

Welcome to class: A survival guide for commencing student midwives

Abstract

October is a very busy month in the university calendar as, along with 104 other higher education institutions (HEIs) delivering approved midwifery courses (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2015a), we welcome our new cohort of students as they begin their journey to becoming a midwife and having the privilege of being 'with woman'. This article aims to provide commencing student midwives with some tips and information to help navigate the early stages of their course and ease the transition into a professional programme of study. Information is provided from the author's perspective as a senior lecturer with experience in teaching and supporting first-year students, combined with the reflections of three students who have recently completed the first year of their programme of study. The students share their thoughts on how they felt at the start of their programme and give suggestions for how to cope with its academic and clinical demands.

Keywords: Midwifery programme, Education, Student midwife

Congratulations! Out of the thousands of applicants, you were successful and are now at the start of your training. This is where the really hard work starts as you learn to juggle your home life with the considerable demands of the course in terms of theoretical input and clinical practice, not to mention assessments and irregular working patterns.

A reality check

Carolan and Kruger (2011) undertook a study asking first-year midwifery students the question: 'What, if anything, would make your experience as a first-year student better?' Findings included students identifying a need for greater opportunity to prepare, both before the start of the course and prior to lectures. The majority of students also felt they needed greater opportunities to study because theoretical input was intensive, leaving little time to consolidate learning outside of the classroom. Finally, students almost unanimously identified a need for greater support: pastoral support when they felt overwhelmed with the workload, and peer support for reassurance that they were not alone in how they were feeling.

Research suggests that commencing student midwives need time to prepare, time to consolidate and support from a variety of sources. While

this article will provide you with suggestions for managing workloads from both the student's and the lecturer's perspectives, please be reassured that you will be supported by a committed and professional team of midwifery lecturers, academic librarians, academic support staff and clinical mentors, wherever you study. They should be your first point of contact with any issues.

Tip 1: Know your support network

Be proactive in accessing support: if your personal tutor or module leader doesn't know you're struggling, they can't help you! Make sure you support each other, too

Resources to support your learning

I have a particular interest in the potential for social media to support professional discourse and development (Power, 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). However, I am concerned that health professionals are not always aware of how to protect their professional identity in an online environment. Just think: how would you feel if, during a lecture, your Facebook page was shown on the screen for all to read? Would your privacy settings allow this to happen? Would the content be suitable?

Tip 2: Use social media wisely

Make sure any social media accounts you have comply with Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2015b) guidance i.e. to act as professionally online as in person

The internet has fundamentally changed the learning landscape: students should not and must not be passive learners; rather they are their most powerful resource and should take ownership of their learning by judiciously using the wide range of resources at their fingertips (Power, 2015d; Power and Coulson, 2015; Power and Gordon, 2015; Power and Siddall, 2015) to complement and consolidate learning from face-to-face sessions in the university and clinical practice.

Tip 3: Be proactive

Be a proactive learner and develop good time management skills

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The student's perspective

In preparation for writing this article, I asked three first-year students to share their thoughts on how they felt at the start of the programme and give tips on how to cope with its demands.

Feelings at the start of the programme

'Of course I felt excited, but also very nervous, especially being in a new town, living independently etc. I felt honoured to be a part of the profession, though, as I began to realise more and more the responsibility midwives have and the history of midwifery—and I was itching to get into practice!' (Amy)

'I felt nervous as I was moving away from home, but excited to start this challenging yet rewarding course. I am glad that I took the time to revisit some of my A-level human anatomy and physiology work, as it prepared me well for the first 6 weeks of the course. I was inspired by the lecturers and other students as soon as I started the programme; I knew that I was in the right place.' (Victoria)

Coping with academic demands

'The top tip would definitely be that you have to be strict with yourself in consolidating knowledge, and seek guidance straight away from module leaders if you don't understand something fully. If you ignore things or let them build up, that's when the workload becomes unmanageable—even if you just do an hour before dinner each night, then take time to relax. Mentors in clinical practice are also invaluable with academic queries and often give a different point of view. I think it's also important to try not to compare yourself to what others are doing; seek to support each other, but don't beat yourself up if somebody is going 4 hours each night—it's no measure of what they are taking in, and everybody works so differently! Having time for yourself is just as important in maintaining sanity and balance.' (Amy)

'Firstly, don't panic! One of our lecturers put it to our cohort as follows: if you

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look at all the assignments, deadlines and timetabling all at once, it is bound to overwhelm. Take each step as it comes, and take time to prepare for each individual session. I think that is also a great mantra for the course as a whole. I often think, "How will I ever feel confident and competent enough to work autonomously in practice?" But take each section of the programme as it arrives. I also think it is valuable to write a list of achievements so that you can see how far you have come. In our cohort, we have designed a "Hopes and Fears" jar and refer to it periodically. We hope that it will provide comfort to future cohorts. It is normal to feel trepidation on a vocational programme like this; I believe it comes with passion for midwifery. We all want to do well, and reflecting on the positives—and also the not-so-positives—is essential for growth.' (Victoria)

'Plan your time, and keep on top of academic work so you don't feel snowed under. Ask questions—no question is wrong to ask. Don't ignore your social life; if you have downtime regularly, you can focus on academic work with a fresh mind.' (Sarah)

Surviving clinical placements

'Push yourself out of your comfort zone and embrace every opportunity—become a "yes man" and you'll surprise yourself at how much you learn and grow. Just remember that you are there because people along the way saw potential in you, and just keep going. However, at the same time, you should seek guidance from your mentors or other members of staff when you have a query. Students in the years above are also very good to talk to.' (Amy)

‘You’ll get out of a placement what you put into it’

‘Be enthusiastic. As a first-year student, you will not be expected to know everything, but enthusiasm is contagious and will positively impact on both the mentors you work with and the women you care for. You are in an extremely privileged position to be embarking on this journey to becoming a midwife—never forget that. Be on time. It shows eagerness, professionalism and commitment.’ (Victoria)

‘You’ll get out of a placement what you put into it. Be prepared and ask lots of questions.’ (Sarah)

General tips

- Bookmark key professional bodies’ websites on your computer e.g. the Royal College of Midwives (www.rcm.org.uk) and the NMC (www.nmc.org.uk)
- Follow key professional bodies on Twitter (for suggestions, see Power, 2015a)
- Download policies and guidelines from the NMC website onto a memory stick for ease of access
- Be organised: if you download a document, make sure you will be able to recognise it by its file name after 6 months, and categorise your documents in appropriately titled folders
- When it comes to paperwork, ensure you have a robust filing system from the start (not a pile of papers on the dining table!)
- Always do pre-session work to make best use of the face-to-face time
- Get into the habit of reading every day, whether it is journals, websites, text books, Twitter feeds, or professional blogs.

And finally...

You are about to embark on a life-changing journey which, at times, will feel like a rollercoaster. So the final tip is: Hold on tight and enjoy the ride! **BJM**

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