

How can universities ‘ASSIST’ student midwives with additional needs to achieve?

Abstract

Previous articles have discussed how pre-registration midwifery education should prepare student midwives ‘to cope with the complex emotional and physical demands of their chosen profession’ (Power, 2016:66); acknowledged the importance of a partnership approach to education through the ‘Clinicians in the Classroom’ series (Power, 2016; Power and Briody, 2016; Power and Gupta, 2016; Power and Rea, 2016; Power and Rooth, 2016) and considered how best to support student midwives with appropriate learning and teaching strategies (Power and Farmer, 2017). What is yet to be considered is what extra support is available to students who have additional needs, disabilities or medical conditions that might impact on their studies. This article will take the University of Northampton as a case study and review the support services it has in place to support such students to meet their full potential. This service is called The Additional Student Support and Inclusion Services Team (ASSIST).

Keywords

Student midwives | Dyslexia | Student support | Revalidation | The code

In terms of literacy and numeracy, the NMC Standards for Pre-registration Midwifery Education (2009) state that for an applicant to be accepted onto a pre-registration midwifery programme they must be able to ‘manipulate numbers accurately [...] including using a calculator’ and ‘read and comprehend (in English or Welsh) and communicate clearly and effectively in writing, including a computer’ (NMC, 2009). In terms of inclusivity: ‘if a student has a disability, the above criteria can be met through the use of reasonable adjustments’ (NMC, 2009).

Alison Power

Senior lecturer in midwifery, The University of Northampton

Jonathan Murray

ASSIST officer, The University of Northampton

The programme must have at least 50% practice and no less than 40% theory and should include a range of learning, teaching and assessment strategies. In order to qualify as a midwife, students must demonstrate competency in the following four domains: effective midwifery practice; professional and ethical practice; developing the individual midwife and others; achieving quality care through evaluation and research (NMC, 2009). Clearly the demands of the programme are extensive and could be exacerbated if students with additional needs, disabilities or medical conditions are not provided with additional support services by their University.

The University of Northampton: A case study

At the University of Northampton, The Additional Student Support and Inclusion Services Team (ASSIST) supports students with an additional need, disability or medical condition that impacts on their day-to-day studies. Taking a random sample of 86 students who have accessed ASSIST since October 2016, 44% (n=38) were from the Faculty of Health and Society. There are currently 132 students enrolled on the BSc (Hons) Midwifery programme at the University of Northampton, ten of whom have a declared disability, with 5.3% (n=7) declaring a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia.

What is ASSIST?

The support offered by ASSIST covers a range of services, from priority status accommodation for disabled students, to providing specialist study skills support for dyslexic students. ASSIST makes recommendations to academic staff to ensure the learning and teaching environment is inclusive and accessible, and that the University makes ‘reasonable adjustments’ for its disabled students.

The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on Higher Education Providers (HEPs) to make necessary adjustments and comprises three specific requirements:

- Where a provision, criterion or practice puts a disabled student at a substantial disadvantage by comparison to non-disabled persons
- Where a physical feature puts a disabled student at

a substantial disadvantage by comparison to non-disabled persons

- Where a disabled student would, but for the provision of an auxiliary aid, be put at a substantial disadvantage in comparison to a non-disabled person.

Reasonable adjustments can vary greatly for different disabilities and different courses. Adjustments could, for example, include additional time in examinations for a student with dyslexia, ensuring a student using a wheelchair has safe and suitable access to lecture venues, or providing communication support, such as BSL, for a hearing-impaired student who is otherwise unable to access auditory content on their course.

ASSIST has a core team comprising a team leader, two coordinators, two disability advisors and a wider team of specialist staff that includes note-takers, practical assistants, mentors and study skills support tutors. The disability advisor's role involves working with students and assessing their needs to make recommendations for reasonable adjustments: this is done through a document called the Academic Inclusion Report (AIR). The AIR is then shared with academic staff so the student gets the necessary support required for the course (e.g. additional time or provision of amanuensis in exams). Another major role of the Disability Advisor is to support students for Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs). These are government grants to help pay the essential extra costs students may have as a direct result of a disability; they are administered by funding bodies, such as Student Finance or the NHS Student Bursaries. They can help to pay for extra assistive technology, software and specialist support that students may need as a direct result of a disability, ongoing health condition, sensory impairment, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty. However, DSA funding is not guaranteed and students have to undergo an assessment of their study-related needs to determine exactly what support and funding they may need.

Disability Advisors can also support students with seeking a diagnosis of a condition/additional need (e.g. by referring them for dyslexia diagnostic assessment). Recent changes in DSA funding and provision have placed more responsibility on HEPs to provide anticipatory support and to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students, meaning that the funding a student receives from the DSA is likely to be less, but the University/HEP will be required to consider the student's needs and put in place a plan to address those needs, even if DSA funding is not available for all of the required support.

To access support from ASSIST, students can self-refer or be referred by academic or specialist support staff within the University. Sometimes referrals do come in from outside agencies, e.g. colleges, social workers, and school Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs). Students wanting to be tested for dyslexia can email ASSIST and

Key points

- The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on Higher Education Providers (HEPs) to make necessary adjustments to support students with an additional need, disability or medical condition that impacts on their day to day duties
- Standards for pre-registration midwifery education (NMC, 2009) require student midwives to be literate and numerate, but reasonable adjustments must be made for students with a disability
- As midwives are expected to submit their revalidation applications online, the NMC states it will make reasonable adjustments for those with a disability (NMC, 2017)

ask to be booked in for a free screening. Disabled students applying for university places in September/October are contacted automatically by ASSIST in the spring/summer before they join us. Students can disclose a disability, additional need or medical condition on their Universities and College Admissions Service (UCAS) application forms.

ASSIST works closely alongside other teams within the University and within Student Services, such as the University's Counselling and Mental Health Team, the Residential Life team, Accommodation Services and the Financial Guidance team.

From student to qualified midwife

On qualification, midwives must practise according to The Code (NMC, 2015), which states they must prioritise people, practise effectively, preserve safety, and promote professionalism and trust. In the context of practising

How ASSIST supports students

- Initial contact with student prior to starting course on applicant visit days
- Priority status accommodation
- Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) application
- Arranging DSA recommended support and help ordering equipment
- Examination adjustments
- Taster Day for students with Autism Spectrum Conditions
- Academic Inclusion Reports (AIRs)
- Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPS)
- Referrals: internal and external
- Initial screenings for dyslexia and Specific Learning Differences (SpLD)
- More accessible parking via an ASSIST permit scheme
- Support with arranging travel support, such as taxis
- Liaison with academic staff
- Library support
- Campus orientation and sighted guidance*
- Equipment loans e.g. digital voice recorders, deaf pagers and ergonomic aids
- Specialist Mentoring*
- Study Skills Support*
- Note taking and practical assistance during lectures and taught events
- Transcription support to make materials accessible in a variety of formats*

*Denotes an item that is usually funded through DSA

Requirements of revalidation

- 450 practice hours or 900 if renewing as both a nurse and midwife
- 35 hours of CPD including 20 hours of participatory learning
- 5 pieces of practice-related feedback
- 5 written reflective accounts
- Reflective discussion
- Health and character declaration
- Professional indemnity arrangement
- Confirmation

effectively, the midwife is expected to base care on the best available evidence and ensure record keeping is clear and accurate. As applications for revalidation are online, the NMC state they will make reasonable adjustments for those with a disability (NMC, 2017).

Conclusion

Successful completion of a midwifery pre-registration programme of study awards the student midwife a professional qualification and an honours degree. With this professional recognition comes a commitment to lifelong learning to ensure practice is evidence-based and documentation is clear and accurate. Student midwives with a disability, additional need or medical condition are fully supported in their studies whilst at university by services such as ASSIST at the University of Northampton; however an area warranting further research is how these students are supported after

qualification to meet the professional requirements of the Code and revalidation. **BJM**

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2017) Guidance Sheet – alternative support arrangements. <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sites/default/files/2017/03/revalidation/alternative-support-guidance-sheet.pdf>. (Accessed 27 March 2017)

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2015) What is revalidation? <http://revalidation.nmc.org.uk/welcome-to-revalidation>. (Accessed 27 March 2017)

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2015) The Code: professional standards of practice and behaviour for nurses and midwives. <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sites/default/files/2015/06/nmc-publications/nmc-code.pdf>. (Accessed 27 March 2017)

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2009) Standards for pre-registration midwifery education. <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sites/default/files/2009/06/standards-for-preregistration-midwifery-education.pdf>. (Accessed 27 March 2017)

Power A (2016) Midwifery in the 21st century: are students prepared for the challenge? *British Journal of Midwifery* **24**(1): 66–68

Power A (2016) Pre-registration midwifery education: Clinicians in the Classroom. *British Journal of Midwifery* **24**(2): 123

Power A, Rea T (2016) Clinicians in the Classroom: the Bereavement Midwife. *British Journal of Midwifery* **24**(3): 219–221

Power A, Rooth C (2016) Clinicians in the Classroom: the Consultant Midwife. *British Journal of Midwifery* **24**(4): 286–287

Power A, Gupta K (2016) Clinicians in the Classroom: the Consultant Anaesthetist. *British Journal of Midwifery* **24**(5): 369–370

Power A, Briody P (2016) Clinicians in the Classroom: the Matron *British Journal of Midwifery* **24**(6); **441–443**