Crossing the threshold
Students’ experiences of the transition from student to staff nurse

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“...they were really pleased with what I was doing, so that gave me a buzz. It made the fact that you have actually gone through that transitional period, that what you were doing was actually right, if you know what I mean.”

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References


Find out more about this project and the Practice-based Professional Learning CETL at our web site: www.open.ac.uk/pbpl/

The Open University is incorporated by Royal Charter (RC 000391), an exempt charity in England & Wales and a charity registered in Scotland (SC 038302).
What are students’ experiences of the transition to qualified practitioner?
What mechanisms and resources do they draw upon to support their transition?
How can transition theory help us better understand these experiences?

Student to staff nurse

Current policy in the health services emphasises students’ fitness to practice at the point of registration. There has also been some suggestion that pre-registration education has not equipped them with the necessary knowledge and skills. Research has shown that students can find this transition stressful. Due to the massive investment in nurse education and the need to retain nurses in the workforce, we wanted to understand the factors that might better support transition.

Using telephone interviews with former students of The Open University part-time, distance learning, pre-registration nursing programme, we explored nurses’ experiences of their first 3-6 months of qualified practice. A number of recurring themes emerged which were then exposed to theoretical analysis using Van Gennep’s theory of transition and Bridges’ work on organisational change.

Transition theory

Van Gennep described the process of transition in terms of three phases:
- separation
- transition
- incorporation.

We were curious as to whether this framework would illuminate students’ experiences of transition. We also drew on Bridges’ representation of transition as ‘overlapping strata’.

“...in the real and messy world of clinical practice, the whole process of transition can be overlapping.”

Research findings

Four main themes emerged from our analysis of students’ experiences:

In at the deep end
Here students talked of their feelings associated with their increased accountability.

Changing identities
As sponsored Health Care Assistants (HCA), OU nursing students juggle the transition from HCA to student and then to staff nurse. Many talked about the impact of this on former HCA colleagues, and of the significance of the uniform as a symbol defining identity.

Coming together
Participants talked of how things started to come together, their growing confidence and their satisfaction of applying their knowledge in practice.

Scaffolding
These were the formal and informal support structures participants described as useful during their transition e.g. education, organisational support, individual support of mentors and family.

“...in the real and messy world of clinical practice, the whole process of transition can be overlapping.”

“Going through the different colours of the uniform was very difficult. Going from HCA to being a student with the same members of staff, then going from a student to a staff nurse with the same members of staff was quite difficult, not only for me but for the staff members as well.”

“The actual day that you changed your uniform, you know, you changed from your grey to blue ... a sudden feeling that right, this is it. You know you are doing it for real now ... the buck stops here!”