“The role is very rewarding in seeing the development of your students, and the transition they go through from auxiliary nurse, to student nurse to an independent practitioner. There has been a lot of blood, sweat and tears over this period, but the relationships developed between myself, students and mentors are ones that will continue once the course has finished.”

Lin McDonagh is Assistant Head of Nursing, professional and practice lead in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University. She has a range of experience across higher education provision. Her research interests include ‘studying’ in practice and integrated working between education and health service providers for children with long term conditions. A developing area of interest is the contribution of interactive technologies in patient/client centred education of practitioners.

Jan Draper is Professor and Head of Nursing in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University. She has extensive experience across different higher education provision and her research interests include transitions across the life course, nurse education and, in particular, the impact of nurse education on practice.

Gillian Davies is a Programme Tutor on the OU pre-registration nursing programme and Practice Education Facilitator at Argyll and Bute Hospital in Argyle.

Wendy Mowbray is a Programme Tutor on the OU pre-registration nursing programme and Senior Charge Nurse, NHS Highland.

Donna Gallagher is Staff Tutor Nursing in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University. Donna has worked on the pre-registration nursing programme for 4 years and is particularly interested in communities of practice.

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 the key features of effective Programme Tutor practice?

What are the enabling factors contributing to role effectiveness?

Cultivating positive practice learning

The cultivation of positive practice learning environments for students of nursing, including high quality learning support, has long been established as a thorny issue for nurse educators and practitioners. It is crucial that we get the learning support for students in the practice setting right. If we do not, it will have wide-ranging implications for the quality of patient care, work-related stress, role satisfaction, retention and attrition and professional reputation.

The Programme Tutor (PT) – a role unique to the pre-registration nursing programme at The Open University – is crucial in facilitating learning in the practice setting. The purpose of the role is to work longitudinally with both students and their mentors in the workplace to support learning in practice and monitor student progress.

Asking tutors

The overall aim of the project is to critically examine the experiences of a sample of PTs in order to identify the key features of effective PT practice. These features will then inform the continuing development of the programme and identify those aspects potentially transferable across the wider health education sector.

Our findings

Three major themes were identified during data analysis. First, the factors impacting on the effectiveness of the PT role including the PT themselves, the mentor, the student and the environment, illustrated in the diagram below. Second, the factors which appear to enhance effective PT practice including preparation, support and ongoing development. Thirdly, the individual characteristics of the PT contributing to effective PT practice including experience, knowledge, attributes and their operationalisation of the PT role in practice.

I was able to utilise my communication skills to facilitate deep learning, using a facilitative approach.”

PTs find their role both rewarding and vital in the context of creating supportive learning environments for practice settings. Effective communication with students, mentors and service managers appears to be a crucial aspect of the success of this role. Many PTs have already incorporated aspects of the PT model into their substantive posts in the health service.

“My motivation in becoming a programme tutor was to work with students and inform their learning, to ensure they are equipped for the challenge of the role of staff nurse.”