

What's the issue?

All pre-registration nursing degree students in the United Kingdom must be supernumerary when they are in clinical placement. Supernumerary means that students cannot be counted as part of the workforce when they are learning on placement in a clinical setting.

The introduction of supernumerary status was designed to give student nurses the opportunity to realise their own learning needs and also understand their professional responsibilities. ¹

This requirement is set by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and is designed to ensure that students have the space and time to learn. The NMC is the regulator for nursing and midwifery in the UK.

The NMC decided in September 2018 they will not mandate supernumerary status for the new nursing associate role in England. Instead, employers will be able to choose whether trainee nursing associates (TNAs) are supernumerary or have 'protected learning time'.² At the time of this change we made our view clear to the NMC that trainee nursing associates must be supernumerary too.

The RCN's position is that all nursing students, including nursing associates, must be supernumerary while they are in clinical training. It is essential that supernumerary remains the standard for pre-registration to protect the safety of students and patients.

We are concerned to learn that the NMC is to review supernumerary status for all of its professions following an evaluation period of the new arrangements for TNAs. ³

Why is supernumerary status important?

Any compromise of supernumerary status for pre-registration nursing students would fundamentally compromise patient safety as well undermine nursing students' learning during clinical placements and ability to practise safely upon registration. 2,300 hours (50%) of a pre-registration nursing student's learning time is spent in clinical placement.

In the UK, nurses were previously trained as part of the workforce in clinical settings, with the employer having oversight of the training. However, the Government decided this was unsafe for patients and students. In this model, students' learning needs were secondary to the delivery of patient care.

If student nurses are counted as part of the workforce it will mean that they will be used as support staff and be unable to develop the skills and competencies necessary to deliver safe and effective care. There is a clear risk that without supernumerary status, patient care will be compromised.

When all students are supernumerary then it is clear to other staff that they are primarily there to learn. This makes it easier for students to articulate their learning needs more confidently, and to access the appropriate clinical activities and experiences which will help ensure that they are safe and effective practitioners at the point of registration.

Mandated supernumerary status alone is not sufficient to ensure quality learning. Every student should have access to adequately staffed settings that are characterised by high quality patient care, delivered by skilled, up to date, enthusiastic and supportive health and social care staff.

¹ Supernumerary status was introduced in the 1980s as part of a set of modernising reforms known as Project 2000.

² Protected learning time provides for a programme of 1 day a week in university and 1 day a week in a placement

setting where the TNA is not counted in the staff numbers, as a minimum. The rest of the time is spent as part of the workforce.

³ The NMC has stated that this will happen sometime in 2019. The NMC has yet to give further details.

These are the key elements of all excellent practice learning environments, and this is what ensures that student and staff learning is maximised in the workplace. It is important that both students and current workforce, especially mentors, feel valued.

Does supernumerary status mean that students can't receive funding while on placement?

No. Supernumerary status only means that students can't be part of the substantive workforce and so should not be salaried. It doesn't mean that they can't receive grants or other payments to support them while they are learning as part of their clinical placement. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland students receive some form of bursary while they study. In England, there is no longer any grant support for students on placements and we are actively calling for this to be provided through the RCN's Fund Our Future Nurses campaign.

What needs to happen?

We need a clear commitment from the NMC that they intend to keep the requirement for supernumerary status for pre-registration nursing students. The NMC must also follow through with its commitment for a robust transparent evaluation of protected learning time for TNAs before any longer term decision is made. Any decisions must involve stakeholders such as the RCN.

As the RCN we are:

- Calling for the NMC to guarantee supernumerary status for all nursing students, regardless of the route they study.
- Undertaking a student member led campaign for at least £1bn per year to be reinvested in student education in England. Supernumerary status cannot be separated from having a properly funded education system that values clinical placements.

- Collaborating with other stakeholder groups to monitor the roll-out of protected learning time in England and the provision of supernumerary status across the UK.
- Proactively taking every opportunity we can to promote our student members' interests to ministers, UK and country MPs and peers.

What can RCN members do?

Share your experience about supernumerary status: what works about it and what doesn't? And what challenges have you faced in receiving or giving supernumerary clinical placement education? What would make it work more effectively for you and your students or staff?

Want to provide feedback on this position?
Email us at: papa.ukintl.dept@rcn.org.uk

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