

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, we welcome our new cohort of students (NMC, 2015) as they begin their journey to becoming a midwife and having the privilege of being 'with woman'. This article aims to provide new student midwives with some tips and information to help navigate the early stages of their programme of study and ease the transition into a professional programme of study. Information will be provided from my perspective as a senior lecturer with experience in teaching and supporting first year students, combined with the reflections of three students who have just completed the first year of their programme of study. Sarah, Amy and Victoria will 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;

Introduction

Congratulations! Out of the thousands of people that apply to join a midwifery programme 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

Research conducted in Australia explored student midwives' motivations and beliefs at the start of their programme of study, identifying the three main drivers as being a desire to help others (altruism); a fascination with childbirth and the belief that midwifery would be a satisfying career (Carolan and Kruger, 2011a). The study found that where students' preconceived ideas about the role of the midwife did not match reality there was disillusionment, friction between students and clinical and university staff and higher attrition rates. Recommendations included the need for students to be better supported in reconciling their preconceived ideas with the realities of practice (Carolan and

Kruger, 2011a). In the same year Carolan and Kruger (2011b) undertook a second study asking first year 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 as theoretical input was very intensive, leaving little time to consolidate learning outside of the classroom. Finally students almost unanimously identified a need for greater support, particularly pastoral support when they felt overwhelmed with the workload combined with peer support as some students felt lonely and were unsure if others were feeling the same.

In support of the identification of the notion of reality not meeting expectations, Hughes' (2013) review of student midwives' reasons for withdrawal from a pre-registration midwifery programme in the United Kingdom (UK) found the majority of students withdrew stating wrong career choice as their reason. Green and Baird (2009) explored the retention and attrition of pre-registration midwifery students and found that whilst students were highly motivated on starting the programme, the stresses of the programme itself along with personal issues were contributing factors to attrition. Recommendations included the need for better support and mentorship to maintain motivation and increase retention.

Don't panic – help is at hand

Whilst there is research to suggest first year students sometimes struggle to cope, be reassured that you will all 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 call with any issues so please be proactive in accessing support, as burying your head in the sand will only exacerbate your problems. If your personal tutor doesn't know you're struggling they can't help you so tell them!

The student's perspective

In preparation for writing this article, I asked 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

Tips for surviving the academic side of the programme

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 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, 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

Tips for 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 keeping going, however at the same time, seek guidance from your mentors or other members of staff when you have a query or don't feel comfortable doing something - most will happily help you. Students in the years above are also very good to talk to.

Amy

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 placement what you put into it, be prepared and ask lots of questions.

Sarah

Resources to support your learning

I have a particular interest in the potential for social media to support professional discourse and development (Power, 2014; Power 2015a; 2015b; 2015c); however I am concerned that healthcare professionals are not always aware of how to protect their professional identity in an online environment. At this early juncture, I would strongly urge you to ensure any social media accounts you have comply with NMC guidance, ie to act as professionally online

as in person (NMC, 2015). 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?

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; 2015e; 2015f; 2015g) to complement and consolidate learning from face to face sessions in the university and clinical practice.

And finally...

A few tips

- Bookmark key professional bodies' websites on your pc eg the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC); Royal College of Midwives (RCM)
- Follow key professional bodies on Twitter
- Download policies and guidelines from the NMC website onto a memory stick for ease of access
- Be organised with IT: 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
- Be organised with paperwork: have a robust filing system from the start (NOT the kitchen table!)
- Always do pre-session work to make best use of the face to face time
- Get into the habit of reading every day (journals, web pages, text books, Twitter feeds)
- Time management: you will be given assessment submission dates at the start of a module – add them to your diary and set yourself deadlines taking into account clinical placements and annual leave

You are about to embark on a life-changing journey which at times will feel like a rollercoaster ride! Final Tip: Hold on tight!

Acknowledgements

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