Widening Participation:
A Virtual Approach to F.E.Collaboration.

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Background and Rationale.

The aim of the project was to devise a WOLF (Wolverhampton On Line Learning Framework) programme specifically designed for use by students undertaking Access to Nursing courses at local colleges of further education. Students would access the WOLF site using 'guest status' to log on to and engage with a selection of exciting, interactive learning activities, related to nursing and linked to modules studied during the first year of pre-registration training.

There were three main intended outcomes of this project:

1) To provide the students with a 'taster' of the reality of pre-registration nurse training both theoretically and practically hoping that this will aid retention rates and increase the employability of the students on qualifying.

2) To create a smooth transition from studying as a student at further education level to higher education level. It was further hoped that the introduction to WOLF prior to commencement on pre-registration courses would improve students' key skills in preparation for studying at higher education level and familiarise the students with WOLF as it is used quite extensively in pre-registration training.

3) To increase recruitment of these Access students by generating enthusiasm and interest in the pre-registration nurse training available at Wolverhampton University, with the assistance of Technology Supported Learning (TSL).

The outcomes link with the School of Health Teaching and Learning Strategy (2001) where it states a mechanism should be provided for interactive information exchange and a resource should be provided for developing key skills in I.T.

Part of my role as Senior Lecturer within the School of Health, is to 'link' with Wolverhampton College, Bilston Campus. One of the aims of the role is to work closely with the course leaders for the Nursing Access course to ensure the pre-registration training provided at higher education level complements, nurtures and expands on work students have completed at further education level. One innovative way of achieving this, as well as working at a face to face level, was to use TSL by devising a WOLF site just for access by students at Bilston Campus (initially). This would provide access to high volumes of diverse learning resources including texts, audio and visual materials and library materials. Students would be able to access simulations of dangerous or complex situations to gain insights into otherwise inaccessible situations. Feed back loops from teachers, peers or from self assessment tests, quizzes and on line assessment (Stephenson 2002) would provide opportunities for students to check their progress. In addition, it was anticipated that the package would accommodate a range of learning styles to meet the diversity of learner needs (Laurillard 1993).

The Innovation

A variety of activities and information were devised and loaded onto the WOLF site. The programme was named 'Stepping up to Student Nurse' suggesting progression to or a 'step up' from further, to higher education. It included the following activities:

- What kind of person becomes a nurse?

- Welcome to the University

- Frequently Asked Questions

- What is Communication?

- Information relating to Portfolio

- Information relating to Reflection

- Practice Placements

- What would you do if…….? (5 multiple choice questions on emergency procedures)

- Fancy working in another country? (Information relating to The Socrates Exchange Programme open to all nursing students in their 3rd year of training)

- Preparation for Interview

The programme included interactive exercises and contained information to help orientate the student to the life as a student nurse both off and on ward duty, and life as a student of the University. For example, it contained exercises for students to explore a typical 'off duty' when working on the ward and a typical timetable for when in University. Six students currently on the RNDipHE training programme volunteered to produce videos for these and other exercises. These included a 'talking heads' section where the students talk to the camera giving their first impressions of the University and of their first day in clinical placement. Another section included a 'video diary' where the students talk through a day on the ward stating the hours they have worked and the activities they have been involved in. The main aim of this was to give prospective students a 'reality check' of what nursing is really like prior to their commencement on the course.

At the beginning of April 2005 the programme was launched to the students at Bilston Campus. This involved the author and other team members visiting the college to assist the students with logging onto the programme. Prior to this the students had all necessary paperwork required by I.T services within the University to enable them to be issued with passwords and user names to log on to WOLF as guest users. The session was booked and arranged to take place in the computer suite at the college but this was not without its difficulties:

- The computer suite was shared with many other students not participating in the project and it was not possible to partition off the section allocated to the project team

- Not all students had the required password to enable them to initially log on to the college computers. This resulted in a loss of time as they had to be issued with passwords from the college IT manager. The reasons for this appeared to be that either the student had never logged onto the college computer at all during their course or they always worked at home

- The computers needed updating to play the media programme required for the video clips. This had been tested prior to this date but only on the course leaders computer and not in the IT suite. It was wrongly assumed that all of the computers were the same. This was swiftly rectified

 Eventually all students were logged onto WOLF and the programme explained to them. A printed sheet was issued to all students with written instructions on how to log on next time and then it was left to the student to access the programme at their own pace. They had a time period of 8 weeks before access was discontinued to allow for evaluation. The 'cut off' date was 13th June.

Evaluation

There were 37 students on the Access to Nursing course at Bilston Campus who participated in this project. Evaluation has only just commenced as access to the programme was ceased on 13th June when the students left the college at the end of their course. However, initial findings indicate positive

responses to the programme. The comment below is typical of those gathered to date:

> *"The whole of the information that has been supplied on WOLF has benefited me greatly, especially the video clips and information supplied about what to expect during an interview. I also thought that information supplied on 'what is communication' was very informative".*

Some students had commented that they had not even considered the hours worked by nurses, organisation of child care to allow them to participate in the course or issues around communicating with 'ill' people. The course leader stated that the video clips and seeing sample 'off duties' was a real reality check for some.

A questionnaire was issued to all students who participated to enable a more detailed evaluation to take place. A stamped addressed envelope was included to encourage students to return the form but only 25% were returned. The following analysis helped to establish usage and usefulness of the site as well as how the programme had influenced their career decisions. Finally they were asked what improvements they would like to see.

Use of the WOLF site

Of the 25% of students who responded to the questionnaire, 6% said they accessed the site between 1 – 3 times; 8% accessed the site between 4 – 6 times and 11% accessed the site 6 or more times. They were not asked to comment on what factors influenced their use of the site but they were asked which of the sections they found most useful and to rate these on a scale of 1 – 10 (10 = extremely useful and 1 = not at all useful). A breakdown of the results is illustrated in the table below:

	WOLF sections	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
a	What kind of person becomes a nurse					2	1		1	3	1
b	Welcome to the University						1	2	1	1	3
c	Frequently Asked Questions						2			2	4
d	What is communication?					1	1		1	2	3
e	Portfolio					1			2	2	3
f	Reflection					1	1		2	1	3
g	What Would you do if…..?								1	4	3
h	Fancy working in another country?					1	1	1	2	2	1
i	Preparation for Interview.								1	4	3
j	Practice Placements.								1	4	3

Although the number of respondents is small this table indicates that most students felt the sections to be very useful (see numbers of students rating sections between 9 and 10). Sections c, g, h and j were rated by most students as being very useful.

Career decision and progression to university

The students were asked if they were still considering nursing as a career. All of those who returned the questionnaire all said they were. The others did not respond. All had applied to the University of Wolverhampton.

A student profile received from the Access to Nursing Course Leader illustrates the following information from the students who participated in the programme:

Only partial achievement of the Access course so cannot apply for nurse training – 6 students.

- Deferred or change of career direction - 4 students
- Applying for Midwifery course – 3 students
- Applied and interview arranged for RNDipHE – 6 students
- Applied and accepted onto course – 4 students
- Applied and waiting to hear re interview – 14 students

Improvements to the programme

The students were asked what other information might be helpful that was not included in this project. Some of the comments received included:

> *"Information on the 4 branches of nursing to help people decide…"*

> *"A separate section on career progression and post graduate studies available"*

> *"Possibly the procedures necessary once the Access Certificate has been issued and the next steps needed in regards to the University"*

> *"What students will do in their first year".*

Overall students felt the project as a whole was helpful. Comments included:

> *"It was very useful. Could have done with having access before the end of the course as it would have been a good start for assignments"*

> *"Thought it was a good web site that would more than prepare students for University"*

> *"all of the information supplied on the website was useful and has helped me to understand what makes a good nursing student"*

> *"As an individual with no nursing experience at all the practice placement and What would you do next sections were extremely helpful. Most important was the assistance in regards to prep for interview"*

> *"Should be available to a wider network of people"*

> *"an excellent way of making potential students feel valued and welcomed by the University"*

Summary and Future Developments

I anticipated that the project, if successful, would benefit the University by aiding recruitment and retention into pre-registration nurse training. In terms of recruitment, I believed that, with the assistance of the activities devised and transferred onto WOLF, students would want to train at the University of Wolverhampton as oppose to other local higher education institutions. In terms of retention, I believed that, because these students would have had insight into the academic and practical elements of the course, they would be more likely to complete the course. The interest that has come from Wolverhampton College and other further education colleges in the area (see below) is evidence that this project has contributed to achieving the increase in recruitment objective.

– Wolverhampton College have requested that they use the programme again with their new intake of students in October 2005.

– It has been suggested that the programme be introduced to other Colleges, namely Sandwell in the first instance, as recruitment in that geographical area into Nursing has reduced.

– New College in Telford have also expressed an interest in using the project with their nursing students this year.

The issue around the benefits to the University with regard to retention will take a little longer to evaluate. Statistics will be collected and collated over the 2005/2006 pre-registration programmes to monitor the numbers of students accessing the Step up to Student Nurse course. These will be compared to retention rates for the course in academic year 2004/2005, prior to the implementation

of this project.

It is worth noting that despite undertaking a thorough search of the nurse training literature, I found little evidence of any project having been undertaken that addresses the issues of transition preparation for student nurses. The findings from this study would therefore appear to make a small contribution to this area of nurse education.

If you would like further information about this project please contact Sally McConville, Senior Lecturer, School of Health, Mary Seacole Building, City Campus. S.McConville@wlv.ac.uk. 01902 518681.

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