

**Evaluation of the East Sussex College Network Placement Project**

April 2020

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Executive summary

Despite the limitations of the evidence collected for this evaluation, owing to a number of factors outwith our control, we are pleased to be able to summarise the findings from this pilot project.

***The placement process***

Students who wished to be considered for the pilot programme were asked to attend an information evening, submit a written application form and undertake a panel interview. They were able to list three roles/departments that they were interested in (hospital or social care setting) and the majority were placed in one of these areas after successfully completing the application and interview process.

Feedback about the information evening, the application form and the interview panel were largely positive, with a few small tweaks suggested. Students felt that the induction process could be more tailored to individual circumstances and less generic.

Most students were well prepared for their work placements. Some students said that they did not know what to expect - that it would have been useful to have a job specification for their roles and to have been introduced to their mentor/supervisor in advance of starting the placement. Most students lacked previous experience of working in busy and potentially challenging environments - more preparation could be done around this. Students would also welcome more support and contact with the College whilst on placement.

Mentors/supervisors reported that students clearly demonstrated the values and attitudes needed to work in health and social care (for example, that they were compassionate, person-centred care and had excellent communication skills).

***Outcomes of the pilot project***

The pilot achieved its main aim which was to test a work placement model in preparation for the introduction of T Levels

The subsidiary aims of the project were also met:

* Employers were able to promote the health and social care sector more generally as well as the career pathways within their own organisation
* Students were able to gain an insight into specific healthcare roles of interest, to develop relationships with staff and to receive support in the form of guidance for university application or references to support job applications.

A number of unanticipated benefits were realised through the pilot project, including:

* staff within host organisations gaining additional mentoring/ supervisory experience
* service users benefitting from the additional ‘manpower’ capacity brought by the students meaning that activities could go ahead when staff resources were stretched
* students being able to apply for bank work.

***Lessons learnt***

Some specific learning was uncovered through the pilot which needs to be borne in mind when the work placement element of T Levels are designed, this relates specifically to the number of placement hours, the timeliness of the involvement of employers in the process and an increased collaboration between the College and employers.

# Introduction

**Health Education England Kent, Surrey and Sussex commissioned Skills for Care to evaluate the East Sussex College Network Placement Programme.**

**Fourteen students from the second year Health and Social Care BTEC course or the first year Science A-Level course at East Sussex College were recruited to the 10-week programme which began in October 2019.**

**Placements were hosted by the East Sussex NHS Trust and East Sussex Council’s Learning Disability Service and were co-ordinated by East Sussex College. Representatives from these organisations formed the ‘Project Team’.**

**The overarching aim of the pilot was to explore employer views and experiences of hosting students on placements in preparation for the introduction of the ‘T level’ in health and healthcare science in 2021 which will have an intensive placement requirement.**

## The project’s aims

The overarching aim of the pilot was:

* To explore employer views and experiences of hosting students on placements in preparation for the introduction of the Health and Healthcare science ‘T Level’s in 2021

The secondary aims of the pilot were:

* To provide students with ‘hands-on’ experience of a range of roles within their chosen health/social care pathway
* To raise student awareness of health/social care roles which are less well known and roles where there are workforce shortages

## Data collection

Due to a combination of factors beyond the control of Skills for Care and the commissioners of this evaluation[[1]](#footnote-1), we were unable to gather feedback from all stakeholders. We urge you to be mindful of this when reading the report and to note that our conclusions are indicative only.

This report is based on feedback collected from the following stakeholders:

* **Project leads** - A small group comprising of representatives from the NHS Trust and Learning Disability Services, along with the College who were instrumental in designing and delivering the pilot programme (feedback was obtained via a face-to-face focus group with all key partners represented)
* **Mentors / Supervisors** - A group of professionals working on the frontline who were charged with overseeing the students on placement on a day-to-day basis (feedback was obtained by a short survey administered via email with responses received from eight out of fourteen people)
* **Students** – Those undertaking a placement (feedback was obtained via a face-to-face focus group conducted by a member of the commissioning team on our behalf with four students from one of the three sites involved[[2]](#footnote-2))

We also utilised the slides and notes produced as a result of a ‘Celebration’ event held at the College at the end of January where students and mentors / supervisors attended to receive recognition of the completion of the pilot programme[[3]](#footnote-3).

## About the commissioning organisation

**Health Education England** works with partners across Kent, Surrey and Sussex to ensure that healthcare providers across the region have the workforce they need to provide services for the population they serve. It develops the people working in health and care so they can provide local people with the very best care and outcomes, now and for the future.

## About the Project Team

The Project Team consisted of representatives from three organisations:

* **East Sussex Healthcare Trust** - an NHS trust which runs Conquest Hospital in St Leonards-on-Sea, Eastbourne District General Hospital, Bexhill Hospital. The Trust offered placements to ten students during the pilot project.
* **East Sussex County Council Learning Disabilities Service** - responsible for the county’s day care and residential services for adults with learning disabilities. The Service offered placements to four students during the pilot project.
* **East Sussex College** - a further education college offering a range of traditional A Level subjects, alongside vocational and professional courses, apprenticeships and re-engagement programmes across three sites.

## About Skills for Care

Skills for Care supports adult social care employers to deliver what the people they support need, and what commissioners and regulators expect. It does this by helping employers get the best from their most valuable resource - their people.

The pilot project was independently evaluated by a small team of experts from Skills for Care’s Evidence and Impact team who were responsible for designing the research tools and conducting most of the evidence gathering[[4]](#footnote-4).

# The placement process

**Students were selected for a placement after attending an information evening, submitting a written application form and attending a panel interview.**

**The students listed three roles/departments they were interested in observing (hospital or residential care setting) and most were allocated one of their preferences upon successful interview.**

**Some tweaks to the application form and placement matching process were proposed.**

**Support from mentors/supervisors was invaluable.**

**Inductions could be improved by tailoring them to individuals rather than being generic.**

**Most, but not all, students were prepared for their work placement.**

**Some students reported that they did not know what to expect and that it would have been useful to have a job specification for their roles in advance of starting the placement.**

**Students generally lacked previous experience of working in busy and potentially challenging environments – a period of adjustment was necessary to overcome this.**

**Students expressed a desire for regular support from and contact with the College during their placement.**

## The information evening

As part of the pre-selection and promotion of the programme students, and their parents, were invited to an open information evening at the College where they heard presentations from the project leads. The presentations covered an overview of the work placement programme, including the selection process, and of what is required to work in health and social care organisations. Application forms were made available for interested students to apply. Students reported that the event was useful and that the level of information provided was about right.

One student in the focus group expressed disappointment that they had not been allocated to one of their top three placement preferences, however, they did enjoy their placement, so this comment was mainly related to managing expectations.

Students reported that it would have been useful to have more detailed information about what can and cannot be offered as part of a placement at the application stage in order to help them prioritise their preferences (for example, not being able to view x-rays being taken, certain situations not suitable for students to observing owing to patient/service user confidentiality, etc). They would also have liked the opportunity to visit other departments to broaden their experience[[5]](#footnote-5).

## The application form

Students reported that the application form was relatively straightforward to complete. However, they felt that some elements could be streamlined (for example, asking students to give a separate explanation for each placement choice was felt to be repetitive). Students also said it would have been helpful to have had more insight into the functions of each department included within the application form.

## The interview panel

Despite the students having been briefed and supported by the College in preparing for their interviews the projects leads felt some students were better prepared than others. However, the majority of students offered a placement had performed well during the interview[[6]](#footnote-6).

Students felt that the values-based interview format used as part of the placement selection was very useful because it mirrors the approach used by health and social care employers. The interview panel therefore gave students a good insight into what employers are looking for. Students were able to use this experience when applying for university courses and for work within health and social care.

## The allocation of placements

Feedback from the students and from the mentors/supervisors suggests that most students found their placement interesting and engaged in the opportunities presented with enthusiasm.

Students undertaking placements in hospital departments specialising in a single procedure felt it would be beneficial to have the option of experiencing other departments after three to four weeks to broaden their experience.

Where possible the mentors/supervisors accommodated requests to vary the placement experience, which is a positive indication of the commitment to ensuring students were able to get the most from their placements. However, the students felt that this could be included as part of the regular discussions between mentors and students rather than relying on them having the confidence to ask for it.

*‘‘For the first few weeks, it was a set timetable. I got the chance to go around all the different activities and then after that, I got to pick what I wanted to do. It was what I enjoyed the most and stuck with that”.*

(Student)

Having worked closely with students for the placement duration, mentors/supervisors were well placed to offer feedback on how the student experience (on future placements) might be improved. The key recommendations made were:

* Match placements with student interest(s)
* Enable early discussion with student and placement mentor to discuss and agree details (placement day / hours / limitations / interest in visiting other departments etc.) in advance of the student joining the host team.

## Support from mentors

Students reported that meeting their mentor at the earliest opportunity was very important to them and that they would have liked this to have happened before their placement started or as part of the training induction day.

Students valued the role of the mentors/supervisors in helping them to prepare for their placement.

*“I was really nervous going into a new environment. I didn't know what to expect. It would have been nice to know my mentor’s name in advance.”*

(Student)

## Placement induction

Students reported that the induction day content should be tailored so that specific, relevant information is given for that individual’s placement rather than applying a standard format.

For example, the time allocated to explaining policy do’s and don’ts, might be relevant for some students but not all, and should therefore be tailored according to needs of the individual. They also felt that policies and procedures could be provided in another format before starting the placement, perhaps in an email or included in the handbook for reference.

## Student readiness for placement

The project leads reported that not all students were fully prepared to undertake their placements (for example, some turned up in the wrong clothes, without paperwork, etc.). This was mirrored by student feedback around information that they would have liked in advance of the placement (for example, a job specification and a clear picture of what to expect).

The project leads recognised that the timeline from initiation to delivery was very challenging for the pilot. Moving forwards they acknowledge that it would be good to work with the students in advance (perhaps at the end of Year 1). Producing a video showcasing the range of opportunities on offer was mooted.

The students on the learning disability placements all had previous experience of working in that type of setting and therefore had some experience of the challenging behaviour exhibited by some service users. They said students with no prior experience of that environment might find this intimidating and some preparation around dealing with challenging behaviour would be useful.

Most students had no previous experience of being in the busy and regulated environments found in health and social care and a process of adjustment was therefore required.

*“Working in a busy and unfamiliar environment is challenging but X [our student] settled quickly and remained professional throughout her time with us.”*

(Mentor, Learning Disability Services)

The celebration event and feedback from mentors/supervisors confirmed that the majority of placements had been successfully completed.

## Support provided by the East Sussex College Group

Feedback from students and mentors / supervisors indicates overall satisfaction with the support provided by the College, although one mentor expressed frustration regarding the timing of information about what was required / expected of them.

Students made some suggestions about how the support from the College could be enhanced:

* Regularly contact students during the placement to find out how things are going and to identify and resolve any issues at the earliest opportunity
* Regularly visit students on placement to observe them in the work setting (for some courses this is a requirement and needs to be factored in)

The College may also wish to consider how to use student Log Books in future as the paper format used in the pilot, whilst liked by students, does not easily lend itself to review and consideration by the College and others for learning and development purposes.

# Outcomes of the pilot project

**The two subsidiary objectives of the pilot were:**

* **to provide students with real ‘hands-on’ experience of a range of roles within their chosen health/social care pathway**
* **to raise student awareness of health/social care roles which are less well known and roles where there are workforce shortages**

**These appear to have been achieved:**

* + **Organisations were able to promote the health and social care sector more generally as well as the career pathways within their own organisations**
	+ **Students gained an insight into specific healthcare roles of interest, were able to develop relationships with staff and received support in the form of guidance for university application and references supporting job applications.**

**Mentors/supervisors reported that students clearly demonstrated the values and attitudes needed to work in health and social care. Being compassionate, delivering person-centred care and having excellent communication skills were the standout qualities mentioned.**

**Students said identifying the organisation’s values within the work placement required more thought on their part as it was not always immediately apparent to them.**

**In addition, a number of unanticipated benefits arose for those involved in the pilot:**

* + **the ability to offer a learning opportunity for staff to gain mentoring/supervisory experience (reported by Learning Disability Services and the Healthcare Trust)**
	+ **staff responding to the enthusiasm and eagerness of students by sharing their own experiences (reported by Learning Disability Services and the Healthcare Trust)**
	+ **services users benefitting from the additional capacity from students meaning activities could go ahead (reported by Learning Disability Services)**
	+ **opportunities to apply for bank work (reported by Learning Disability Services, the Healthcare Trust and students)**
	+ **guidance from frontline practitioners around how to realise career aspirations (reported by students)**

## Meeting the placement objectives - Employers

The two groups of employers participating in the work placement programme expressed similar objectives around increasing the interest in the organisation and careers in the sector generally:

* The Healthcare Trust wanted to capitalise on those already on a pathway which lends itself to healthcare professions and encourage them to think about future professional training
* The Learning Disability Service were keen to grow their own workforce / the wider social care workforce now and in the future

Feedback from the Project Leads and mentors / supervisors suggests that these objectives were achieved through the pilot project activity.

## Meeting the placement objectives - Students

Students participating in the work placement programme articulated a range of objectives, including:

* Getting an idea of other roles in the hospital
* Building relationships with staff for networking, references, etc
* Getting a job
* Getting clinical experience
* Working in learning disability setting
* Meeting their course requirements

Feedback from the students suggests that these objectives were achieved through their participation in the pilot project.

## Values and attitudes

The mentors/supervisors all reported that their allocated students had the right passion, values and attitudes to work in health and social care. They were able to give examples from observed behaviour, for example:

* Compassionate and person-centred care
* Excellent communication skills
* Hard working and eager to learn
* Having relevant knowledge for health care setting

*“[Our student] was very enthusiastic and keen to learn. The staff were motivated by her enthusiasm and were keen to support and teach her.”*

*(Mentor, Hospital Trust)*

*“[Our student] quickly gained confidence showing her ability to communicate effectively with people of all needs and abilities. [She] has shown she is caring and compassionate.”*

*(Mentor, Learning Disability Services)*

Students reported that it was not always easy to identify the values held by their respective placement organisations. This is possibly because staff tend to ‘live and breathe’ the values rather than specifically referring to them or it could be that the organisations did not have a (visible) values statement. Students found that working in a values-driven environment required them to think about how they were applying them in the course of the placement.

## Unanticipated benefits

Feedback from mentors/supervisors and project leads confirmed that their **organisations** had benefitted as a result of hosting students on placement. The main value was the intrinsic reward gained by mentors/supervisors and other staff as a result of supporting and sharing their knowledge with the students. The mentors/ supervisors all said that they would host students again owing to the positive experience of the pilot.

The hands-on nature of work in a learning disability setting meant that student presence bolstered numbers/ratios meaning that some activities went ahead which may have otherwise been cancelled due to insufficient numbers of staff, thereby bringing an added benefit to **service users**.

*“Sometimes if there isn't enough staff or someone annual leave, they are quite limited to what they can do, so it [the student being there] is good for the clients as well”*

(Student)

Participating in the pilot has led to opportunities for **students** to apply for bank work, apprenticeships, etc. in both the Healthcare Trust and Learning Disability Services.

*“The staff and the service users are always quite happy because they don't usually have someone [on placement] for that length of time. You get to know them, and they get to know you”*

(Student)

Furthermore, students were able benefit from the relationships developed with their mentors/supervisors in relation to careers guidance/coaching to help them understand the pathways available and some have already used this to make applications for higher education courses.

When asked *‘What advice would you give to someone else about to start on a work placement’* the students made a number of suggestions:

* Make the most of the opportunity and ask questions
* Be eager!
* Speak up if something is not quite working for you
* Be yourself
* Capture the experience through notes, photos and videos whenever you can
* Look out for jobs of interest you could apply for after you have gained more experience
* Try everything you get offered the chance to do
* There’s always something to learn
* You can always improve on your knowledge and skills
* Form relationships and expand your networks
* Offer to help as much as possible.

*“Go in there thinking ‘this is literally life changing!’ …the things that I saw, I could never have thought I would ever see that.”*

*(Student)*

# Additional lessons learned[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Careful consideration will be required to establish how students can undertake placements that will give them the total hours required to meet the course requirements at T Level.**

**Earlier employer involvement and greater collaboration with the College will be needed to ensure placements are closely matched to the requirements of T Levels.**

## Introduction

The pilot project has highlighted two main aspects of the work placement which will need to be considered when T Levels are introduced:

* placement hours
* earlier employer involvement
* greater collaboration between the College and placement host organisations.

## Placement hours

Students and Project Leads acknowledged that the placements contributed to, but did not fully meet, a 2-year course requirement of 350 hours. During the pilot many students were able to secure additional hours (one student gained was able to undertake almost 100 extra hours) but this was largely due to the flexibility of the mentors / supervisors and proactivity on the part of students.

Although the placements were promoted as running from 9am to 4pm, this was not always the reality. For example, one placement was only available from 9am to 1pm. In other cases host teams performed certain activities around a set time of the day, which weren’t necessarily of interest or benefit to students (for example, paperwork) or were involved in activities that were unsuitable for a student to participate in (i.e. intimate care, some aspects of theatre work). Further consideration will be required when T Levels are rolled out to ensure that students can achieve the number of placement hours required.

## Earlier employer involvement

Employers will need to be involved in designing the placements and setting learning outcomes in conjunction with the College to ensure that the placements meet the requirements of the T Level courses and that a wider variety of opportunities are available for students.

With the increased requirements of T Level placements, employers in Health and Social Care will need longer lead in times to enable systems to be put in place to manage students.

The Project Leads also felt that it was important to factor in time to prepare students and increase their awareness of the opportunities available, particularly those in social care. It was suggested, for example, that the local authority should promote itself as the second largest employer in the county offering a range of jobs including social care (in the same was ay the NHS promotes itself as a major employer).

## Greater collaboration between the College and placement host organisations

Employers expressed a desire to better understand how social care is covered within the curriculum in comparison with health.

The Project Lead from Health also felt that the students pastoral care needed to be assigned to someone and that this may require funding.

The positive feedback received from the students who participated in the pilot project should be built upon and used in future marketing of placements for T Levels.

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1. This included a key member of the project team from the College going on an extended period of sick leave and the effects of the Covid-19 epidemic [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A further two focus groups were planned but were unable to be carried out owing to staff illness [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Students also completed Log Books during their placements which may yield further evidence about what did / did not wok well for them. However, we were unable to obtain copies of these to include in our evaluation (they were to have been requested at the focus groups and passed onto us, but this did not happen). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The student focus groups were delegated to the College as we would have required ethics approval to work with under eighteens and the project timescale did not allow for this. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This was often facilitated during the placement, but some students felt ‘stuck’ in one department [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. One student was ‘given the benefit of the doubt’ by the interviewing panel despite performing poorly at their interview, however, this student went on to perform poorly on their placement, much to the disappointment of the panel. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The aim of this evaluation was to highlight what worked well and what did not work so well and this has largely been covered in previous sections. However, there were further some clear and consistent messages from stakeholders which we have collated here as lessons learned given that we are unable to draw conclusive recommendations given the incomplete nature of the evidence gathered. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)