

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF EPA FLEXIBILITIES FOR RN APPRENTICES AT MID & SOUTH ESSEX NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

Like many trusts across the country, Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust (MSEFT) have been working actively to engage with the Registered Nurse apprenticeship in order to address some of the workforce challenges in their nursing workforce. Following a significant amount of preparatory work, in April 2018 they successfully started a group of 25 apprentices undertaking a shortened top-up apprenticeship with the University of Essex as part of a cohort of apprentices from Trusts across the mid and south Essex area. These apprentices continued their development, having previously completed a foundation degree or similar, with a further 1,150 hours of theory and 1,150 hours of supernumerary practice in line with the full-time nursing students at the university.

Fast forward to March 2020 and the cohort were approaching their End Point Assessment (EPA), having completed their Nursing degree. Excitedly looking forward to taking up their new roles as registered nurses, the cohort hit a barrier when the impact of Covid-19 made it clear that their EPA would not be able to go ahead, leaving them in limbo yet keen to utilise their new skills to support their colleagues in caring for patients impacted by Covid-19. During this time, MSEFT alongside trusts across the country, worked to provide evidence to Health Education England (HEE) to build a case for flexibilities being introduced to the EPA requirements for health apprenticeships so that more qualified staff could get to the front line sooner.

Rachel Gray, Work Based Learning and Apprenticeship Lead at MSEFT, said: "It was vital for our Nurse Degree Top Up apprentices to start working on the frontline as soon as possible, to enable them to support their colleagues during Covid-19 and be an additional resource to our registered nursing workforce"

Following conversations between HEE, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and the Education and Skills Funding Agency, an agreement was confirmed that all Registered Nurse and Nursing Associate apprentices who had passed the gateway in their apprenticeship and met the requirements to join the Nursing and Midwifery Council's register would be awarded their EPA and therefore allowed to complete their programme despite the disruption caused by Covid-19.

Rachel confirms the trust were pleased with this outcome, stating, *“This was our first cohort on the Nurse Degree top-up and without the flexibilities that have been introduced, we would not have been able to deploy them as registered nurses so quickly. They have now been able to work as registered professionals at a time when our capacity has been stretched.”*

A total of 22 apprentices have been working as registered nurses across MSEFT since the start of May.

