

## **Paused students\_(Ridgway)**

### **Working title: Supporting 'paused' students to re-enter their nursing programmes**

The recruitment and retention of staff within the health and social care sector continues to be a leading issue nationally, as the NHS faces the [greatest workforce crisis](#) in its history.

[New data from NHS Digital](#) shows there were almost 47,000 registered nurse vacancies in the NHS in England alone between April and June 2022, with a total of 34,000 nurses leaving their NHS role over the past 12 months – an increase of 25% on the previous year.

Nursing student attrition also continues to be a problem. Nationally, one in four nursing students will drop out of their course, and a [Nursing Standard investigation published last month](#) suggests that 33% of those who started their nursing degrees in 2018 did not graduate in 2021.

This high drop-out rate makes it harder for the NHS to anticipate the shortage of nurses and other health care staff in years to come, compounded by the fact that an estimated [10% of the nursing workforce is considering leaving](#) their jobs.

Students drop out of their studies for a variety of reasons, including poor academic progress, personal, social and financial problems, and issues relating to their mental health and well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the number of students pausing their studies, with issues with practice placements and the dominance of remote learning leaving some students feeling overwhelmed and stressed out.

As an educational institution offering a range of health and social care courses, the University of Chester is committed to providing bespoke well-being and pastoral support to our students, enabling them to focus on their studies and complete their programmes so they can reach their full potential.

In January 2022, we employed a pastoral lecturer to support students who had paused their studies but wanted to return to their programmes.

Part of a collaboration with [Health Education England](#), the goal is to help students re-enter their programmes and complete any outstanding requirements so they can register as nurses.

There are many reasons why students decide to pause their studies, so the most important aspect of this support is recognising that a 'one size fits all' approach won't work.

### **How does the pastoral support programme work?**

After identifying the reason for the pause in study, the pastoral lecturer works closely with each student to develop a bespoke support package dependent on the needs of the student, such as extra study skills or well-being support.

The pastoral lecturer contacts students via email initially to offer a one-to-one meeting, which can be outside of the working day if required. It is important that the student is able to meet with the pastoral lecturer according to their needs, rather than a specific timeframe.

The pastoral lecturer then devises a schedule of work linked to when the student should return to their studies and maintains regular contact with each student during the remaining period of being paused.

The pastoral support package is shared with the student's personal tutor to ensure everything is in place to meet the student's specific needs once they have returned to their studies, with the pastoral lecturer working closely with the personal tutor to progress the support outlined in each student's package and facilitate a timely return to the programme.

Once the student has returned to their studies, continuous review of their progress is carried out during formalised meetings and touch points with their personal tutor. The student receives extra support as required, usually for around three months.

Individuals we have supported through the programme so far include a student with anxiety issues who required therapy to allow them to return to practice, a student with financial difficulties who could not afford to travel to placement, and a student who had no option but to pause their studies after their parent – the main carer for the student's children – became seriously ill.

We have also supported students who are failing academically, including one who did not have enough academic credit to progress to the next year. A study skills package was put together for the student, including one-to-one support in essay writing, signposting to academic integrity support, and regular touch points with the student's personal academic tutor to ensure they remained on target.

Students requiring support are signposted to relevant services across the university, and we also set up a peer support 'buddy system' where other students from the same cohort who may also have paused their studies could reach out to each other or their student representative.

Our evidence suggests that on return to study, students who have paused their programmes can remain at high risk of not completing their studies and are much more likely to require additional support and guidance.

By providing this support early on, we aim to help these students build their resilience and tackle any challenges that may have previously led them to drop out of their course again.

Not only does this help ensure they are able to complete their programme on their return, it provides them with the tools they need to deal with the demands of being a nurse during the first few years after completing their degree.

The pastoral support programme has shown impressive initial success, with a total of 21 students returning to their nursing programme at the University of Chester since the initiative was introduced.

Third-year nursing student Yildiz Ozcan – who paused her studies at the start of the pandemic in 2020 as she was due to get married - re-started her nursing programme this month.

'The wedding was fully planned and I was concerned that the pressures and risks of studying for a nursing degree during a pandemic would mean I wouldn't be able to get married,' she says.

'While initially I had been apprehensive about returning to my studies, the ongoing support of the pastoral lecturer and the faculty at the university has been extremely helpful.

'After taking time off, they helped me overcome the worries I had about picking up the course again and we worked together to ensure I was in the best position to re-start the programme.'

As a faculty, we are now looking at how we can fund this important programme long-term to ensure this bespoke support is offered to any student who has paused their studies and is interested in returning.

A number of universities across the country have also been funded by Health Education England to support paused students to return to their programmes, with different institutions trialing a variety of ideas and initiatives to support students.

We have shared the experiences from our programme with others, and the university is now part of a group of higher education institutions in the North West of England where we share best practice and work together to ensure paused students are given the most effective support.

We have already seen the valuable impact this programme has had on each individual student. Moving forward, we will continue to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of introducing the pastoral lecturer post, with the aim of making this a permanent position.

Our faculty is fully committed to encouraging and supporting those who have paused their studies to return to their programmes. We look forward to seeing how our students flourish upon their return and go on to be excellent nurses.

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