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Tutoring pharmacists on a work-based diploma - an emerging challenge and opportunity

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Introduction

The professional development and fitness to practice agendas mandate and require all pharmacists to identify and develop their skills and knowledge. The early years of qualification sees many practitioners, particularly in secondary care, meeting these development needs by working towards formal qualifications such as postgraduate diplomas. We the authors have experience of a work-based postgraduate diploma programme offered by the Joint Programmes Board (JPB), which meets and combines these emerging challenges.

The work-based diploma tutor (hereafter known as 'tutor') plays an important role in the life of any diploma student. Many tutors testify that their experience is rewarding but also challenging. Tutors must juggle the competing demands of a busy job with a tutor role that encompasses many activities. The aim of this article is to explore what stakeholders require of a tutor involved with a work-based diploma programme, along with some practical suggestions. We also hope to encourage tutors to better understand their role, access support; and adopt a holistic approach to diploma student development.

We hope that a tutor for any diploma programme, regardless of the mode of delivery, sector of practice, or geography, may find the insights offered helpful, as well as anyone who is managing or guiding a junior pharmacist not on a formal programme.

The JPB diploma

The JPB is a working collaboration between nine universities and the NHS, covering 40 per cent of the population of England, that has developed the Postgraduate Diploma in General Pharmacy Practice (DipGPP).¹ In essence, DipGPP is not a 'clinical' diploma, but a general programme that awards academic credit for learning and development 'on the job' post registration. DipGPP graduates are also awarded a 'statement of completion' of general pharmacist training. The new pharmacy contract in England provides the backbone for the community pharmacy curriculum of DipGPP and typical hospital pharmacy rotations form the basis of the hospital programme. Further details can be found at www.jpbsoutheast.org.

The *diploma student* and their requirements of the work-based diploma tutor

In the hospital environment, diploma enrolment typically occurs at the start of a band 6 post. This means that the first meeting between student and tutor may occur during a period of change and potential stress as students come to terms with the pressures of practising as a hospital pharmacist. At this time of vulnerability, they will hope that tutors are knowledgeable about the requirements of their diplomas, their roles and responsibilities; and motivated and enthusiastic about the new tutor-student partnership.

Regardless of the sector of practice or the experience of the new diploma student, a tutor with little or no understanding of the above, or who is disinterested, will de-motivate even the most enthusiastic student. Diploma students often 'look up' to their tutors and it can feel impossible to challenge a tutor who is unsupportive. Evidence suggests that interest in students' experiences and clear direction are factors that improve assimilation and understanding, whilst unhelpful attitudes of teachers (and presumably tutors) can prompt them to disengage.²

Students appreciate enthusiastic tutors who support them in their practice and provide direction, helping them to make the transition from needing 'hand-holding' to being more self-directed in their learning at work at an appropriate stage. Such tutors are valuable role models for their students, and can provide crucial input into their development, supporting them in decisions about future career choices. The tutor may only be formally linked to the diploma student for the duration of their course, but it is a relationship that may last a lot longer.

Besides this, diploma tutors are often the eyes and ears of their student's development and can be an invaluable support in terms of the pastoral care and professional development.

Suggestions to help the tutor-student relationship:

- Discuss expectations of both the diploma student and tutor at the first meeting to establish mutual respect and understanding in the relationship
- Consider using an educational agreement or learning contract
- Honour appointments with students wherever possible and respond promptly, e.g. to emails
- Think about how easy or difficult it was to approach or question your tutor when you were a student. Consider how you could be welcoming and approachable in spite of your busy schedule
- Make sure that your diploma student knows what they need to do at each stage of their work-based programme
- Help students to meet their obligations, e.g. commit to releasing them for assessments and study periods at the academic institution
- Remember that diploma students will value tutors who provide timely and honest feedback

Work-based diploma tutors and what they want for and of themselves

Whilst many tutors are enthusiastic about their role, some are reluctant, which may be due to lack of time or personal interest in being a tutor, or through being allocated a student without consultation. Either way, there are things that all tutors are likely to want for themselves in terms

of support, and *of* themselves in terms of how they would like to perform as a tutor. There are links between these two aspects.

Arguably, the tutor's biggest challenge is to fit the role into an already busy work schedule. Many will testify to undertaking tutoring activities in their own time. Tutors will therefore seek adequate work-time to fulfil their responsibilities and to tutor appropriately. A work-based diploma means that tutor activity relates directly to on-the-job development. Therefore, for work-based tutoring to be recognised as an important and legitimate activity alongside service delivery, this role should be included in relevant job descriptions. Tutors will also want adequate notice and forward-planning by diploma students who need to meet up and undertake work-based assessments.

Tutors will not want to let the diploma student down through not being adequately equipped. Skills required of the tutor include managing student expectations and facilitating them as adult, work-based learners. Some diploma students, particularly in the early stages of a work-based diploma programme such as DipGPP, might expect to be formally taught everything, rather than facilitated on a journey towards self-directed learning (SDL). Depending on the definition, SDL is a controversial concept that maybe differs from what diploma students were used to at university and what tutors may be used to in 'taught' programmes. This is especially the case if tutors have previously supported students on courses using a teacher-led approach to learning. The tutor needs to have appropriate knowledge about the ethos of the particular diploma and the necessary skills to facilitate learning, develop appropriate self-direction, assess an individual's performance, and give feedback and support.

Formal tutor training with ongoing support, provided locally and in partnership with academia, helps to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and confidence for tutors to accelerate their students' development; and to meet their own requirements as they develop as advanced practitioners. This may include meeting criteria laid down in frameworks such as the KSF³ and Advanced and Consultant Level Framework.⁴

Suggestions for support and development as a tutor:

- Advocate tutor activity being reflected in the relevant job description
- Discuss your individual development needs as a tutor with your line manager as part of your Personal Development Plan
- Use your manager or E&T lead to help you locate relevant tutor training opportunities, tips, and easier ways to understand the academic programme
- Try to learn course jargon and assessments found in the course
- Think about how your tutor role can help you with your own personal development and aspirations
- Collect evidence gained from tutoring role for your CPD portfolio, e.g. to demonstrate competence against relevant competency frameworks
- Set up a local network of peers to share tutoring experiences/concerns

Pharmacy managers/Superintendants and their requirements of the work-based diploma tutor

Pharmacy managers and Superintendants will want assurances that all pharmacists working in the organisation are fit to practise in order to meet professional requirements. They will expect poor

practice to be identified and addressed; and work-based assessment tools used in the DipGPP programme are helpful in this respect, across the sectors of practice.

A JPB example of this is the regular academic review of progress within DipGPP, which provides the platform where competence is assessed against the relevant competency framework, the GLF.⁵ Pharmacy managers can therefore expect diploma student development to be linked with performance; and in this respect the DipGPP programme provides ample work-based evidence to make decisions about meeting organisational requirements, such as KSF 'gateway' progression. This academic review can contribute to evidence of a competent and capable workforce, which in secondary care helps managers fulfil NHS Litigation Authority (NHSLA) requirements. In the majority of cases, regular formative feedback ensures that most students pass through the academic review without difficulty.

Early identification of poorly performing or unsupported diploma students is essential; since attempts to rectify matters at a later stage are likely to be more difficult, with the attendant effect on provision of pharmacy services. Key to early identification is timely and transparent communication, which will be expected of tutors by their managers.

Finally, managers will also expect that tutors have the necessary skills to undertake tutoring requirements such as questioning, feedback and assessment skills. We recognise that these are challenging skills which take time to develop; but the current absence of national standards for tutor training and accreditation can mean a lack of quality assurance for these important skills in pharmacy tutoring.

Suggestions:

- Identify poor performers at an early stage and discuss with the lead tutor or appropriate manager, referring to the academic institution where necessary
- Know what your organisation requires to demonstrate a competent and capable workforce

Conclusion

We have found tutoring and supporting diploma students to be a rewarding challenge. The emergence of work-based formal programmes for all sectors of practice will raise the stakes for tutoring and facilitation. If we can get this right as a profession, there is exciting potential for a self-perpetuating stream of development, where today's diploma students can be tomorrow's tutors, with a robust understanding of work-based programmes and an empathy for the next generation of diploma students.

References

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