

Reflections from the
UNISON student nurse and midwife
network
2020 -2021

UNISON Student Nurse and Midwife Network

Rights

Unity

Learning

 **UNISON**
the public service union

Introduction



It's not an exaggeration to say that student nurses and midwives had an experience like no others before them over the last two years.

Whilst completing their degrees, student nurses and midwives must spend thousands of hours on clinical placements to learn skills and put theory in practice. While doing so they are not officially counted in staffing numbers, though in practice this distinction is often blurry.

This all changed rapidly when COVID-19 gripped Britain in spring 2020.

Fears that the NHS would be overwhelmed meant more experienced nursing students were asked to take up paid roles in the NHS whilst they continued learning. Tens of thousands of students underwent this experience, and many again in England during the second wave in 2021. Many others opted to continue their studies online.

UNISON, with the help of our student members and activists, set up and coordinated a network of students throughout this time. Students from all across the UK contributed to this network, helping us to organise vital support and education for students, to raise problematic issues to decision makers and to campaign for their rights.

The students on our network were courageous and showed amazing leadership, both locally and nationally. In London, in September 2021 we brought many of them together for the first time to share their reflections and experiences. To improve nursing education, student activism and healthcare going forward, we should all pay attention to their perspectives and try to learn from them.

Stuart Tuckwood

National Officer for Nursing, UNISON

One of the most empowering actions any organisation or healthcare leader can do for students is to create time and space to listen and engage with us. It is in this listening space, that problem solving, shared understanding and solutions can emerge. This, for me, has been the underpinning strength of our student network. UNISON leaders reached out and asked for our voices and insights, we were keen to engage and ensure our voices made a difference.

Over the last two years, we came together, advocated for our peers and gave insights that no healthcare leader could possibly gleam. We asked our healthcare leaders to make decisions with us, based on our expert 'lived experience' as students learning in a pandemic. This was no tick box exercise, these were authentic voices wanting to support each other in a time of crisis and to advocate for positive changes going forward.

I am incredibly proud of the work we have all done together and the many, positive working relationships we have developed with each other and our healthcare leaders. A strong group of passionate students leaving a strong legacy for future students. Long may this listening space, student advocacy, empowerment and action continue. There is so much more to do.

Joy O'Gorman

UNISON National Student Nurse Lead
2020-2021



Student reflections from the COVID-19 pandemic – September 2021

12 student nurses from the network joined the UNISON Health team in London on 17th September 2021. They discussed their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic with health leaders who attended. These are the themes that emerged from their discussion.

How they felt about their experiences during the pandemic

Network members talked about how exhausting being a student trying to learn during the pandemic had been, and how many of their colleagues were now burnt-out.

‘It’s felt like trying to survive the hunger games, it’s been really hard going.’

‘in the end I was forced to take a break (suspend my studies) because the pressure was too much.’

‘I feel like I’m disconnected – like I have constant jet-lag, this is not healthy.’

Some felt like there wasn’t enough understanding that they had lives outside of their studies. They felt like they were trying to juggle too many competing priorities whilst also trying to complete their degrees well.

‘It needs to be remembered that not all students can afford to stop to work, we have families and children and many colleagues were juggling all this.’

How their education and development had been affected

A lot of discussion was dominated by how difficult continuing education had been during the pandemic. A number of students were concerned that they and their colleagues were lacking in important experiences and knowledge because their studies had been disrupted.

‘A lot of people have left courses, disheartened, people aren’t getting the same opportunities to learn’

‘I feel like we’re teaching ourselves’

‘I know a lot of students who are now third years, because of the various circumstances, they haven’t really had any proper experience – and they’re not ready’

Many students talked about how the emergency standards introduced during the pandemic meant they didn’t get normal learning opportunities in practice.

‘you worry a lot about what level of experience they’re going to have when they graduate’

‘I feel like I lost ten weeks, because I didn’t learn any nursing skills’

When they're in clinical practice students need experienced nurses to teach and supervise them but many spoke of staffing shortages and how these were preventing this from happening.

'They didn't have the people to look after us on placements'

'The teams we are working with are almost struggling more than ever – because of shortages and isolation'

'inevitably you are working as an unpaid healthcare assistant'

However a number also felt like they'd developed specific strengths by working and learning through such challenging conditions.

'Now we're going into work environments that are struggling even more with staffing but we've probably learned more than ever about how to delegate and how to lead.'

'We didn't have a choice but to be resilient.'

'although my first paid placement was poor, my second helped me develop my leadership abilities and reflect on my skills. If I hadn't opted in for my second one then I probably wouldn't be as confident'

It was pointed out that it was helpful for some who couldn't take up a paid placement to get the opportunity to practice skills in simulation

'Those that opted out where we were, were still able to continue doing clinical skills and learning some things which was really helpful.'

The group were all concerned about the transition into qualified practice and the lack of support they felt there was out there for newly qualified nurses and midwives.

'There isn't enough preceptorship and support in practice nursing. The GP where I am now didn't have any idea how to support a newly qualified nurse.'

Where did they get support from during the pandemic?

There was a lot of talk about what had helped them cope during the pandemic, and their disappointment in those they expected more support from.

A large number felt their universities hadn't supported them well.

'a lot of universities are saying they've communicated well and have been really supportive but we haven't seen it'

'The university hasn't been helpful at all – their answer has been, get on with it, show some resilience'

'our university hasn't given us the chance to practice skills online or in any other settings'

Students also agreed with each-other that there had been lots of inconsistency between different universities, organisations and administrations during the pandemic, which had left many confused and helpless.

'the inconsistency between universities, maybe there needs to be more regulation of how they're treating students as it seems to be really unfair'

'There always seemed to be lots going on in England, webinars and talks and information, that didn't seem to take place in Scotland.'

Evidently the students at the event had found the support and opportunities afforded by their union membership to be very helpful.

What standards and interventions did they find helpful?

'UNISON always has a place at the table and it feels like this has made a difference to how it was handled'

'It was so nice to be contacted by UNISON – and to know that someone did care about how we felt... It did make me feel valued as a member of UNISON but also valued as a student. It also made me want to get more involved'

'it gives us a voice – and a space. It makes you feel like part of something, like you can make a change.'

But trying to get more involved in union activities as a student had been a challenge for several.

'At the moment my branch has just asked me to stay away – because at the moment it's just too difficult for them to manage people (students) with these problems.'

The students had all drawn strength from the teams they worked alongside in the NHS, they found the support and leadership of nursing colleagues inspiring.

'the staff on the wards have been as well despite all the pressure they're under – helping them to pull everyone through'

'I had a great experience on my paid placement which meant I wanted to work there'

There was a great deal of upheaval during the acute phases of the pandemic in the UK, with different standards and interventions being introduced for students. Some of these, like the adoption of a measure so students could complete more clinical placement options in simulated environments, were viewed favourably.

'The introduction of the 300 hours flexibility through simulation I'm really grateful for. It meant I was able to get a break before I began my new role'

But not all the students had been given this opportunity, and many agreed with each other that they hadn't been given enough flexibility during their studies.

'to be told you have to complete (clinical hours) under these conditions is a disgrace.'

'the hours are just too much.'

'There is a lot of disparity in how hours are considered or included? This seems unfair and also creates resentment'

'In the end I got pulled from placement 19 hours short – I thought to myself, I've spent 6 and half years in training to do this and I get told on a Friday afternoon that I was getting pulled...'

A great deal of discussion on this topic centred on how important it was for students to have more of a status and a voice, and for leaders and decision makers to genuinely engage with them.

Some felt they didn't have any rights as a student nurse.

'The accessibility of vaccines for students is a good example. I was working recently and they were making the flu vaccine available and accessible but for employees only, not for students.'

'we seem to be shunted from placement to placement – I think we need a proper protected status during our studies so we don't miss out on the fundamentals'

It was agreed by many that it often felt like decisions were being about them, without their input.

(referring to Scotland) 'It makes you wonder what is the point in engaging or raising concerns when no-one seems to be listening. We don't feel listened to or heard.'

'As a more junior student all my placements were cancelled – I had no choice but to work on the bank'

'you hear students complaining about their situation and they don't understand (what's going on). That gap needs to be bridged'

However through the network a number did have the opportunity to engage with senior decision makers during the pandemic. They found this positive and wanted this collaboration to be built on for the future.

'It's really helped me to understand how things work behind the scenes, and to have empathy for those making the decisions'

'We need this collaboration that's developed during the pandemic to continue – or how are we going to know how things are going to recover?'

Similar to how they had learned extra skills whilst nursing through the pandemic, a number felt like they had developed their ability to influence and advocate.

'Absolutely I've learned about how to influence people.'

'I've been working as a lead to try and get more collaboration between university and the placement providers, I think that's something that really needs to be thought about more'

One theme that came up often during this discussion was that of choice. The students recognised the emergency nature of the pandemic meant their choices had been constrained, but still felt the ability to make their own choices had been important to them.

'I had a choice to work through August in my placement area – or to do this online. Others haven't had those choices.'

'We were empowered in making our own choices, they were constrained choices but they were still choices'

How did they feel about their future studies and careers now?

A common theme at this point was of loss. Students had dealt with death and emotionally challenging circumstances during the pandemic which several spoke of. A number spoke about how they and their colleagues felt after what they'd been through and reflected on the sad loss of some of their enthusiasm and positivity for nursing.

'It's really sad that we've got a whole generation of student nurses who feel that way, a lot of skilled people we might be losing because of turnout.'

'A lot of people are thinking about not going to work in the NHS, about going to work in private healthcare instead'

Several had reluctantly decided not to pursue further study and development which they had planned for. They spoke about the loss of this opportunity.

'there's no way I could have done another year in studies. We all got to a point where we just felt done.'

'A lot of younger, more junior students don't want to know about additional opportunities or experiences because they just have too much to do already.'

But throughout all the discussions and debate there was a sense of pride in what they'd achieved, in caring for people during a global health emergency and still completing their studies.

'a lot of students don't get to nurse and learn through a pandemic like we have'

'I feel proud in lots of ways, there's lots I've learnt during the pandemic.'

Others used the word privilege to describe their experiences.

'(I'm) feeling lucky with what I've learned during the pandemic'

This small group of student nurses was by no means necessarily representative of the broader experiences of healthcare students during the pandemic. They did however have a fairly unique perspective on the emergency at a local, regional and national level and by supporting not just themselves and their families but their student colleagues.

It will be crucial for the future of nursing and midwifery that health leaders reflect on their experiences, what can be learned from what they have gone through and how we can build from the various positives they have identified.



Nichole McIntosh
Regional Head of Nursing and Midwifery
Health Education England, London

'I found it to be a humbling experience to hear first-hand the inspirational journey that these students had been on during the pandemic.

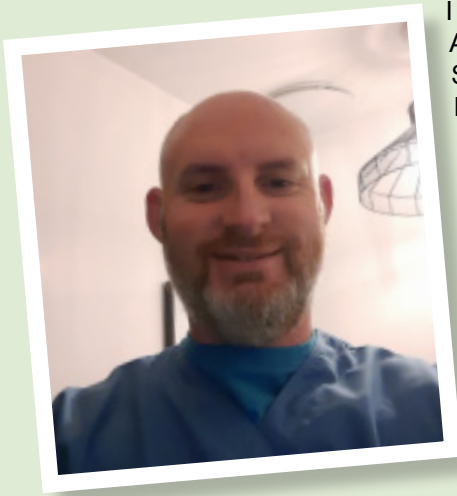
I was particularly impressed with their confidence in articulating their experiences and how they had personally and professionally responded to the opportunities and challenges that had been experienced. The messages of support to each other and their appreciation of the work that health care staff in the placement areas and academic staff at the universities had undertaken were great.

There were areas that were identified as requiring improvement including how information was shared with them in relation to, for example, the introduction of a blended learning approach is one that we need to act on in a collaborative manner.

I would again like to thank all the students for being so professional, dedicated and committed to providing excellent patient care during the pandemic and beyond. I wish them all successful and happy careers in the NHS.'

In their own words

Simon James – Adult Nurse



I have just attained my Adult Nursing degree from Swansea University and have just begun my first registered nursing role as part of a community/district nursing team in my local area.

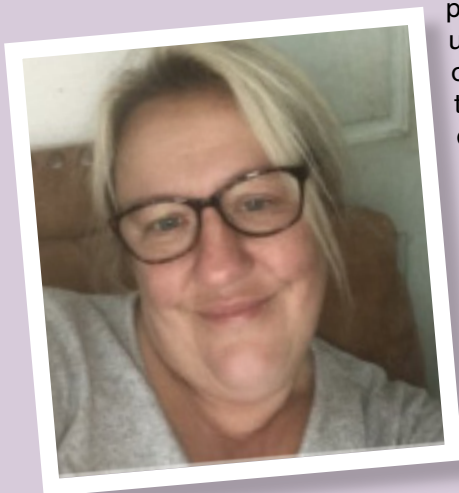
The pandemic hit when I was halfway through my second year of study. I adapted well but did struggle to concentrate if we had a few long lectures over zoom in

the same day. It was also a challenge when I moved back home after finishing my opt in placement and also had to home school my daughter. I am a person who thrives on interaction and sitting at home IN front of a screen hit me hard. I'm incredibly proud of all the healthcare students studying at the moment and do feel it's been a unique and character building experience.

During the discussions with the NMC throughout the pandemic the network has really pulled together and it has been great to speak to the decision makers first hand and to be part of the process and I am proud to have been selected to offer the Welsh prospective.

I have been inspired by the other participants on the UNISON Network and their tireless efforts to get the best outcome for their fellow students and future colleagues. The passion and commitment by the members has driven me to keep challenging myself.

Nik Haley – Student Mental Health Nurse



The pressures began in March 2020 when I was a second-year student in a PICU placement. I was settling in and doing well with all my skills and competencies. I got the email to say we have been taken off placement due to the pandemic. A few weeks later we had to decide whether to opt in or opt

out of an emergency paid placement. I unfortunately had to opt out (a decision that prevented me qualifying with my cohort in Sept 2021) due to my partner being unwell.

As I opted out, I was unable to continue placements with my peers which resulted in me falling behind. I did my

Part 2 placement again in Sept 2020 but was expected to do part 2 and 3 in just 10 weeks. It can be difficult enough to get signed off in placement due to demands on the wards. I just feel I have been playing catch up the whole time and this in turn affected my own personal mental health so much so that in April this year I almost gave up Nursing.

I feel like my university could have done more to help me get competencies signed off or it could have been made clearer to universities on ways to implement clinical skills as simulated tasks. It can be very difficult in mental health to get opportunities to develop some of the required skills.

I am so glad I had the support of the UNISON Student Network as it meant I had support and it helped renew my excitement and confidence in Nursing. Meeting my peers and other important figures was so inspiring.

Monica Tong – Adult Nurse

In my experience, we can never be sure of how we are treated in practice until we arrive onto our placements. Some are great and others not so much. Some were great where staff fully acknowledged my goals, utilised and built my skills, my supernumerary status was protected and they did their absolute best to uphold that, whilst ensuring every chance was there to make the best for my learning.

During the pandemic there was so much disruption to how we studied. The collaborative aspects of university and learning weren't the same through zoom and the knowledge of modules for me was much harder to absorb. The level of concentration required was much more intense and being under pressure from this and working full time was not easy.

Students must be given a chance to voice their concerns in a safe space.

Not only this but providing genuine advice and working with them for solutions which can help them.

Students need to feel valued and listened to, nursing is an incredibly stressful job and degree, we need to continue to work together to make it work.



Natalie Elliott – Newly registered Adult Nurse

Joining the UNISON Student Nurse Network was one of the best things I did. Creating a safe place for nursing students during the pandemic was the best thing UNISON did. It connected people across the UK to share what was working well in their areas and what wasn't. Being a nursing student can be isolating and having a connection with others really helped.

I felt like the team at UNISON were eager to listen to nursing students and our challenges but most importantly they were able to advocate on our behalf. They wouldn't shy away from the tough conversations that were needed to ensure that nursing students received as fair a deal as possible, particularly when it came to issues like life insurance for students. I always trusted them to do the right thing.

Another thing that the network allowed me to do was sit at the table when students were asked their opinions of the current situation. This gave me many skills, such as being able to articulate myself professionally and diplomatically, it also taught me about how to confidently advocate for my peers.

UNISON always took the ethical stance when decisions needed to be made. Being part of the network allowed me to keep focussed

during the most difficult parts of my degree because I knew there would always be someone close by who was willing to offer an ear to listen or help navigate any problems I was having. UNISON is the trade union that listens, cares and acts.



Activities of the UNISON Student Nurse & Midwife Network 2020-2021

Late March 2020 – UNISON launches all nursing & midwifery student survey for COVID-19

21 May 2020 – Student Nurse and Midwife Network first meeting

17 August 2020 – Preparing for your placements advice – Organised by the Network

Autumn 2020 – UNISON launch survey for nursing and midwifery students on COVID-19 experiences

August 2020 – New twitter account to signpost and inform fellow students on student affairs launched

October 2020 – UNISON Learning Month for Healthcare students – Organised by and supported by the student network

21 October 2020 – UNISON Student Network – peer support webinar on preparing for your clinical placements

November 2020 – UNISON Student Network members meet with MPs about tuition fees & financial support during the pandemic

January 2021 – UNISON Student Network members meet senior health leaders and the NMC to discuss emergency standards reintroduction

18 January 2021 - Student Nurse and Midwife Network emergency meeting to discuss student response to COVID-19 pandemic second wave

28 January 2021 – UNISON / NMC joint webinar with students and advisors to support final year nursing students with emergency standards

15 Feb 2021 – UNISON Student Network advises UNISON on raising issues with Scottish Government

15 March 2021 – UNISON Network online debate on whether clinical placement hours should be reduced for nursing students

12 May 2021 – UNISON Student Lead Joy O’Gorman takes part in an online event to celebrate International Nurse’s Day with other UNISON nursing family members

Summer 2021 – Student Nurse and Midwife Network contributes to UNISON response to NMC consultation on undergraduate nursing and midwifery education

17 September 2021 – Student Nurse and Midwife Network comes together in London to reflect on experiences and perspectives with senior health leaders

21 September 2021 – UNISON Health Conference passes a motion calling for better support for newly qualified nurses and midwives following work of the Student Network

October 2021 – 475 healthcare students join study sessions put on by the network for UNISON Student learning month.

