

Learner and Educator Perceptions of Adult Social Care as a Learning and Career Choice

Sue Clarke, Sue Noon, Kate H. Knight, Jonathan Hay

As more people are treated and looked after in a place of their choosing, adult social care plays an increasingly vital role in our health services. The UK Government's 2022 'Health and Social Care Integration: Joining up Care for People, Places and Populations' framework calls for health and social care provision across the UK to become more integrated (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022). This paradigm shift requires not only changes in training and education processes, but also in perception. This report presents the initial findings of a study evaluating the perspectives of learners and educators on adult social care (ASC). The study assesses the extent to which those undertaking social care work placements or teaching envision social care as an aspect of their future careers.

The sample consisted of student participants undertaking a nursing qualification (45), alongside educators (8). Although the majority of student participants were pre-registrant adult nurses (n=37), other student participants were studying on non-adjacent courses. There was an even spread of participants across the three years of undergraduate study. In this sample, only 27% (n=14) of participants had experience of ASC through their educational studies, suggesting that few students are being prepared for working in ASC environments via the taught elements of their courses.

There was generally a stronger understanding of the value of ASC amongst first year students than second- and third-year students, suggesting that recent educational approaches in the region have been somewhat effective in emphasising a holistic picture of healthcare. For one first year student, "social care gives you a great knowledge base to nursing and helps you develop interpersonal skills that make you a good nurse." (P34)

When asked whether they intended to pursue a career in ASC, almost even numbers of participants answered "yes" (15), "no" (13) and "maybe" (17). There was no clear correlation in intention between participants who had already worked in ASC and those who would be prepared to do so going forwards.

Overall, 60% of respondents (n=27/45) answered that ASC was included at least minimally in their studies, yet, amongst these participants there was a consensus that ASC was covered "not as much as it should be" (P2), or that they only "discuss it briefly I believe" (P18). This indicates that the quality and quantity of related teaching provision is more important than the bare presence of ASC in curricula.

Throughout the survey responses, 'holistic' was one of the key terms mentioned most frequently (9). Numerous students also stated a desire to help others being a motivation for their interest in pursuing a career in ASC:

"I firmly believe social care is a way forward for society to enable those who can to be cared for at home which would have better benefits and outcomes for them" (P44).

Overall, 87% of participants (n=46) felt that it was either "important" or "very important" that ASC was included as part of their studies or teaching. 77% of participants felt ASC

was either “useful” or “very useful” towards acquiring the knowledge, skills and proficiencies required for registration, providing a strong utility case. Nevertheless, 39 participants felt that primary care placements had a clinical component, whereas only 21 felt the same about ASC placements.

Many participants stated that ASC education was crucial, since it was essential to them understanding how care links together across the NHS Health and Care system. For another student, a current lack of ASC provision and education was responsible for high hospital admission rates:

“I find the lack of social care the underlying reason for many patients ending up in clinical settings, so I think [it] is an essential part and we should have more preparation around this” (P15)

As one educator summarized, “adult social care placements have so much to offer students but many students and HEIs rate them as second class compared to the ‘excitement’ of NHS Trusts unfortunately” (P36). As another educator stated:

“This is such an important discussion to be having and it’s great that it’s happening now, but we should have been having it at least 10 years ago! The key message is for the social care sector to be valued - in terms of the people served and supported; in terms of staff remuneration; and as a valid and exciting career destination.” (P43)

In conclusion, this initial data suggests that preparation for practice in social care settings is currently inadequate, and correspondingly, students appear inadequately prepared for ASC careers. We suggest that a significant call to action for HEIs is required and conclude that more taught content pertaining to ASC is needed on university courses. Lectures could, for instance, explain to students what it would be like to work on an advanced dementia ward.

References

Department of Health and Social Care. (2022, February 9). Health and social care integration: joining up care for people, places and populations. *GOV.UK*.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-and-social-care-integration-joining-up-care-for-people-places-and-populations>