Guidelines for students and practice educators: How to work with a student displaying unprofessional behaviours during a practice placement

The nature of the work undertaken by students and the conditions to be met for registration with the Health and Care Professions Council require specific standards of conduct associated with professional status and practice. During practice education students remain accountable to the University for their professional conduct.

All students on practice placement are assessed on their professional conduct. The assessment of this is based on the Health and Care Professions Council Guidance on Conduct and Ethics for Students (HCPC 2016), and the College of Occupational Therapists Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (COT 2015a).

Expected professional behaviours during practice placements

Professionalism can be regarded as a meta skill, comprising situational awareness and contextual judgement (HCPC 2011). The true skill of professionalism may be not so much in knowing what to do, but when to do it. The role of the practice educator is to raise the student’s awareness of this.

Throughout practice placements it is expected that students, at all times will:

- Respect everybody including people referred to occupational therapy, and their carers, peers, all staff, and other practice and university colleagues;
- Behave in a professional, and ethical manner;
- Act with integrity;
- Maintain proper and effective communications with every one;
- Respect service user confidentiality;
- Behave in an appropriate and non disruptive way;
- Disclose to the University any information which may affect their good character, health, and performance;
- Communicate effectively and take responsibility for any planned, or unplanned absence;
- Uphold the reputation of the profession, and the University.

Examples of unprofessional behaviours

Examples deemed to be evidence of unprofessional behaviours include but are not limited to:

- Adverse reactions and/or inappropriate behaviours relating to individuals referred to occupational therapy, and/or specific client groups;
- Angry feedback to practice educator, arguing with practice educator about grade awarded for placement;
- Offensive, undermining, slanderous inappropriate communications about peers, service users, staff, and other colleagues, practice placement provider, and/or the University;
- Attitudes such as disloyalty, dishonesty, intolerance, irresponsibility, lack of commitment, lack of initiative, unreliability;
- Breach of confidentiality, misuse of confidential material relating to a service user;
• Boundary violations with service users, and/or colleagues;
• Deliberate misuse of equipment or materials, or monies of the placement site;
• Deliberate falsification of facts, as in lying or attempting to defame colleagues, or service users. For example, making false claims for placement expenses, lying about placement attendance, falsely claiming to have undertaken activities with a service;
• Failure to carry out agreed actions without explanation;
• Failure to recognise factors, and respond to issues affecting health and well being as a health care student, and to take appropriate steps to minimise harm to self and others;
• Unsatisfactory standards of record keeping;
• Inappropriate dress and appearance for practice placement;
• Incapacity for placement due to the influence of alcohol, or use or possession of illegal substances;
• Persistent absenteeism without good cause;
• Regular and/or repeated lack of focus of attention to learning on practice placement due to anything that has an effect on performance, for example undeclared ill health;
• Repeated failure to respond to feedback from appropriate others in relation to performance and behaviour.

Points of guidance for failure, and/or early termination of placement on ground of a student’s unprofessional behaviour.

Stage 1
The Practice Educator must:

• Discuss with the student the issues causing concern giving specific verbal feedback, and agree appropriate actions. Agree review date.
• Refer the student to the appropriate criteria on the assessment report form;
• Document that such a discussion has taken place in the student’s supervision record;
• No further action will taken unless the behaviour continues to be repeated.

Stage 2
If the above does not remove concerns about professional behaviour, it is essential that the Practice Educator involves the student’s Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) or the Professional Practice Tutor (PPT) in all discussions about the student’s behaviour.

The PAT or PPT will discuss with the practice educator the nature of the incident, and document the practice educator’s concerns on the Link Lecturer’s Report Form. Reference will be made to the appropriate assessment criteria and, where appropriate, the relevant sections of the HCPC Guidance on Conduct and Ethics for Students (HCPC 2016), and COT Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (COT 2015a). A copy of the Link Lecturer’s Report will be retained in the student’s file at the University.

All parties will consider the seriousness of the issue and determine whether or not further action
needs to be taken. If the incident and/or behaviour is significant but not serious, specific objectives, and an action plan will be devised in consultation with the student and the practice educator. A review date will be set.

Any period defined for the purposes of improvement will operate on the basis that the improvement must be sustained thereafter. The ending of the improvement period will be noted, the student either being informed that the improvement is satisfactory, or that further action will be taken.

In order that students are given reasonable opportunity for improvement, the improvement period will be determined taking into account:

- the time by which the student can reasonably effect an improvement;
- the Practice Educator’s need to make a robust assessment of the improvement;
- the likelihood of any recurrence;
- any other factors relevant to the individual situation.

Throughout this process Practice Educators must refer to the relevant assessment criteria, and continue to document their observations of the student’s behaviour/performance. Similarly, any discussion with the student relating to his/her behaviour/performance whilst on placement is documented in the supervision record by the Practice Educator.

**Stage 3**
This stage is for those behaviours that either cannot be, or has not been resolved through the processes previously outlined.

The issues that have arisen and consequent actions taken are referred to the Programme Leader, if this has not already occurred. The Programme Leader will discuss the situation, and review the documented evidence in collaboration with the Head of Division. At this point the University may take action in collaboration with the staff at the placement site to remove the student from practice placement.

The Practice Educator must complete the Practice Placement Assessment Form, documenting all issues arising during placement. We ask that the completed Assessment Form is returned to the University within 5 working days of the student’s removal from the placement setting.

If the allegation cannot be resolved locally, by the Programme Leader and Head of Division and there are concerns regarding professional suitability remaining, further action will be considered including reference to the Queen Margaret University Fitness to Practise Policy.