



# Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professions Students' Return to Supernumerary Practice Learning Experiences – applying the COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment Guidance

This document was developed by a short life working group, with representation from education, practice placement providers and NHS Education for Scotland (NES) on behalf of the National Strategic Group for Practice Learning and AHP practice-based Learning Stakeholder group in response to recommendation (i) of the Scottish Government Commissioned NES Report 'Provision of NMAHP placements in the 2020-21 Academic Session'. Recommendation (i) states 'work with universities and boards to develop a national approach to risk assessment processes and occupational health review processes for students.'

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# Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professions Students' Return to Supernumerary Practice Learning Experiences – COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment.

## Background

Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professions (NMAHP) students need to return to practice learning environments to meet the learning outcomes that allow them to graduate and to ensure the health and care sector are provided with newly qualified practitioners to meet workforce needs. It appears the coronavirus infection will remain with us for some time and therefore returning students to practice learning experience is not without risk; COVID-19 may be present in any practice learning environment and students will therefore potentially be at risk of contracting it.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (2020)<sup>1</sup> Recovery Programme Standards state that: *'Institutions and their practice learning partners will need to continue to work with their students to find appropriate placements, ensuring appropriate risk assessments are carried out. This is also underpinned by our other standards which require that institutions should be actively supporting their students' health and wellbeing at all times.'* A joint statement issued by the AHP Directors Scotland Group, Universities and NES in July 2020<sup>2</sup> states that: *'Patient/client, student and practice educator safety and well-being is paramount. Prior to being allocated to placement by the HEI, students' health and wellbeing will have been assessed to ensure their suitability to undertake PrBL in the current environment.'* While Health and Care Professions Council (2020)<sup>3</sup> emphasise students' responsibility saying they *'expect students to follow local guidance and policies put in place by their education provider and placement provider.'*

This document will provide guidance on how education providers, in both higher education institutions and further education colleges, in Scotland, in partnership with practice learning providers, may mitigate the potential risk of return to supernumerary practice learning experiences by using current COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment Guidance with all NMAHP students.

This guidance is intended to complement existing risk assessment processes by providing a means of assessing the specific risk of COVID-19 in a practice learning context. It does not replace, or exempt practice placement providers or education providers from their existing legal obligations but seeks to support them in meeting those obligations given the new risks presented by COVID-19.

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<sup>1</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Council (2020) *Recovery Programme Standards*. Available at: <https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/education-standards/recovery-programme-standards.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Joint statement (2020) Available at: <http://www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/media/CLT/ResourceUploads/4099791/8c4993da-b48c-47af-931f-630fcbaf6a83.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Health and care Professions Council (2020) *Advice for students*. Available at: <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/covid-19/advice/advice-for-students/>

### ***Adapting to changing circumstances***

It appears likely that the incidence of COVID-19 will change over the course of the next year or so and there may well be regional variation in its prevalence. This may have an impact on students' practice learning experience opportunities. Education providers, in partnership with practice learning providers, will be required to monitor their local situations very closely, act expediently and may need to change their advice according to local circumstances. The expectation is that practice learning providers will continue to support supernumerary practice learning experiences during such periods.

If a vaccine becomes available this has the potential to significantly alter risk, as will the introduction of antibody testing.

While education providers and practice learning providers have responsibilities to ensure the safety of learners, students also have a personal responsibility to keep their education providers updated if their own personal risk status changes. Examples of this include the development of new illness, starting new treatments or pregnancy. These or any other change in students' general health and wellbeing would require a repeat of the COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment and an occupational health referral if necessary.

### **Individual Level Student COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment**

All NMAHP students will have gone through health screening at the entry point of their programme. However due to the COVID-19 pandemic education providers will need to work with students to identify which individuals are more at risk of potentially suffering serious health outcomes from COVID-19.

National guidance on the occupational risk assessment that required to be undertaken for the new risks posed by COVID-19 was initially published on the 27<sup>th</sup> July 2020. Subsequently, updated guidance was published on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2020 given that, risk associated with certain conditions varies with age. A further iteration to reflect the latest clinical evidence was published on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020<sup>4</sup>. This latest version provides occupational risk assessment guidance in the form of a digital tool as there is concern that previous downloadable versions may rapidly become out of date as clinical evidence on risk factors emerges. The occupational risk assessment guidance incorporates a COVID-age calculator tool which is based on the COVID-age concept developed by the Association of Local Authority Medical Advisors (ALAMA)<sup>5</sup> and estimates a person's vulnerability if they were to contract the virus. The COVID-19

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<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government (2020) Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on individual risk assessment for the workplace. Available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-individual-risk-assessment-for-the-workplace/>

<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 medical risk assessment <https://alama.org.uk/covid-19-medical-risk-assessment/>

occupational risk assessment guidance and calculator tool, applicable to health and care staff, also applies to all healthcare students on practice placement<sup>6</sup>.

The COVID-19 risk assessment tool within the guidance is designed to support effective risk assessment and enable education provider staff to have supportive exchanges with students to agree the best course of action. The guidance also highlights the responsibilities of practice learning providers to minimise the risks in the workplace for their employees and de facto students. The agreed national approach relies on the determination of a COVID-age to identify individual risk when considering a student's return to practice placement experiences. The COVID-age of each student requires to be calculated in advance to determine the most suitable practice learning allocation for that individual. It is advised that students with a known underlying medical condition and with a COVID-age lying close to a risk-criteria threshold (e.g. between moderate to high) should refer to the ALAMA website on a regular basis to confirm their personal level of risk.

**N.B. It is important to note that, NMAHP students have a professional responsibility to be open and honest about how their health might impact on their ability to undertake practice learning experiences and will be expected to engage fully with this process. Given the occupational risk assessment guidance indicates that the tool has some limitations, particularly with some significant or less common health conditions that the tool does not address encouraging NMAHP students to be candid about all their health conditions is recommended.**

### ***Using the COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment Tool***

The COVID-age calculator tool is aimed with the individual in mind, to help them to understand their own individual risk factors and vulnerability level. The COVID-19 occupational risk assessment guidance and associated tool must be disseminated to all N&M student groups. Students should be asked to read the guidance fully and complete the COVID-age calculator tool, in order to calculate their COVID-age and identify their own level of vulnerability. Students should be strongly advised to read the guidance on the ALAMA website before using the COVID-age tool. Education providers should thereafter, once the student's COVID-age is determined, commence supportive exchanges with students. Education providers should maintain a clear audit trail of the outcome of such exchanges and may wish to develop a COVID-19 vulnerability self-declaration form which students could complete, and which could potentially be held with the student's other records. Students will fall into four broad categories, namely:

1. **Low- COVID age below around 50**

These students are at very low risk from COVID-19 and can undertake the full

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<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government Health and Social Care Directorates (27/07/20) *Publication of the COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment*. Available at: [https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/dl/DL\(2020\)24.pdf](https://www.sehd.scot.nhs.uk/dl/DL(2020)24.pdf)

range of supernumerary practice learning experiences available<sup>7</sup> but should be aware that they need to inform their education provider if their health status changes for any reason as a repeat of the COVID-19 occupational risk assessment will be required.

2. Moderate- COVID age around 50-70<sup>8</sup>.

These students are less likely to develop severe disease from COVID-19 infection and can undertake the full range of supernumerary practice learning experiences available<sup>9</sup> but should be aware that they need to inform their education provider if their health status changes for any reason as a repeat of the COVID-19 occupational risk assessment will be required. The measures students require to consider when getting ready for return to practice learning experiences are detailed within the relevant section of the COVID-19 occupational risk assessment tool.

3. High- COVID age range around 70-85<sup>10</sup>

These students are at high risk of COVID-19 but are okay to attend supernumerary practice learning experiences if they agree to accept the risk. Measures students require to consider when getting ready for return to practice learning experiences are detailed within the COVID-19 occupational risk assessment tool and should form the basis of a constructive discussion with their education provider representative so a mutual decision can be reached. If a student has made an informed decision to accept the risks, then a decision should be made regarding the most appropriate type of practice learning experience for their COVID-age range. If a student is judged to be at high risk from COVID-19 decisions on adjustments to practice learning provision will need to be made on a case-by-case basis depending on their individual circumstances. In such circumstances practice learning and education providers will need to mutually agree types of practice learning experiences that might be available and suitable to help mitigate risks.

4. Very high - COVID age range 85 and over<sup>11</sup>

These students are at very high risk from COVID-19 and must be fully informed to enable them to make choices about what they do. A constructive conversation with these students should take place. These students should be advised, in line

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<sup>7</sup> Unless previous risk assessments or occupational health assessment for non-COVID related health issues indicate otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> As there is an overlap in the COVID-age categories those students on the borderline of two categories i.e. those scoring 50 or 70 should have a conversation with their educational provider representative to mutually agree the COVID-age category that applies to their individual circumstance.

<sup>9</sup> Unless previous risk assessments for non-COVID related health issues indicate otherwise.

<sup>10</sup> As there is an overlap in the COVID-age categories those students on the borderline of two categories i.e. those scoring 70 or 85 should have a conversation with their educational provider representative to mutually agree the COVID-age category that applies to their individual circumstance.

<sup>11</sup> As there is an overlap in the COVID-age categories those students on the borderline of two categories i.e. those scoring 85 should have a conversation with their education representative to mutually agree the COVID-age category that applies to their individual circumstance.

with current guidance within the COVID-19 occupational risk assessment tool, not to attend practice learning environments. Occupational Health (OH) input may be required if continuity of study is requested. These students may be advised to defer their studies. Education providers may wish to explore if there are any type of practice learning opportunities that would allow students in this circumstance to work from home.

**N.B. The occupational risk assessment guidance indicates that the tool does not replace clinical advice from a GP, Occupational Health services or medical specialist for students who have a serious or complex medical condition.**

Strong partnership working and clear communication between education and practice learning providers is vital in enabling students to return to supernumerary practice learning experiences. There is no requirement for a student to disclose personal medical information with education staff or those practitioners who support, supervise and assess them in practice, but they should share their vulnerability level (e.g. low, moderate, high, very high) if such information sharing is required to reduce the risk to the student while on practice learning. Academic institutions should discuss this with students and seek their consent prior to sharing this information with the relevant practice learning providers.

For those students in the high and very high COVID-age range, sharing of information with practice learning providers well in advance of planned learning experience start dates will ensure joint responsibility and enable shared decision making with regards to potentially suitable practice learning experience allocations (should such practice learning opportunities be available).

### ***Other considerations***

For pregnant students, the COVID-age risk calculation provides only one component of the risk assessments they require before allocation and commencement of practice learning experiences. Those N&M students that are pregnant will need to:

- (i) Engage with the normal education provider pregnancy specific processes
- (ii) Complete the COVID-19 occupational risk assessment tool and calculate their COVID-age
- (iii) Complete a specific risk assessment in line with the recommendations of the Royal College of Gynaecologists<sup>12</sup>

Once complete a constructive conversation should take place with each student so a mutual decision can be reached whether practice learning experience can be undertaken.

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<sup>12</sup> Royal College of Gynaecologists (2020) *COVID-19 virus infection and pregnancy occupational health advice for employers and pregnant women during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Available at <https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/guidelines/2020-08-10-occupational-health-advice-for-employers-and-pregnant-women-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf>

Constructive conversations may also be required with N&M students whose COVID-age range does not preclude them from attending practice learning experience but where the impact of COVID may influence their ability to attend that environment. For example, students who are deaf or hearing impaired may encounter challenges in patient-facing practice learning experiences due to the wearing of face masks which inhibits lip reading or the removal of readily available hard surface technology from the practice environment. Again, decisions on adjustments to practice learning provision will need to be made on a case-by-case basis depending on their individual circumstances, those of the practice learning providers, and the education providers.

Students who live with vulnerable people will have to carefully consider, in collaboration with their education provider and practice learning partner representatives how any risk can be mitigated if they are undertaking a supernumerary practice learning experience.

### **Student wellbeing**

Whilst the risk assessment will identify students at increased risk because of their physical health there will be students who are very anxious about returning to practice learning experiences. Education providers should offer these students support, refer them to appropriate resources and have open conversations with them to allow them to think about the risks of returning to practice learning experiences versus the impact of deferring a year.

### **Risk Assessment of Placements**

Risk assessment of practice learning environments are assured through the Nursing and Midwifery Memorandum of Agreements<sup>13</sup> or Placement Agreements<sup>14</sup> and the Allied Health Professions Practice Based Learning Agreements<sup>15</sup> currently in place between each education provider and its practice learning provider/s. No additional risk assessment of placement areas is required. While on a practice learning experience students will have access to, and follow, any specific COVID-19 related guidance or processes in place to mitigate risks e.g. students will be tested for COVID-19 in line with current guidance for staff and will utilise the risk assessment processes already underway in NHS & non-NHS settings; particularly regarding the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in each clinical setting.

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<sup>13</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Memorandum of Agreements are between HEIs and practice placement providers

<sup>14</sup> Placement Agreements (titles may vary) are between Colleges and practice placement providers

<sup>15</sup> Allied Health Professions Practice Based Learning Agreements are between HEIs and NHS Boards

## **Death in service**

The Scottish Government has confirmed that it will provide a temporary COVID-19 related death in service scheme to students of Higher Education Institutes (HEI) on supernumerary practice learning experiences in health and social care settings.

**N.B While the COVID-19 Occupational risk assessment guidance and associated tool was developed using the latest clinical evidence that sets out best practice on risk assessment for COVID-19 the tool will be under review as more continues to be understood about COVID-19 in Scotland. At the time of publication of this document COVID-19 Occupational Risk Assessment Tool and Guidance (interactive) 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020 was available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-individual-risk-assessment-for-the-workplace/>**

**Students, university and practice provider colleagues should revisit the Scottish Government webpage regularly as the guidance and associated COVID-age calculator may be revised if new research is reported that materially changes the balance of available evidence, as it will be kept automatically updated, without notifications of changes.**