

Taster Days – a positive intervention to help prepare students for the realities of professional courses.

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Midwifery taster days are an award winning innovation that aim to provide prospective students with a taste of the realities of becoming and being a midwife. This original project was introduced in 2002 and since then, more than 500 people have attended a taster day. The concept has influenced recruitment strategies of related professional courses and been adapted by other university departments that feature practical activities as a central part of the student learning experience.

Following an award by the Learning and Teaching Committee in 2007, a two-part audit of the usefulness of the midwifery taster day was developed and recently completed. Part 1 evaluated the feedback received from all those who had attended a taster day between 2002 and 2007. A total of 403 completed feedback forms were analysed and demonstrated that the taster day was helpful, interesting and met the expectations of those who had attended. Many stated that the taster day had made them reflect on their personal circumstances and how those might have to be adapted before they applied to the midwifery course. The first part of the audit clearly demonstrates that the taster day is a popular feature of the wider recruitment strategy of the university and is a major influence on the sustained high level of interest in the midwifery degree programme. It is also an excellent marketing opportunity for the university.

Part 2 of the audit involved a web-based questionnaire that all registered midwifery students in 2007 were invited to complete. Of 70 students, 57 completed the on-line survey, or 81%. This is a good response rate and suggests that on-line surveys can be an effective tool. However, the methodology of web-based research is still in its relative infancy and many potential obstacles remain. The results of the survey demonstrate that nearly all students felt that the taster day provided realistic insight into the midwifery course. Almost a quarter of the students considered leaving their course with financial struggle, assignment load and home/work balance being the most significant reasons. These key stressors are echoed throughout the developing evidence base about nursing/midwifery student attrition rates. The students identified social support as being most influential in their decision to remain on the course, especially that obtained from family and peers. The role of the personal tutor was also identified as a positive factor in supporting students through difficulties and motivating them to stay. Interestingly, the one group of students who had not thought about leaving the course were those who had entered via 'Access' courses.

The aim of the workshop was to present and discuss the findings of the audit in more depth and use them as a platform for informal discussion with colleagues. In particular, how the taster day concept could be refined further, both as an effective recruitment tool and as a key to reducing student attrition. This was achieved during the workshop, with much debate about the motivation of 'Access' students. The influence of the taster day in shaping other strategies for reducing attrition rates was also discussed, in particular 'stepping off' options for students struggling at undergraduate level, and strengthening the midwifery selection day strategy.