

**'Taking a break in study is a difficult choice for a student to make'**

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## **‘Taking a break in study is a difficult choice for a student to make’**

Richard West and Carmel Bond argue that we need a better understanding of breaks in study to help students reintegrate on their return – and to reduce attrition rates.

Future predictions for the nursing workforce make sobering reading, with the staff shortfall worsening in the years ahead (Shembavnekar et al, 2022). The ambitions set out in the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan, published last year, aim to address this. It is estimated, however, that around 20% of nursing students leave their programme before graduating (Hamshire, 2019). One unreported factor that potentially plays a role in student attrition is the decision to take a break in study and the student experience of this process.

A break in study can be defined as a voluntary decision to temporarily suspend studies and is one way that students who may be at risk of leaving indefinitely can be identified. Universities use different language to describe this process, from ‘interruption of study’ and ‘suspension of study’ to ‘pause in study’. This phenomenon is a common occurrence, but there is little written about the effect the decision has on student wellbeing, progression and what best practice might involve.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that taking a break in study is a difficult choice for a student to make. As lecturers in nursing, we often support students through their decision. There are financial implications to choosing a break in study, as students cannot access grants in their year away from the course. Additionally, students who take this decision will graduate later than expected. Often the situation that has precipitated the student needing a break in study does not resolve within the time frame given, as with a long-term health condition. As the student body changes, with more students declaring disabilities, universities need to understand the challenges to wellbeing students face. A break in study seems to be one such challenge and an indicator that further support may be helpful.

Reintegration onto the nursing course may also present challenges, but within this an opportunity for good practice. Following a scoping exercise, very little literature on this specific demographic of students is available. However, there is published evidence that staff-

student relationships are crucial to student nurses' sense of belonging (Levett-Jones, 2009). This sense of belonging is thought to encompass feelings of being valued, included and accepted at university, and results in higher academic engagement and achievement (Levett-Jones, 2009) [correct to add the citation here too?]. This may provide some indication regarding how best to work with students who have taken a break in study when they return to university. The staff–student relationship may have deteriorated in the time away, so the students' sense of belonging have eroded. Interventions may be designed that foster positive relationships with teaching staff and peers. These could include re-entry interviews with specific members of staff or supportive groups for returning students.

Another reason that students might find taking a break in study challenging may be the 'knowledge gap' the time away has created. A 2018 study found that students studying mathematics at the Open University in the UK who took a break in study were “rusty” in many foundational areas required on upcoming modules (Pawley and Hughes, 2018). Students are building their knowledge as they progress through the course. Taking a break of a year may erode some foundational skills and knowledge required for the course. The authors conclude that a self-led “revise and refresh” programme was effective in promoting student achievement and progression (Pawley and Hughes, 2018). However, no similar programme exists for student nurses returning from a break in study in the UK. A structured, self-led revision programme might be a constructive method to reintegrate students onto the course.

The experiences and narratives around wellbeing of the returning students are unknown, as are the demographics of the students who take a break in study. Evidence shows that students from BAME backgrounds are more likely to withdraw from their undergraduate degrees than White students (Kauser et al, 2021). This raises critical questions about the potential intersectionality of challenges [that might trigger a break in study?] with factors such as ethnicity.

As nurse educators, we are highlighting a 'squeaky wheel' in how students reintegrate back onto their course following a break in study. Despite the current lack of empirical studies, we have ethical approval for a qualitative study that looks at this issue in more depth. Given

the high attrition rate currently within nursing courses we believe this is an issue that needs further scrutiny.

*Richard West and Carmel Bond are both lecturers in mental health nursing, Sheffield Hallam University [still correct?]*

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