

Skills Matter

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, ATTITUDES. WELLNESS, HOPE, RECOVERY

Guidance for employers of Skills Matter trainees

Te Pou
o Te Whakaaro Nui

Skills Matter is a workforce development programme within Te Pou.



Introduction

Every year around 300 health professionals working in mental health and addiction services (trainees) undertake clinically focused postgraduate study funded by Skills Matter.

Trainees' employing organisations have asked what they need to know - and do - to support a team member or colleague through their programme of study. This resource aims to answer these questions. It provides information and guidance to assist with achieving two important outcomes for trainees and the service they work in:

- successful completion of the post graduate study
- 'training transfer' - trainees actually using and applying their new learning in their workplace.

The resource is in two parts. Part one provides relevant context about the programmes, including potential benefits and challenges of study. Part two focuses on what can be done to support successful completion of training and training transfer. The content is based on findings from research and evaluation undertaken by Te Pou in relation to the Skills Matter programmes and training effectiveness in general. It draws both on literature and feedback from trainees and their employers.

Note - this is a general resource aimed at all employers, so does not give detail about specific programmes. The programmes have different requirements for support from employers - for example, each trainee undertaking the new entry to specialist practice (NESP) programmes must have a preceptor. Information about the specific programme support requirements can be provided by programme coordinators.¹

Part 1 - About the programmes

Academic-clinical partnership

An important feature of all Skills Matter programmes is they are an academic and clinical partnership. Trainees undertake post graduate study at an academic institution, but their work environment provides a significant clinical component of their programme and should enable them to extend and embed their learning.

This is reflected in the fact that all programmes require trainees to be working in a mental health or addiction service and/or that they have clinical placements or opportunities for clinical experience. Managers must indicate that trainees have organisational support as part of application process for a funded place on a Skills Matter programme.

Research indicates the support trainees receive in the clinical/workplace environment is associated with their use of training in practice. Supervisors, mentors, preceptors (and others in the workplace) have a key role to play in assisting to translate academic learning into practice.

¹ The programme coordinator is the person at the education institution who oversees the programme, including liaison with trainees' employers. Currently, the majority of Skills Matter programme providers are education institutions – and this is reflected in the content of this resource. The requirements for support from employers are usually documented in letters of agreement or forms provided by the education institution. Managers sign these prior to the trainee commencing study.



It is beneficial for employers to engage with the educational institution providing the post graduate programme. In general, a strong clinical-academic relationship helps to ensure the programmes are relevant and applicable. In addition, education providers can pass on useful information about the programmes and also assist employers with ideas on how to best support trainees.

Benefits and challenges of study

Skills Matter evaluation activity - including the annual trainee survey - has explored both the benefits and challenges of post graduate study.

Benefits reported by trainees in the annual trainee survey are numerous, but can be summarised as follows:

- enhanced knowledge and skills
- exposure to current concepts and models of practice
- development of critical thinking and reflective practice
- increased confidence (through evidence based practice)
- desire to keep learning and undertake further professional development
- increased motivation and enthusiasm for their work
- perceived career opportunities
- better understanding of service user needs and perspectives.

Through other Skills Matter evaluation activity both trainees and employers also reported outcomes that extended beyond the individual trainee to others within their organisation. These include:

- improved communication with team members
- sharing learning with others
- working more effectively in a team, for example more collegial decision-making
- developing new initiatives for the service, for example initiating projects to effect positive change
- increased motivation to undertake study across staff more generally.

Challenges reported by trainees centre largely around the pressures of juggling work, life and study commitments. Most trainees are full-time (or close to it) and are fitting in post graduate study on top of their role. Annual trainee survey responses indicate that each year more than half of trainees agree their clinical workload is too high to allow sufficient time to study. This sense of overload or stress can be exacerbated when trainees are faced with other challenges such as illness, unexpected life events or increased family responsibilities. It is clear from programme providers' reporting to Skills Matter that trainee withdrawals are often linked to these factors.

When asked what helped overcome these challenges, trainees describe support from others as the most important factor, especially from people within the workplace - managers, team leaders, colleagues, supervisors and preceptors (along with academic staff, family and friends). This feedback from trainees aligns with research findings that indicate support within the workplace has a real impact on both trainees' course completion and their learning being applied in their work.



Part 2 - Getting good outcomes: supporting completion and training transfer at work

It is acknowledged that some organisations will have more infrastructure around training support, such as nurse educator roles or DHB cars available for travel to lectures. Smaller organisations may not have the same range of potential supports. However, it is hoped many of the suggestions below will be applicable across a variety of services and organisations. Even a supportive attitude from colleagues and managers can be helpful and motivating for trainees.

Research into effective training indicates that as much attention should be paid to what happens before and after training as to the training itself. Therefore, this section refers to both pre and post training factors, as well as what happens during the trainees' participation in their programme. Not all of the points below will apply to every programme.

Practical considerations

Strategic approach to post graduate study

As part of planning post graduate study it is useful for the trainee and their employer to consider how the proposed programme of study fits with both the trainee's own career pathway and the service or organisational objectives. If there is alignment, there is a higher likelihood of the trainee being able to apply learning in the workplace and that colleagues and their organisation will see the benefit of their study. This includes considering the expected outcomes of the programme.

Understanding the programme requirements

It is important that relevant people have understanding of, and information about, the trainee's programme (as appropriate).

- The trainees themselves should have a clear understanding of what will be required in terms of time, commitment and workload.
- Managers and team members - unit manager, team leaders, and colleagues - should be aware that their team member will be studying and will require support (for example, time off work to attend lectures).
- Preceptors, mentors or supervisors - these roles play an important part in assisting the trainee to translate his/her learning into practice, so it is important that they have sufficient information about the programme. For some programmes, the supervisor or mentor may not be based in the trainee's own workplace, but will still assist the trainee to apply the learning to their work.

The education provider is able to provide information about the academic programme, such as content and assignments. Often the education provider has specific information or guidance for preceptors and supervisors and may invite them to participate in a workshop or meeting about the course.

Planning for study leave and covering absences

The trainee will attend lectures/block courses during the academic year. The education institution can provide information about this to enable managers and team leaders to plan for trainees' absences.

Skills Matter programme funding currently includes a contribution to employers which is sometimes referred to as a 'backfill' payment, although this is perhaps better regarded as an acknowledgement of the clinical component of the programme which includes releasing trainees to attend lectures. There is



also a contribution to costs of supervision related to the programme. Programme providers have processes in place around transferring this funding to trainees' organisations and can give information about this.

Flexible support

'Flexibility' is frequently mentioned by trainees in survey responses when describing how managers, team leaders and colleagues offered valuable support during their programme. This may be flexibility in terms of hours, the ability to reduce clinical workload and/or to offer flexibility with study leave (for example, using unpaid or annual leave to allow time for assignments). Some managers have come up with creative responses to meet trainees' study leave needs without overburdening other staff - for example, facilitating swapping of shifts or tasks between team members.

Organisational culture: creating a learning climate

Research indicates that just participating in training often is not sufficient to effect and sustain change in the way people work. Organisational culture and the learning climate affect the trainee's ability to apply their learning - or 'training transfer'. The following outlines how an organisation can create and sustain a learning culture, including examples from trainees' workplaces.

Characteristics of a workplace supportive to learning are:

- trainees have time and opportunity to transfer learning and skills; leaders support the use of new knowledge and skills and the climate supports innovation
- job design and other organisational structures support training transfer - for example, trainees have a level of autonomy in their roles to enable them to apply new learning and skills
- trainees have access to support or supervision they need to transfer learning and skills - including opportunities to reflect and learn from transfer attempts
- the workplace supports on-going 'learning on the job'
- there are opportunities to establish supportive 'communities of practice' where experience and knowledge can be shared.

Employers of Skills Matter trainees have supported trainees' learning and encouraged training transfer in the following ways.

- Establishing a network of nurses who had completed the new entry to specialist practice (NESP) nursing programme the previous year to act as buddies or 'mentors' to nurses currently on the NESP programme. The intention is not to replace preceptors or supervisors, but to provide support from the perspective of someone who had just been through NESP. It also builds potential leadership in those nurses acting as buddies for trainees.
- Creating specific opportunities for trainees to feed back on their learning through staff meetings and/or in-house professional development events.
- Inviting trainees to disseminate assignments via intranets.
- Providing work time for trainees to tailor new knowledge to their specific work context.
- Negotiating with trainees to undertake assignments focused on an in-house initiative.

Having structured opportunities to transfer learning to others can be motivating for trainees and help make sense of and 'rehearse' their learning in context. This can enhance job satisfaction and commitment to employer and the sector. Ultimately, trainees and their employers will have joint responsibility to ensure there are opportunities to apply their learning in ways that will be useful in the workplace.

