

Rising to the Challenge: Ireland's Pharmacy Education Practice-Based Learning Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The immediate impact of COVID-19

When Ireland locked down in March 2020, 156 fifth-year pharmacy students undertaking a five-year MPharm programme were on placements in community and hospital practice settings. This eight-month placement which had commenced in January 2020, is a statutory requirement, therefore immediate action was required to ensure its continuation. The potential impact of COVID-19 on students' ability to complete this statutory placement was immediately clear: their training site could be closed due to COVID-19 infection within the team; the training site could withdraw from the placement programme; the student's trainer could be personally affected by COVID-19; or students could be a close contact, become infected with COVID-19 or be required to take an extended period off placement due to COVID-19. What is more, these threats could potentially reoccur during the placement.

Adapting practice learning

The Affiliation for Pharmacy Practice Experiential Learning (APPEL) is a collaboration between University College Cork (UCC), the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), and Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and provides a single point of contact for trainers, Training Establishments (TE) and students for all placement activities. APPEL also manages the experiential learning placements in years 2, 4 and 5 of the integrated pharmacy programmes. In the initial phase of COVID-19, APPEL engaged with the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI) to discuss these risks and the possibility of amending the relevant legislation. Delay in students' registration could have led to a significant impact on the pharmacist workforce, who were already at risk due to the pandemic. Consequently, amendments to the legislation were made and students impacted by COVID-19 had a reduced placement requirement ([SI 148, 2020](#)) from eight to six months, in line with European legislation.

As well as PSI, APPEL engaged with the Department of Health (DoH) to ensure their continued support. The Department recognised student pharmacists as essential healthcare workers, which allowed them to attend in-person at the workplace even at the highest level of government-imposed restrictions. This

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facilitated the continuation of their placements at a time when many other clinical placements were suspended or deferred. Alongside this support for practice learning, APPEL promoted pharmacy students' role through the pandemic by coordinating the publication of articles with contributions from both students and trainers and ensured the profession was kept informed of the impact on students' academic progression (Burton & O'Sullivan, 2020; Heinrich & O'Reilly, 2020).

Preparation for practice placements

In advance of placement, extra preparation was needed to adequately prepare students for their entry into learning environments impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. The traditional Pre-placement Preparation Session was delivered online by PEs and academic staff, and students were required to complete seven online training modules, focusing on COVID-19 related topics as well as educational materials on official healthcare websites. To help to ensure student safety in the practice learning environment, all students completed the 'APPEL COVID-19 Supplemental Student Declaration' (APPEL, 2020a), which focused on COVID-19 specific requirements, such as logging daily onto a COVID tracker. Students were also directed to prepare a Personal Support Plan (APPEL, 2020b) to consider their personal needs if affected by COVID-19 while on placement.

The APPEL Trainer Training Programme was updated extensively because of the required COVID-19 changes. This was delivered as a live webinar and participants were facilitated to complete the mandatory assessments via the online trainer training assessment tool. APPEL also facilitated COVID-19 focused webinars for fourth and fifth-year trainers to ensure they had a clear understanding of the new student requirements, and to allow them to share concerns and questions.

Moving to virtual assessment

Final year pharmacy students also undertake the mandatory Professional Registration Exam (PRE). As the usual face-to-face Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) exam was not possible, the PRE was changed to a virtual format OSCE, requiring extensive planning, testing, and training of invigilators, assessors and actors. This work was supported by APPEL, through liaison with organisations that had delivered and explored the delivery of virtual OSCEs, including the Schools from across the UK and as far afield as Qatar. The need to support students affected by the change to a virtual format was recognised and additional steps were implemented as preparation for the virtual PRE. APPEL created guides, and pilot virtual OSCEs were conducted with fourth-year pharmacy students. A mock PRE was also held to ensure students would have some familiarity with the format and that the virtual format was managed effectively.

Enhanced communication

Through COVID-19, communication with students was intensified and personalised to ensure clear messaging and support was available as students witnessed significant changes in their education and practice. APPEL sent frequent updates via email to all students and their trainers. These emails included updates from the Schools of Pharmacy, travel information, advice on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Infection Prevention and Control (IPC), advice from the Health Protection and Surveillance Centre, the DoH and the Irish Government. A Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) resource was also developed to ensure consistent, clear, and up to date information was available. Schools provided local support via Practice Educators (PEs) who offered video and telephone calls and email communications to ensure students were aware of the support available throughout their placement.

Ongoing practice learning support

The initial raft of adaptation and support was extended as the pandemic's impact went well beyond the initially anticipated 2-3 weeks. This included enabling four-month, fourth-year placements for 179 students, to go ahead in September 2020. As was the case for final year students, significant support was offered to students and their trainers. APPEL continued its engagement with PSI to seek approval and

support for remote placements being undertaken by students and guidelines were developed to assist, and direct trainers in facilitating remote placements (APPEL 2020c; APPEL, 2020d). Subsequently, in early 2021, a second round of fifth-year placements was implemented, integrating the flexibility and learnings from March 2020.

Evaluation

Students and trainers were surveyed as a part of a standard approach to evaluation, in order to assess satisfaction with the arrangements made during COVID-19. An overview of the results is provided in Tables 1 and 2, indicating a positive response to the changes that were made to practice learning.

Table 1

Trainers Post Placement Survey Responses

Trainers	Response Rate	Students were adequately prepared regarding COVID-19 (Strongly/Agreed)	I felt supported by APPEL regarding COVID-19 considerations (Strongly/Agreed)	I was happy with communications from APPEL re COVID-19 (Strongly/Agreed)
Fourth Year	41.98% (n=68)	79.41% (n=54)	72.06% (n=49)	72.06% (n=49)
Fifth Year	43.23% (n=67)	N/A - Pre COVID-19	76.12% (n=51)	83.58% (n=56)

Table 2

Student Post Placement Survey Responses

Students	Response Rate	Overall happy with placement experience (Strongly /Agreed)	I felt supported by APPEL regarding COVID-19 considerations (Strongly /Agreed)	I was happy with communications from APPEL re COVID-19 (Strongly /Agreed)	I felt prepared for placement regarding COVID-19 (Strongly /Agreed)	I felt supported by my Preceptor/TE during the pandemic (Strongly /Agreed)
Fourth Year	55.75% (n=97)	74.23% (n=72)	72.16% (n=70)	71.13% (n=69)	76.29% (n=74)	80.41% (n=78)
Fifth Year	51.28% (n=80)	76.25% (n=61)	65% (n=52)	68.75% (n=55)	N/A - Pre COVID-19	76.25% (n=61)

Reflections and conclusion

Students showed adaptability and resilience through demonstrating flexibility and engagement with the changes made to their academic programme introduced during the pandemic. The positive response rate to our surveys by both fourth and fifth year students, and their affirmative view of their overall placement experience, despite the impact of the pandemic, was encouraging. The pandemic highlighted the students' ability to confidently adapt despite the unexpected and unexplored areas of their professional skillset, building and nourishing their development and professional identity formation. Students rose to the challenge presented, continuing their placements, and understanding the importance of their contribution to the workplace and the role of the pharmacist in supporting communities. This was a scenario we had not anticipated, but was one where students showed their abilities to see the bigger societal picture and demonstrated how we all have our role to play in supporting it to function when the greatest challenge to

it, and our healthcare system, took hold. We anticipate that these pharmacy students will have acquired knowledge and experience on placement which will benefit patients and society in the years to come. This experience also informed the development of the MPharm programme, as it evolved further than was expected with excellent co-operation across a range of stakeholder groups.

Acknowledgements

APPEL Team members: <https://www.appel.ie/about/appel-team/>

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