

Low level concerns

Submitted by the University of Liverpool

Introducing a 'Learning Contract' to discuss, agree and record specific actions which a medical student must adhere to for management of professionalism.

About the learning contract

We introduced the learning contract after identifying a gap in the support and monitoring for a relatively small number of medical students. These students were performing below their cohort on a number of measures and we were concerned about their progress as doctors in training.

The contract is a preventive measure to avoid disciplinary procedures. It is a remediation approach to students, where we can identify and monitor clear boundaries around engagement, professionalism, academic application, and accessing support services.

Our approach is to give our students the maximum opportunity to become professional medical graduates.

Students who have a learning contract have been offered a number of support mechanisms, including student wellbeing services, being signposted to other services, and academic support.

Aims of the learning contract

The learning contract aims to:

- ensure that our students have a frank discussion about their progress within the medical school with senior academics
- understand explicitly their agreed contract of learning with the school appreciate the consequences of not adhering to the conditions of their contract.

Identifying relevant students

The school has introduced a number of measures to identify students for learning contracts, including a robust attendance policy, and the use of various data for the progression review (held twice a year prior to formative and summative exams).

The progression review identifies students who, for example:

- have poor attendance
- are performing in exams below their cohort
- have been issued with several '[Measuring Professionalism](#)' forms
- have ongoing health and social issues which are impacting upon their studies.

Structure of the learning contract

The learning contract form includes several sections:

- how the student was referred
- agreed actions
- discussion of suspension or withdrawal from the course

How meetings are held

Any meeting with a student to discuss a learning contract is undertaken with a senior member of the school, including a Year Director, the Director of Studies, or the Head of School.

Students are given a copy of their contract and another is put in their student file.

Monitoring

Following a learning contract meeting, the lead senior academic emails the contract to the year administrative lead, who contacts whoever needs to know about the agreed conditions. For example, if the student is required to maintain regular contact with their Academic Advisor, they will be emailed with these details and asked to inform the school if there are any lapses.

Example of a learning contract

A student has significant social issues, which has often led to poor attendance and exam resits in previous years of study.

The student agreed to a learning contract which agreed attendance at monthly meetings with senior members of the school where clinical activity on the electronic portfolio was monitored.

Initially, the student was reluctant to engage in the meetings. After responding to the student's needs through discussions, they now say that the meetings are helpful, both academically and for pastoral support.

Low level concerns

Submitted by the University of Sheffield

We are currently piloting a progression database as a formal mechanism to record and collate low-level professionalism concerns.

Identifying professionalism concerns

A small group of academic and professional services staff met to identify a set of professionalism concerns that could be recorded from existing monitoring data, including:

- attendance
- submission of coursework and other forms
- specific assessments of professional behaviours made as part of clinical placement sign-offs.

Recording the concerns

Each student at the school has a progression record. The database is included in the school's confidentiality policy as an area where personal information about a student is stored.

Professional services staff are asked to submit the monitoring data at two reporting points in the academic year on a standardised shared spreadsheet. These are logged into the database (currently an access database) by a member of the Student Affairs team.

After each reporting point, a query is run to identify all the students who have one or more concerns on their record. A small group from the Student Affairs team then meet to discuss the results.

Results this year

We have had one recording point and one review meeting so far this academic year. As would be expected, very few students had more than one professionalism concern on their record.

Where a student had accumulated several concerns, the team decided whether intervention was needed. They agreed that any initial intervention should be offered

in a supportive manner to address any underlying difficulties the student might be having.

The school has a formal case management process in place should further interventions be needed if a student has a more complex set of support needs that could impact on progress. The school also has an FtP referral route if significant concerns are made.

Those with more than one concern

The first reporting point and review did flag a very small number of students as having more than one professionalism concern on their record. Interestingly, some of these students had not been identified via other monitoring mechanisms and yet they were clearly struggling with some of the course requirements.

There is potential to formalise the system to provide early and timely intervention for a student who is beginning to struggle, rather than waiting until a crisis point or an assessment failure before help is offered.

Further reports and reviews

We are planning to run a second report and review point in the near future. We will see if further cases are highlighted, before reporting on the whole process to the academic team and deciding what would be an appropriate intervention threshold.

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We have designed and introduced the 'measuring professionalism' form to gather evidence about low level professionalism concerns

Need for a new form

In the 2015/16 academic year, we set up a working group within the School of Medicine to review the way we dealt with concerns about professional behaviours. We were unsure about the existing form at the time capturing all incidences of low level concerns on professionalism.

Subsequently, a new 'measuring professionalism' form was devised by a team of academics and clinicians.

What the form covers

The form is designed to capture both minor and major concerns about professionalism. It covers all areas of concern, including but not limited to:

- attitudes and behaviours
- dress code
- insight into health
- promptness to sessions
- use of social media.

Introducing the measuring professionalism form

The form was introduced into all year groups at the start of the 2016/17 academic year. All year groups had a lecture talk about professionalism, and the purpose of the new forms, linking them to the revised GMC guidance [*Achieving good medical practice*](#). Copies of the form went into all student handbooks and onto their VLE.

The key to the success of the forms has been the processes that have been put in place to follow up reports of concerns once they have been received. For clarity, the possible pathways for referral following completion of the form are on the back of the form itself.

What happens once the form is completed

All measuring professionalism forms are sent to a central contact point within the school. Depending on the nature of the concern raised, the student will either be:

- informed of the form by email and no further action taken, or
- more commonly, invited to meet their relevant Year Lead to discuss the concerns raised.

If major concerns are raised about a student, or if they gain more than one form in a short space of time, they are seen by the Year Lead and Director of Studies together. Depending on the situation and the insight a student shows during this conversation, they may be asked to write a reflection on the incident that led them to receive a form, or they might be referred to more senior members of staff.

Professionalism panel

In addition to this process, a professionalism panel sits once a term and reviews all the measuring professionalism forms that have been received. The panel consists of senior medical school staff, a representative from a Trust partner and an external member from the School of Dentistry.

They may make further recommendations about appropriate remediation activities, or they might remove a form from a student record if they feel it has been issued unfairly (as a result of a misunderstanding, for example).

All actions are fed back to both the students and the person who completed the form (if these are hospital clinicians this information is usually sent via the relevant undergraduate teams).

Outcome

Both the medical school and our NHS colleagues are now happier that the system for capturing these low level concerns is more rigorous, and that the system for feedback ensures that students and staff alike are aware that professionalism concerns are taken seriously by the school.