

# Developing Practice-Based Learning in Mental Health and Learning Disability Settings for the Allied Health Professions:



Highlighting the Allied Health Professions contribution to the Mental Health and Learning Disability Workforce

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# Developing Practice-Based Learning in Mental Health and Learning Disability Settings for the Allied Health Professions

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# Developing Practice-Based Learning in Mental Health and Learning Disability Settings for the Allied Health Professions

## Introduction

This guide highlights the benefits and opportunities of practice-based learning (PBL) through placements in mental health and learning disability settings for Allied Health Professions (AHP) students, focusing particularly on the professions most common in these settings. The ideas and examples show how placements have been developed in these settings and highlight the benefits to students, Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) and placement providers. Ultimately, these placements offer most benefit to patients, service users and families who receive holistic support for their health and care needs offered by the different Allied Health Professions.

PBL in mental health and learning disability settings offer students the opportunity to build their confidence, to understand their profession more broadly and to develop an essential skill set they will take forward into whichever professional setting they work in. The skills and knowledge gained by students when working in specialist mental health and learning disability settings will stay with them throughout their careers, shaping future career choice and ensuring transfer of these skills into different career pathways, supporting the development of the future AHP workforce across health and social care.

## Definitions

### Practice-based learning and placements

Practice-based learning (PBL) takes place during placements which involve a range of learning opportunities to support the student's development. A placement is where students apply and consolidate their learning, bringing together academic theory and workplace practice to develop skills and competencies needed to register as health and care professionals. PBL is supervised and structured to enable progress towards learning outcomes and usually involves assessment of the student.

### Mental health services and settings

Mental health services and settings are the range of places where health and care are delivered to people experiencing mental ill health or distress. This includes both NHS and other statutory services, in in-patient settings and community settings. Mental health needs are met in primary care, secondary care, specialist mental health services, in in-patient settings and residential services, education settings and in the private, voluntary and community sector. Mental health services incorporate medical/psychiatric, psychological, occupational, social and peer-led recovery interventions.

Mental health services support people experiencing a wide range of difficulties and diagnoses including depression and anxiety, psychosis, personality difficulties, trauma-oriented difficulties, addictions, eating disorders, bi-polar disorders, neurological disorders and other related conditions.

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## Learning disability services and settings

People with learning disabilities receive care and support from a wide range of agencies and services both inside and outside the NHS. Specialist services offer support and care in the community, residential, in-patient and education settings. People with learning disabilities may also have autism spectrum disorders and experience other neurodiversity.

Learning disability services incorporate medical/psychiatric, psychological, occupational, social and peer-led advocacy interventions. People with learning disabilities often have physical and mental health needs and some services are integrated. However, many people with learning disabilities have unmet mental health needs.

The term learning disability setting has been used as an umbrella term in this guide and includes services for people with autism without a learning disability.

Note: It is important to note that services are commissioned differently across the UK and some NHS Trusts provide both mental health and learning disability services, some only one and some are integrated Trusts providing physical healthcare as well. This guide refers to placements specifically with people experiencing mental illness and distress and people with learning disabilities in specialist services.

## Background

### AHP Pre-registration Student Practice-Based Learning Programme

The NHS requires more people working in AHP roles to meet the care demands it will face over the coming years. To achieve this more student AHP's are required, leading to a need for an increase in placement capacity. The placement expansion programme has focused on developing placements in a wider range of settings, introducing new types of placement opportunities to expand practice learning beyond traditional models of care. This has allowed students to undertake placements in new clinical areas, focus on research and education skills, leadership skills, role-emerging placements and to expand AHP practice into new areas of healthcare provision.

### Mental Health and Learning Disability PBL

Not all AHP training programmes include mandatory placements in mental health and learning disability services, but some professions are more embedded in these services and therefore placements are more common. For example, all occupational therapy students have to do a placement in mental health. The arts therapies (art, music and drama), as psychological professions, tend to experience placements in mental health, less so in learning disability settings. Placements in mental health and learning disability settings have been far less common, in dietetics, paramedicine, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy. This guide highlights how important developing placements in mental health and learning disability services is for patients and service users, students and training institutions and for employers looking to expand the future workforce.

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## Who is this guide for?

This guide, and accompanying resources, will be useful for those considering, or involved in AHP placements including:

- AHP students
- Higher Education Institutions/Education Providers
- Placement Providers
- Service Development Managers

This guide was developed as part of a project which includes other resources, including a short film, available on the [HEE website](#).

It contributes to a wider goal of HEE to ensure the skills of AHP's are recognised and understood as key contributors to the mental health and learning disability workforce in the future.

## Scope

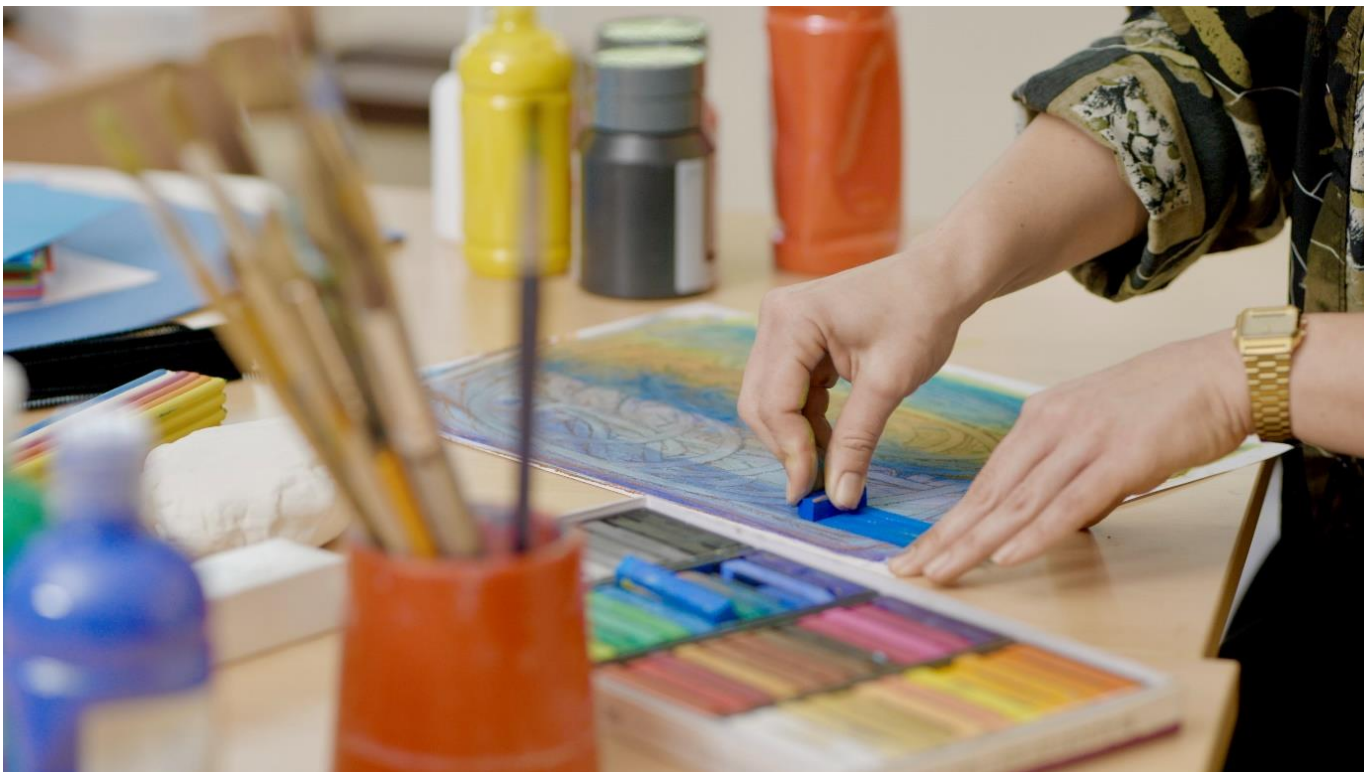
All AHP students require good understanding of the needs of people experiencing mental ill health and people who have a learning disability. People with mental ill health and people with learning disabilities are users of all healthcare services, not just mental health and learning disability specific services. This guide focuses on developing placements particularly on professions most likely to contribute to the mental health and learning disability workforce; art therapists, dietitians, drama therapists, music therapists, occupational therapists, paramedics, physiotherapists and speech and language therapists but may also be useful for other professions.

## What constitutes Practice-based Learning?

Practice based learning takes place during placements which involve a range of learning opportunities for student development. Students apply and consolidate their learning, bringing together academic theory, workplace practice to develop skills and competences needed to register. Practice learning is supervised and structured to enable progress towards learning outcomes and usually involves assessment of the learner.

Traditional practice-based learning focuses on professional practice. Activities within professional practice are not limited to direct patient contact and AHP students can undertake a wide range of activities within their placement including:

- shadowing other professions
- developing case studies
- delivering training and awareness sessions
- developing clinical formulation skills
- writing reports
- assisting with audit and collecting outcome measures or patient feedback.



In addition, an AHP student needs to develop a wide range of skills during their training to equip them for the workplace:

- carrying out research, including literature reviews
- quality improvement projects
- developing a proposal for a new service
- presenting at forums and staff development sessions
- undertaking project work for specific events
- hosting journal clubs
- developing leadership skills

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Mental health and learning disability placements also offer enhanced opportunities to develop specific skills such as:

- Understanding Mental Capacity Assessments
- Enhancing communication skill
- Developing deeper therapeutic relationships
- Working with families and carers
- Working as part of a multi-disciplinary team with other professionals



For more information on the AHP Pre-registration Student Practice-Based Learning Programme:

[AHP Pre-Registration Student Practice-Based Learning Programme](#)

### Benefits of placements in mental health and learning disability settings for AHP students

There are many benefits to carrying out placements in mental health and learning disability settings:

#### What do students say?

Student undertaking placements in mental health and learning disability services report a range of benefits including building confidence in working with people experiencing mental ill health and people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodiversity which they felt they would take with them into whatever setting they chose to work in.

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Students developed an understanding of how mental health and physical health are connected and of some of the health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities and people with mental ill health.

“I know I will work with people who have mental health needs or learning disabilities whatever job I end up doing, so this placement has given me the confidence I need to offer a good service to whoever I am treating” Tariq, Physiotherapy Student

“We don’t get much input around mental health on my course and I don’t really have experience of working with people with different mental health conditions, I had no idea how much different mental health conditions impact on physical health and vice versa” Sarah, Dietetics Student

In addition, students found that they gained a broader understanding of the profession they were joining and how AHP roles can provide a different perspective and understanding of the healthcare needs of patients and service users.

“Until I came to this placement, I didn’t really understand how much Speech and Language Therapy is needed in mental health services – it’s really opened my eyes and given me a new career pathway to pursue – I just assumed I would work with children in the community when I qualified, but I think I’d like to work in psychiatric inpatient services now” Alice, Speech and Language Student

### What do Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) say?

HEI’s highlighted how Practice Based Learning enhances the taught components of training courses, particularly in developing student’s communications skills, confidence in working with people who may present differently to themselves and in understanding the relationship between physical and mental ill health. Most AHP training programmes found that providing enough time to focus on mental health and learning disability themes was challenging and found that students completing placements in these settings found their learning greatly enhanced.



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“Our students are sometimes surprised or nervous when they are offered a placement in a learning disability service, particularly outside NHS services, but have found the placements to offer opportunities to develop their broader skills such as research, or developing creative ways to engage with different patients or service users as well as their understanding of the scope of their clinical practice”  
Marie – Senior Lecturer and Placement Co-ordinator for AHP’s

“Confidence is a common theme when our students reflect upon their mental health and learning disability placements. Particularly without an established registered dietitian on site, students are quick to develop initiative and autonomy as they identify nutritional needs and service improvement projects within the placement site. Our students tell us that whilst it can feel challenging to begin with, there is an immense satisfaction in improving the quality of nutritional care in settings that would have otherwise been unlikely to receive significant, dedicated dietetic time. This is particularly pertinent when people with mental health and learning disability diagnoses experience health inequalities that are often in part diet related. The opportunity to undertake such meaningful service improvement, provides our students with a wonderful sense of pride for the profession they are soon to enter.”  
Steph – Lecturer in Dietetics

HEI’s also highlighted the challenges of finding enough placements for their expanding cohorts of AHP students, and the importance of broadening the range and variety of placements they could offer. Many HEI’s have adopted creative ways to provide the support and supervision students require, especially in role emerging placements where qualified staff in the particular profession may not be embedded in the service yet.

### **Role emerging placements for Occupational Therapy (OT) students in learning disability/autism services**

As part of my 12-month HEE-funded project, one of the workstreams was to increase the number of OT student placements across Devon and Somerset. Four sites were identified with no existing provision. One site in North Devon was identified, providing respite care for adults with learning disability/autism. It proved difficult to find a placement supervisor within the existing OT workforce due to staff shortages and service pressures. I used my Twitter account to put a shout out for a part-time or retired OT, still registered with HCPC and actively involved with the profession, to invite them to become a supervisor for the placement. The support for training the staff in the placement setting and funding the supervision came from the Devon Clinical Placement Expansion Programme (CPEP). The arrangement allowed pressure to be alleviated on existing staff and for a different way for someone to return to practice, and a new role emerging placement to be offered.  
Della Norris – Regional Occupational Therapy Student Placement Expansion Lead, Devon County Council

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## What do placement providers say?

“Through our expanding the number and type of placements we offer, we have been able to offer different clinical interventions to our patients – we have limited physiotherapy cover across our services and hosting placements allows us to offer more of our patients and services physiotherapy interventions” Dan – Physiotherapy Clinical Lead

“We have been able to use placements to highlight demand for services and also to offer different perspectives on problems – our dietitians were trying to encourage weight management for our in-patients and encourage physical activity, but our physio students noticed patients didn’t have decent trainers – we were able to get funding from the Trust charity to get proper trainers for people so they could take part in the exercise classes, which the physio students then helped arrange and deliver” Amanda – AHP Lead

## Tips for Embracing New Placements in Mental Health and Learning Disability Services

### Tips for students

- Be open minded to placements in mental health or learning disability settings
- Talk to previous students about their experiences and ask what they learned
- Think about going to placement in pairs or small groups if possible, or link up with other students on similar placements and share ideas, offer support
- Celebrate what you achieve, write case studies, vignettes, share with course leaders and fellow students

### Tips for HEI's

- Make connections with your local mental health and learning disability service providers
- Look at non-NHS settings as well as NHS settings – Local Authority, schools, special education providers, care homes, hospices, community advocacy services, supported housing providers and activity providers will all benefit from AHP student placements
- Consider alternative and innovative placement models such as project and leadership placements. Could these be offered in collaboration with another placement setting such as a physical health care setting?
- Think creatively about how placement support and supervision can be provided, particularly in role emerging placements – small group supervision, online supervision sessions and working in partnership other organisations where particular AHPs are established are all good starting points
- Consider developing short case studies to highlight the benefits of previous placements in mental health and learning disability settings for both students and prospective placement providers

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## Tips for Placement Providers

- Think creatively about where AHP student placements might offer new interventions. Can you involve service users and families in this?
- Look at opportunities for expanding services, split supervisory responsibility and placements or trying new approaches in services
- Consider developing split placements across physical and mental health/learning disability services. This can increase capacity and allow crossover models for supervision.
- Think creatively and link with HEI's to explore possible placement ideas and options for support and supervision
- Partner with neighbouring Trusts or other organisations to explore a partnership approach, particularly with placement support and supervision ideas
- Celebrate student placements and the benefits they bring to patients and service users, using social media and internal communications to share learning

## Examples of placement innovations

### **Speech and language therapy – Opportunities to provide intensive support to adults receiving care and treatment in psychiatric wards**

Increasing the speech and language therapy placement offer has allowed patients to access more intensive assessment and interventions. Working with our local HEI we have been able to provide students with experience of working with one patient on a 1:1 basis for a period of 12 weeks. This provides the student with the opportunity to work with a patient through an episode of care; from case history and assessment through to goal setting and implementing interventions; all whilst having dedicated time to explore the wider evidence base, consider emerging interventions and produce a written report at the end of their placement. As a growing workforce within a mental health setting, this provides patients with an opportunity to receive intensive speech and language therapy input and ensure all aspects of their care are accessible to them, whilst also demonstrating the impact to service managers and commissioners.

Amy Hird, Clinical lead, Inpatient mental health speech and language therapy  
Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust.

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### **Expanding the Arts Therapies - Dramatherapy in a forensic unit for women**

We have an established art psychotherapy service within this service and recognised a need to expand the models of arts psychotherapies on offer to the women in the service, especially to those who have experienced historical trauma. It is often difficult for our service users to verbalise these experiences, as a result the trauma memories held within the body. Offering a dramatherapy intervention allowed a different opportunity for service users to explore and express their difficulties, in addition to solely talking therapies and art psychotherapy already available in the service. Having a student on placement allowed us to try out different approaches and expand the range of therapies we offer. The placement allowed time for the student to undertake research, scoping and develop a proposal for how best to deliver an intervention. This also included developing referral pathways, creating information leaflets for the service users and delivering an education workshop for staff. The student benefitted from gaining experience of working with high levels of mental distress and trauma, whilst working within a supportive team environment. This is valuable knowledge and experience that they will take with them into their future careers.

Francesca Norouzi, Consultant Art Psychotherapist and Head of Arts Psychotherapies, Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Foundation Trust

### **Dietetics, learning disabilities and creative approaches.**

I was given the opportunity to undertake a role emerging placement in a residential setting for people with learning disabilities during my dietetics degree. Challenges presented in engaging residents in interventions and providing accessible information to support better food choices and reduce the prevalence of diet and weight-related comorbidities. One project focused on reducing purchases of high fat, high sugar snacks at the local shop. Residents were involved in the planning and implementation of the service improvement project via the design of posters and a 'healthy eating' logo. This approach enabled us to explore perceptions of, and provide education on, a healthy balanced diet using creative methods. The icon developed by the residents was displayed on 'healthier choice' products around the shop, making these easier to identify. Residents were proud of their involvement, and it was a very rewarding project for me. The placement increased my awareness of the health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities, and the difficulties that may present in supporting them to improve their diet. I am motivated to work to minimise these inequalities throughout my career as a dietitian and encourage the need to better embed good nutritional practices and care for people with learning disabilities.

Rachel Howarth, Dietetics Student, Teesside University.

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### Occupational therapy, autism awareness and football

During my Occupational Therapy degree, I completed a placement with a football stadium to help them become more inclusive of people with autism. I explored the sensory elements of attending a football match and identified where it might be overwhelming for supporters with autism. I travelled to other stadiums with autism-friendly initiatives and used this research to inform my intervention – developing a sensory space for supporters. This involved writing an evidence-based report which I presented to the stadium management outlining my proposal for a sensory space. This placement helped me to develop skills in research, my understanding of autism, clinical reasoning and presentation skills. Following the establishment of the sensory space, I was invited to speak at a conference on sensory integration and motivated me to promote inclusivity and awareness of autism in my professional role as an Occupational Therapist with adults with learning disabilities.

Lois Connelly, Occupational Therapist

### Physiotherapy placements in new settings: the power of students

The conundrum: inpatient mental health services without dedicated physiotherapy provision, a desire to increase awareness of physiotherapy and a need for developing new physiotherapy placements.

The solution: a partnership with our local university to develop Role-Emergent Physiotherapy Student Placements. Working in buddy pairs, two students at a time undertook placements on a dementia assessment unit supported by university staff for professional supervision and the ward manager for clinical support. As part of the placement the students undertook a review of the physiotherapy process and alongside the university, the ward team and a physiotherapy lead in a partner organisation developed criteria, assessment processes and interventions to enhance patient care.

The results: These placements highlighted the role and value of physiotherapy to ward staff and senior leadership team and increased knowledge of mental health as a potential career route for physiotherapy students. Most importantly, the service users experience was greatly enhanced, mobility increased, and discharge accelerated. Other staff benefitted from access to a different 'lens' with which to view the needs of the patient.

Sarah Smith, Senior Lecturer and Physiotherapy Placement Lead; University of Cumbria  
Janet Folland, Associate Director for Allied Health Professions and Professional Lead for Occupational Therapy (North Cumbria Locality); Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust

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### Reflective Questions

- What are the barriers for me to offering AHP placements in my setting?
- Who can support me? Who can I link with to overcome the barriers?
- What are the opportunities if I think beyond a single profession / setting placement?
- Where could different AHP interventions offer benefits to our patients, service users and families?
- What are the perceived barriers for me as a HEI in providing mental health and learning disabilities placements to student AHP's?
- Are there particular projects or ideas we want to develop which we have not had capacity to do?
- Could students support these projects? Or offer additional clinical capacity to allow other staff do develop these projects?
- Is additional funding required? Are there charitable funds we can access to support the placement projects?
- How can I use the AHP Faculty and in-house communications to share the learning?

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### References and Useful Resources

Films celebrating AHP roles and student placements in mental health and learning disability settings:

[Celebrating AHP Roles in Mental Health](#)

For other relevant Quick Guides see the HEE [Practice Based Learning resources](#)