"Follow the Yellow Brick Road"

A case study exploring the lived experience of second year pre-registration student nurses on their self-directed learning journey(s) at a University in the North of England

Fay Codona

Background & Context

- Widening participation university delivering BSc (Hons) Nursing programme with four field options leading to NMC registration.

- My role as a Senior Lecturer, Year 2 Co-ordinator and practitioner researcher.

- Student demographic - largely school or college leavers, majority female, many with foundation in health & social care, a proportion of mature students in each cohort.

- A need for this research was identified as each year, 2nd year students in particular struggle with the learning journey specifically in relation to self-directed learning.

Self-directed learning and "The Yellow Brick Road"

- SDL generally refers to the learning that adult learners undertake independently, taking responsibility for tasks that they manage for themselves (Knowles, 1975). In the context of this research, SDL was defined to the participants as "any reading, searching, or engagement with learning materials that occurs outside of the taught sessions on your programme and that you partake in independently".

- Adult learners must have a "need to know" that drives their learning; this internal motivation is key to engagement with SDL (Knowles *et al.*, 2020, pp.43-47).

- We expect students to 'do' SDL to support their learning, we tell them to "follow the yellow brick road" of the SDL journey, however there are struggles with this especially in 2nd year (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939).

Aims of the Research

- **RQ1** – What are second year pre-registration student nurses' understandings of the purpose and importance of SDL?
- **RQ2** – What are second year pre-registration student nurses' experiences of the barriers to motivation and engagement with SDL?

- This presentation aims to develop understanding of the second-year student nurse experience of SDL and what some of the student identified barriers to motivation and engagement with SDL are within the research presented.

It is hoped this will lead to reflection on practice, sharing of good practice, and generation of thought and discussion in relation to the issues raised.

Research Methods

- Small scale interpretivist research designed to illuminate and understand the student experience from the students' perspectives (case study approach).
- Took place in the educational environment.
- All pathways of nursing included in design and recruitment to ensure holistic understanding of the case and mitigate potential low response rates.
- 2nd and 3rd year students targeted for recruitment; decision to include 3rd years was due to their recent experience of completing year 2 in full and their ability to offer additional insight.
- Two methods of data collection to enable triangulation of data: self-completion questionnaires (2nd year) and an in-person focus group (3rd year).
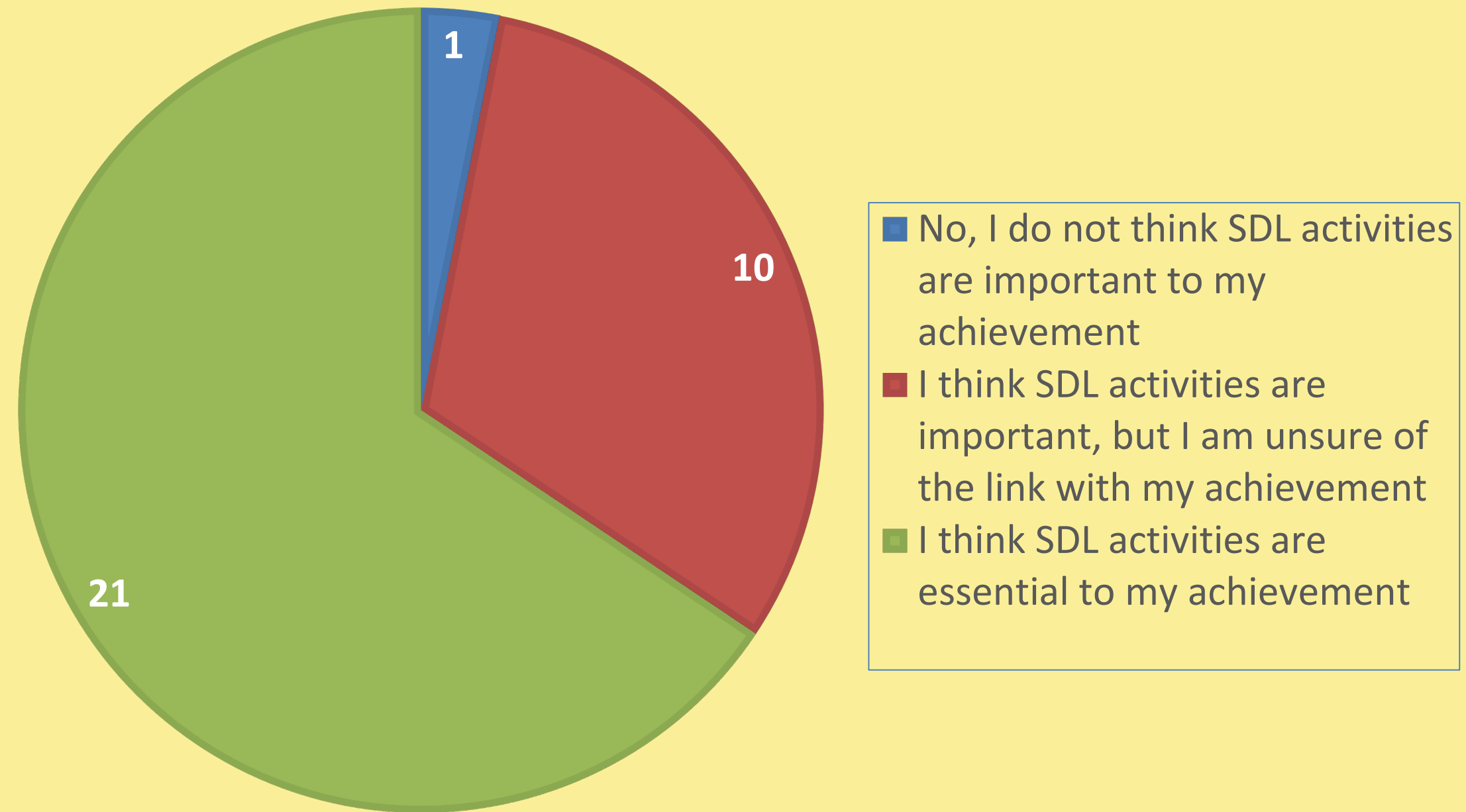- Concurrent design was possible, however the timing of data collection had to be carefully considered.

RQ1 Analysis

- 32 questionnaire respondents (2nd year students)

- 8 students selected "I think I understand what the purpose of SDL is, but I am not completely sure". The remaining 24 respondents chose "I am confident that I understand the purpose of SDL", no students selected "I do not understand the purpose of SDL".

- 2 students identified that engaging with SDL has no impact on their grades.
- 20 students believed that engaging with SDL would increase their grades, but that they felt unmotivated to engage.
- 10 students perceived that engaging with SDL increased their grades and this motivates them to engage.

DO YOU THINK SDL ACTIVITIES ARE IMPORTANT TO YOUR ACHIEVEMENT (BOTH ACADEMIC AND PRACTICAL) AS A STUDENT NURSE?

Legend:
- No, I do not think SDL activities are important to my achievement — **1**
- I think SDL activities are important, but I am unsure of the link with my achievement — **10**
- I think SDL activities are essential to my achievement — **21**

Open text box comments indicated that some 2nd year students were able to equate SDL with getting good grades, 'passing', reaching goals and getting the best out of their degree programme.

RQ1 Key Findings

- Not all the 2nd year students were able to confidently identify the purpose and impact of SDL, however there was a general understanding that there is some relationship between SDL and 'passing'.

- For the 3rd years, the understanding of SDL purpose and impact was clearer, the relationship between SDL and academic grades was also well understood and engagement with SDL was linked with advancing learning and exploring academic and clinical interests:
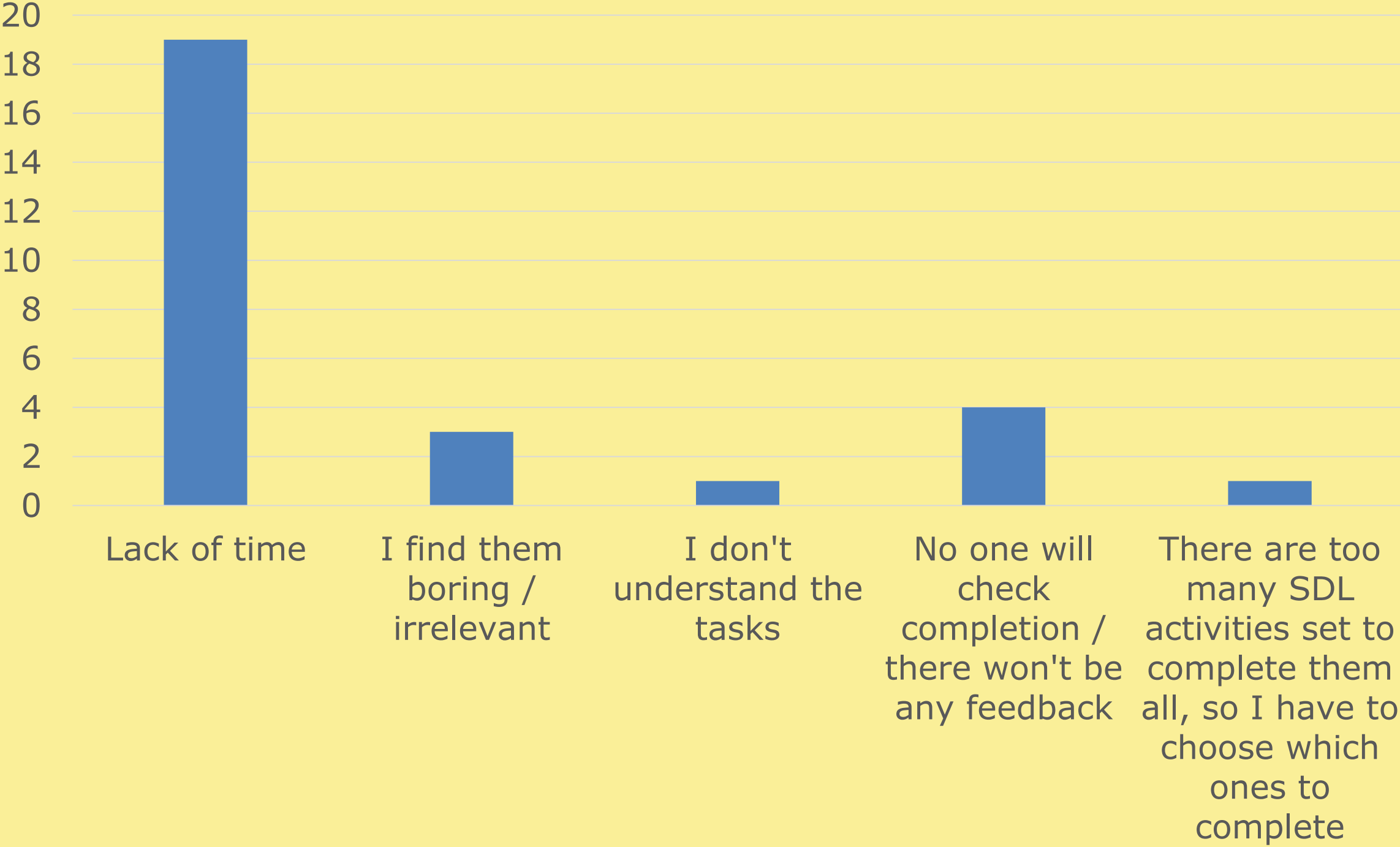
    "you want to equip yourself for going into the world of work [...] so you need to have all of the tools at your disposal, whether that's knowledge or emotional resilience, [...] you want to do well"

- The 3rd year group experienced 'doing well' as an outcome of SDL engagement, this boosted self-efficacy and precipitated further engagement in SDL.

- Some free text comments from the 2nd years highlighted a perception of SDL as an "unrelated activity" that is "not always necessary and important for [...] learning", some students identified that there was "too much" on offer in terms of SDL and that this could be overwhelming.

- Both groups expressed their understanding of SDL as an isolating activity that happens alone and away from shared learning spaces and tutor support.

- While participants from both groups largely demonstrated awareness of the importance of SDL and acknowledgement that it aids learning, this was not always a sufficient motivator for engagement.

RQ2 Analysis

IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE ONE FACTOR THAT IS MOST LIKELY TO STOP YOU FROM ENGAGING IN SDL ACTIVITIES, WHICH OF THESE WOULD IT BE?

Bar chart values:
- Lack of time: 19
- I find them boring / irrelevant: 3
- I don't understand the tasks: 1
- No one will check completion / there won't be any feedback: 4
- There are too many SDL activities set to complete them all, so I have to choose which ones to complete: 1

- Primary motivators for engagement were upcoming exams / deadlines and SDL materials being interactive and perceived as relevant.
- The ultimate goal of becoming a registered nurse was a primary motivator particularly for the 3rd years.

- The most frequently cited barriers by the 2nd year group were lack of motivation, lack of time, tiredness, paid work, and juggling home life with caring responsibilities.
- Time was identified as the main barrier to engagement with SDL for most students in year 2 and was discussed by the year 3 students in their focus group.

- The workload in 2nd year was perceived as overwhelming
- The phrase "mentally draining" was used to describe the year 2 experience and mirrored verbatim in the qualitative comments of year 2 students and in the year 3 focus group discussion.

RQ2 Key Findings

Quality of resources and support	• The majority of participants felt SDL materials provided on the VLE are 'good', however where the value or relevance is unclear this deters engagement • Interactive activities are viewed as positive SDL experiences and being in the learning environment is helpful • Some students perceived an "attitude shift" from the programme team in 2nd year • Perception that the quality of support varies depending on which staff member is approached
Expectations vs. reality	• Some students identified that their expectations of SDL and engagement with the programme prior to starting differed widely from their lived experience • Students demonstrated expectations of themselves to engage with learning, but in reality this is difficult to achieve consistently
Motivation, time & pressures	• Many participants 'sometimes' felt motivated to engage and 'sometimes' achieved this • The phenomenon of the 'second-year blues' had impact • Overwhelming nature of year 2 was compounded by increased expectations of clinical and academic staff • Time pressures were intensified by programme organisation and timetabling, work can feel boring, disconnected, repetitive and overwhelming • Programme team communications in year 2 had an impact

Conclusion: Key Learning Points

- Lack of understanding of the purpose and importance of SDL is not the key reason for lack of motivation and engagement with SDL amongst the students who took part in this research.

- Year 2 is stressful and overwhelming, many participants identified with the 'second-year blues'. Juggling everything feels "impossible".

- Some of the student identified barriers to SDL engagement can be addressed by the programme team by looking at organisation, timetabling, programme communications, provision of consistent support and feedback, constructive alignment of additional SDL materials.

- An identified need to work in partnership with students to understand the issues and develop SDL materials that work for them.

- Potential to create a course of SDL workshops to support SDL readiness in year 1.

References & Useful Resources

Connor, K. (2021) *Navigating the second-year landscape: How student nurses construct an identity and engage with knowledge in the second year of an undergraduate degree*. PhD thesis. Lancaster University.

Knowles, M.S. (1975) *Self-directed learning : a guide for learners and teachers*. New York : Cambridge Adult Education.

Knowles, M.S., Holton III, E.F., Swanson, R.A. and Robinson, P.A. (2020) *The adult learner : the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Ninth edition. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Pryce-Miller, M. and Serrant, L. (2019) 'Students' perceptions of self-direction in pre-registration nurse education', *Nurse Education in Practice*, 40, pp. 102626–102626. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2019.102626.

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