Time for Change: New options for Placement Provision

Introduction
Diagnostic Radiography is facing many challenges due to the current economic climate. According to NHS choices (2013) the National Health Service (NHS) has been undergoing major changes since April 2013 which has impacted on all vital services. There is an emphasis to become cost-efficient, more effective and more streamlined.

The imaging department is one such service, the College of Radiographers (COR) (2013: 17) state that there is a “pressure on clinical departments” and provide authoritative guidance, placing educators with the responsibility of design and development of practice based learning with an “increasing emphasis... placed on work-based learning” (COR, 2007: 16). This is having an impact, not just on service delivery but on the quality of the learning experience for student radiographers.

Background
Clinical Placement is considered an essential part of undergraduate clinical education as it provides a platform for students to apply their theoretical knowledge in a practical setting. Department of Health, 2002
Placement is a core and essential part of diagnostic radiography degree programmes that enables direct patient contact and accordingly reflects the diversity and the need for qualified experiential learning in a variety of clinical settings (Society of Radiographers, 2012) it’s important that students get the most out of their clinical experience.

At our higher education institution we offer a range of clinical placements for students on the 3 year degree, this facilitates experiential learning in a variety of clinical settings reflecting the diversity and the need for qualified radiographers to be able to adapt to workload and changes. The ‘real world’ learning that placement offers is incredibly important to a student’s success and transition to become a competent allied health professional.

Rationale
Yet with all points taken into consideration placement is under threat. Whilst some services are struggling to cope with the same numbers of students and the current economic climate. According to NHS choices (2013) the NHS is proving more and more difficult to place students in plain film and plain film radiography are losing their ‘bread and butter’ radiography. It is proving more and more difficult to place students in plain film and fluoroscopy rooms where they can gain the experience and knowledge required for ‘bread and butter’ radiography.

As a resourceful team who recognise the need to explore new ways of working and new options for placement provision, the challenge has been set.

Methods
The Radiotherapy programme team at the University of Derby reviewed potential new placement ideas and a project leader was appointed. Work started on expanding community hospital placements and the introduction of private, voluntary and independent (PVI) placements.

PVI placements can offer students a diverse experience from that of their usual NHS sites (Nursing Midwifery Council, 2013). Approval was sought from the commissioning bodies and advice from the nursing team who were well underway with a similar project.

The Society and College of Radiographers (SCoR, 2010:1) advise that affirmative placements such as “health centres with diagnostic imaging facilities or cancer support units, mobile facilities and private clinics may be incorporated” into clinical rotations.

Potential placements were identified and contacted with a request for expressions of interest and then follow-up meetings arranged. For community placements the key points to be investigated were; access to resources, availability of public transport, variety and amount of clinical work and the variety of suitably trained staff.

Despite patient services taking priority, certain standards for student training still need to be maintained, the Health Care Professions Council (2012) stipulate that placements must be safe; supportive, provide a range of experiences and have an appropriate amount of qualified staff. Some small departments in isolated areas are run by 1 or 2 radiographers who have not supervised students for a number of years. It was necessary to insist that all sites have a fully trained clinical supervisor who has undertaken our e-learning package and passed the subsequent assessment.

Results and Discussion
As a programme we have previously utilised PVI placements, so this was new territory. However, with student tariffs a clear incentive as well as free continual professional development (CPD) through the clinical supervisors package there were many benefits on offer for these businesses. After providing clear guidance on what is expected, and a visit to the private hospitals to gain a perspective on services offered it became clear the PVI’s could offer a valuable learning experience for students.

Current third, second and first year students were asked to vote on these new introductions via student representatives meetings, the results were unanimously in favour. There are now four private hospitals in the placement rotation planned for Sept 2015 with one more potential on the waiting list. Community placements have increased from three to seven with two more awaiting confirmation in the future.

An unexpected gain was the variety that these new placements could offer, the aim was to increase fluoroscopy and plain film capacity but this has not only helped with the immediate challenge of capacity but with more trained clinical supervisors able to complete and sign off student assessments and there is even more diversity in the student’s experience.

Student radiographers will be undertaking both NHS and private work-based learning, understanding the differences in patient experience and increasing employability.

The adopted changes are helping the radiographers of the future to be more adaptable and more able to adapt to a post in either setting whilst helping them make an informed decision about their career pathways.

References
Health Care Professionals Council (2013). Standards of Education and Training: your duties as an educational provider (EDP).
Nursing and Midwifery Council (2010) Standards for Pre-Registration Nursing Education. London: GMC
Society of Radiographers (2012) Quality standards for Practice Placements. SOR