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Initial reactions to the distribution of mobile devices to learning disability students for use in practice settings

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This paper aims to discuss the initial views of learning disability nurses to the distribution of handheld computers via the Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings (ALPS) programme. At this stage the mobile devices, supplied by the ALPS programme, were given to help the students access information and keep in touch with colleagues and staff back in the university ahead of the implementation of their use for assessment. The paper will present results from the first year of practice use of the devices including, if and how the devices have been used, looking at variables such as age, gender, and previous use of technology.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the impact may be minimal in terms of supplementing the methods already used by the students, primarily mobile phones, the device offers a number of other potential possibilities. The presentation will discuss what the students think these are, from their own perspective, and not that of academics, and will discuss how the students have used the facilities of 'on the go' access to the internet; e-mail; picture taking; and voice recording facilities. It is acknowledged that the students may find the devices limiting and this will also be acknowledged and explored. Finally there will also be a discussion of the ethical implications for the use of the devices as already identified by some local organisations.

This paper will therefore help other nurse educationalists gauge the potential use of mobile technologies as we move to a more community based focus to some of our educational preparation and provision. The importance of the findings is also important when we consider learning disabilities nursing provision at the University of Huddersfield, primarily because of the range of non-traditional community settings it currently uses. Where other branches of nursing use a high percentage of NHS settings we use primarily voluntary, charitable, and private sectors in providing student placements. This along with the fact that students often work 'independently' in clients own homes often means that they can be disadvantaged in terms of access to technology and mixing with their peers. Hospitals for example often have libraries or computer facilities where students can access information and meet peers. This is something that other branches may experience as care provision evolves.

About the devices
The ALPS mobile device is a handheld computer with the ability to access the Internet and e-mails. It also has the facility to store information e.g. word documents, excel files etc, in its internal memory or on a micro SD card. It is also capable of taking voice notes and capturing images via an inbuilt camera. The device itself is a T-Mobile MDA Vario.

About ALPS
The ALPS programme aims, amongst other things, to improve the use of technology within practice settings. This they hope to do by 'implementing mobile technologies to support both formative and summative assessment and learning for the students, university staff and professional practice staff ……' (ALPS, 2008a)

ALPS is one of the 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) promoting excellence across all subjects and aspects of teaching and learning in higher education. Funding of £315 million over five years from 2005-06 to 2009-10 represents HEFCE's largest ever-single funding initiative in teaching and learning.

Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings (ALPS) is a collaborative programme between five higher education institutions with proven reputations for excellence in learning and teaching in health and social care: the University of Bradford, the University of Huddersfield, the University of Leeds (lead); Leeds Metropolitan University, and York St John University. There are 16 professions across the partnership from audiology to social work, and a wide range of partners including Yorkshire and the Humber NHS, practice networks and professional bodies. ALPS aim is to ensure that students graduating from courses in health and social care are fully equipped to perform confidently and competently at the start of their professional careers. This is being achieved by extending excellence and innovation in assessing practice, helping students learn both within their professions and across professional boundaries. ALPS is raising the status of teaching in practice. ALPS works with practice-based educators so they can assess generic skills (e.g. communication, team working and ethical practice) and professional competences common to many groups. Practitioners who teach can benefit from and contribute to the work of ALPS and its networks. (ALPS, 2008b)

References
ALPS (2008a) http://www.alps-cetl.ac.uk/Corework/MobileTechnologies.html (accessed 11/1/08)

ALPS (2008b) http://www.alps-cetl.ac.uk/index.htm (accessed 11/1/08)