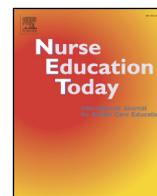


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Key influences identified by first year undergraduate nursing students as impacting on the quality of clinical placement: A qualitative study

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SUMMARY

Background: Despite the fact that high quality clinical placement is an integral component of pre-registration nursing education for the development of the future nursing workforce, the literature identifies an ongoing struggle to 'get it right'.

Objective: To examine qualitative data gathered through the Quality Clinical Placements Evaluation project to identify what pre-registration nursing students deemed helpful and not helpful influences on their first year Professional Experience Placement.

Design: A total of 553 first year undergraduate nursing students from 2010 to 2012 were enrolled in the programme and all were invited to complete a validated survey to measure the quality of their first clinical placement. A total of 361 completed surveys were returned. This paper examines the data provided through open-ended questions within the survey related to most helpful and least helpful aspects of their clinical experience.

Methods: An inductive analysis approach using NVIVO allowed inherent areas to emerge from the raw data forming three key themes that influenced the experience of students.

Results: Feeling welcomed, individual versus team attitudes, and student expectations of supervising ward nurses were the themes identified that were perceived by the student as important to the success of learning and the quality of the experience overall.

Conclusion: The findings echo previous research into the student experience of clinical placement; however the focus regarding the need for students to have a quality relationship with the supervising nurse is an area that warrants further exploration. Furthermore, we argue that students should be purposely engaged in the tertiary sector and provided guidance and strategies related to forming and maintaining relationships with those that supervise their clinical placement, in order to ensure consistent positive experiences. The outcomes from this study suggest that a missing component is teaching undergraduates how to manage relationships in clinical settings.

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Introduction

Recognised as a valuable component of nursing education (McGarry et al., 2009; Arieli, 2013); the Professional Experience Placement (PEP) enables nursing students to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence within the clinical environment. Immersive clinical experiences are planned to facilitate student learning and development by providing a supportive medium in which to link theory and skills gained at

university to the practice context. Although students at a single tertiary educational facility receive the same educational preparation prior to placement, it is 'what' students experience during PEP that is central to their professional development (Leners et al., 2006) which can lead to differences in experiences within a given cohort of students. This study seeks to extend current knowledge by examining pre-registration nursing student perceptions about factors that influence the quality of PEP, specifically focusing on the first year student perspectives.

Background

The continued utilisation of PEP in pre-registration nursing education indicates the central role of such experiences in the students' development of 'nursing skills, knowledge and professional socialisation' (Edwards et al., 2004, p.249). Indeed as Ralph et al. (2009, p.434) state, PEP is the 'most important phase of their entire professional preparation',

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with the practice setting central to developing and shaping the quality of students' experiences (McGarry et al., 2009). Transitioning from university preparation to clinical practice, nursing students can feel challenged by experiences that impact on both a personal and professional level as they attempt to translate theoretical knowledge to the clinical environment. Therefore it is not surprising that PEP is acknowledged to be not only important but also the most stress inducing component of pre-registration education (Andrews et al., 2006; Farkhondeh and Masoumi, 2009).

The first experience of PEP is considered to be the most powerful and influential for the pre-registration student and the quality of a clinical experience can determine whether a student chooses to remain in the nursing profession (White, 1999; Sand-Jecklin and Schaffer, 2006; Dragon, 2009). A positive nursing culture can lead to students feeling more motivated to learn (Grealish and Ranse, 2009; Levett-Jones et al., 2009). Against this background, this study aims to explore first year student feedback on their PEP experience for the benefit of all stakeholders.

The Study

Aim

The aim of the study was to examine what pre-registration nursing students deemed to be helpful and not helpful influences on their first year PEP experience.

Design

The study formed part of a longitudinal research study entitled the Quality Clinical Placements Evaluation (QCPE) project. A validated survey instrument (Courtney-Pratt et al., 2014) was utilised for this purpose and sought responses via twenty-two questions graded on a five point Likert scale. Included in this survey were the following open-ended questions which formed the core dataset for this study:

1. *What, if anything, did you find MOST helpful during clinical placement?*
2. *What, if anything, did you find NOT helpful during clinical placement?*
3. *What suggestions do you have to help meet your needs more effectively?*

Quantitative data from the larger study has been reported in previous publications, the existence of a large amount of qualitative data related to first year experience and an interest in further examining key influences on that experience led to in depth thematic analysis to add to the extant literature on the topic.

Sample Participants

A total of 553 first year Bachelor of Nursing students, representing the whole cohort of enrolled students in the years 2010–2012, were invited to participate in the research with 361 returning their survey. Although the larger study had commenced in 2008, the survey of first year undergraduates did not commence until 2010. Participants were first year pre-registration students who had completed their first PEP as part of their Bachelor of Nursing. The focus on first year pre-registration students was informed by the recognised influence that initial engagement with the clinical environment can have on subsequent PEP experiences and the student's professional development (James and Chapman, 2010).

Data Collection

A meeting was held on the last day of PEP at a venue located away from their clinical areas, participants were invited to participate in the research and were provided with an information sheet prior to completing a hard copy of the survey. Consent was implied upon return of the survey instrument, those who did not wish to participate returned a

blank survey at the conclusion of the meeting. The high response rate is noted in Table 1, and was supported by the provision of paper copy surveys provided directly to students with return immediately.

Table 1 demonstrates response rate across the three years of data collection.

Ethical Considerations

The QCPE project obtained ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network in 2009 (H0010609). Survey data was transcribed into electronic format. Any identifiable information contained within the student responses was removed to protect the anonymity of the students, SWNs and the placement setting in which their PEP was undertaken. Students choosing not to undertake the survey were reassured that this would have no impact on future PEP experiences or their academic grades.

Data Analysis

An inductive approach to the data analysis was undertaken with transcripts of the responses read several times to allow the researcher to become familiar with the data and determine latent content within the text (Graneheim et al., 2004). An inductive approach allows 'research findings to emerge from frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data' (Thomas, 2006, p2). Individual responses were loaded into NVivo 10 software (QSR International, 2012), to assist open-coding. Units of meaning within the text were sorted into sub-categories as they emerged. Similar responses were grouped together under the same sub-category with new findings generating additional subcategories. Similarities between subcategories were then grouped to form three main categories that students identified as influencing their PEP experience

Findings

The majority of the student responses were positive demonstrating that overall, students encountered experiences that were of high quality. Students placed a high level of accountability and responsibility for the quality of their PEP experience on the SWNs with whom they worked. Comments consistently cited SWNs as a primary influence in both helpful and not helpful experiences of students. The three main categories generated from student responses in the survey following their PEP experience were:

- *Feeling welcomed*
- *Individual vs. team attitudes*
- *Student expectations of supervising ward nurse*

Feeling Welcomed

The importance for students of feeling welcomed was highlighted across the three areas of responses sought from the survey. Responses ranged from identifying 'the welcoming nature of the staff and willingness to help, encourage and educate', through highlighting negative impacts, writing 'Some nurses are not really welcoming us (sic), from their body

Table 1
Spread of QCPE survey response rate across sample period.

	Year		
	2010	2011	2012
Total of first year students in PEP	211	190	152
Total number of surveys returned	145	124	92
Return rate	68%	65%	60%

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