



Educational preparation for clinical nursing: The satisfaction of students and new graduates from two Australian universities



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SUMMARY

Background: Attrition rates among young and newly registered nurses are high; the capacity of nurse education programmes to prepare nurses for their professional role and the extent to which they are supported during the transition from student to registered nurse may be important factors.

Objectives: This paper examines nursing student and recent graduate satisfaction with their education, focusing on their preparation for work.

Design: A descriptive cohort design was used, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to measure and interpret satisfaction.

Setting: Two Australian universities, one urban and one regional.

Participants: 530 undergraduate nursing students and recent graduates from the Bachelor of Nursing programmes at the two universities.

Methods: Data were collected via an online survey. Satisfaction with the programmes was measured with closed format questions covering different aspects of the programmes and a single open ended question. Responses were compared between older and younger respondents and between graduates and students at different stages of the programme.

Results: Older students were more dissatisfied than younger students with the amount and type of training and their preparation for nursing work. First year students reported the highest levels of satisfaction, and third year students the lowest. The majority of graduates and third year students thought that the programme only partly prepared them for work in nursing. The free text comments particularly highlighted concerns with the amount and quality of clinical education.

Conclusions: Programmes need to take account of the learning requirements of students to maximise the integration of theory and skill development in hospital environments with limited staffing and resources. The clinical environment and support received impact on the quality of learning and satisfaction of student nurses. Students who are dissatisfied with their educational and clinical experiences may choose to change their career direction.

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Introduction

This paper reports a study investigating the satisfaction of student and graduate nurses with their undergraduate education and preparation for work as clinical nurses. It is set in the context of continuing shortages of clinical nurses in many countries, with an important component of shortages being the loss to the profession of young nurses in their early career. Literature associating difficulties in the transition from student to clinical nurse with intentions to leave the profession

motivated the study. It uses data from the first phase of a longitudinal study of the education and employment decisions of student nurses and recent graduates.

Background

The health systems of many countries are facing similar challenges with regard to the future supply of nurses (Buerhaus et al., 2009; Oulton, 2006). The evidence from Europe, North America, and Australia suggests that the nursing workforce is ageing, with many nurses likely to retire within the next decade. At the same time, attrition rates among young and newly registered nurses are high (Barron and West, 2005; Doiron et al., 2008; Fochsen et al., 2006; Sochalski, 2002). Experiences in the workplace during education and the extent to which graduate nurses enter the nursing workforce feeling competent and prepared for clinical work may be important factors in early career attrition.

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Young and inexperienced nurses have been found to have lower levels of job satisfaction and higher turnover rates than older more experienced nurses (Hayes et al., 2006; Shields and Ward, 2001). Studies of job satisfaction among new graduate nurses have identified issues associated with the transition from student to registered nurse (Casey et al., 2004; Cowin, 2002). Formal programmes to facilitate graduate transition from student to registered nurse are widely used across many countries but vary considerably; although the evidence regarding their successful features is inconclusive, there is some evidence of programme benefits in terms of graduate competence and retention (Rush et al., 2013).

The first 6–9 months as a registered nurse have been found to be the most stressful, while workplace environment and the support of mentors have been identified as important for new graduate transition (Rush et al., 2013). New graduate nurses have reported work environments with unsupportive cultures that excluded them and for which they were unprepared (Kelly and Ahern, 2008). Socialising students to the clinical environment was found to assist their acceptance in the work environment (Mooney, 2007).

Clinical practice experiences during the nurse education programme and the extent to which education prepares students for clinical nursing are also likely to contribute to the transition from student to registered nurse. The clinical supervisory relationship and the clinical environment have been found to be important for student learning during clinical placement (Henderson et al., 2006b; Saarikoski and Leino-Kilpi, 2002). Student satisfaction with clinical placement has been found to be associated with their perceptions of the clinical learning environment, which was rated below preferred levels (Chan, 2002; Smedley and Morey, 2010). The extent to which students leave their educational programme feeling prepared for their clinical role has also been associated with future work intentions (Murrells and Robinson, 1999).

The focus then for policy makers is to concentrate not only on workforce issues of recruitment and retention of registered nursing staff in hospitals, but also on strategies to improve the education of students in preparation for their nursing career (Barnett et al., 2010). In order to prepare students adequately for the workplace and to retain them in the workforce, curricula in educational programmes need to be successful in providing students with the skills for coping competently with their patient care role in difficult workplace environments (Hayes et al., 2006).

This paper reports a study of student and graduate nurse satisfaction with the career preparation provided by two Australian nursing education programmes. In Australia, all registered nurses are educated at university, completing the Bachelor of Nursing (BN) degree in order to register. Many students are either totally or partially self-supporting by working during their degree, often employed as assistants in nursing or enrolled nurses while studying. Both programmes involved in the current study use a blended learning approach, including face-to-face teaching, on-line learning and clinical placement learning experiences. Each programme is three years fulltime and both programmes have an accelerated programme for enrolled nurses who can complete the course within two years. The clinical practice component provided during the three years differs slightly between the two programmes. One programme is based in a metropolitan area and provides 840 clinical placement hours in large hospitals, where students work with a ward nurse and are supervised by a faculty clinical facilitator (ratio 1:8). The other programme provides 1000 clinical placement hours in a wider range of facilities (small rural to large metropolitan hospitals) and students are supervised by a registered nurse preceptor when the placement group is small and by a faculty clinical facilitator when groups are larger (ratio 1:6). In both programmes students undertake a typical shift pattern for nurses, completing an eight/ten hour day and a forty hour week.

The study aimed to investigate the satisfaction of student and graduate nurses with their educational preparation for work. The

specific objectives were to describe satisfaction with educational preparation for work, identify if satisfaction differed between students with different levels of experience (generally and within their educational programme), and to enhance understanding of these using participants' comments.

Methods

Design

The study draws on both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to describe the extent of satisfaction/dissatisfaction and to enhance understanding of contributing factors. It was conducted as a cross-sectional analysis of observational data, using baseline data from a longitudinal cohort study to investigate the educational and employment choices of nurses at career entry and during the early career (Kenny et al., 2012). A key focus of the cohort study is to understand the reasons nurses leave the profession in the early career, to inform health workforce policies. Consequently the study of educational satisfaction focuses on satisfaction with preparation for work.

Participants

Participants were students and graduate nurses recruited through two universities in New South Wales (NSW), Australia; the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and the University of New England (UNE) at Armidale. The two universities were selected to ensure that the study encompassed the experiences of students studying in both a major city location (UTS) and a regional centre (UNE). The recruitment methods included: a brief presentation and distribution of written information prior to a lecture, the distribution of brochures outside classrooms and announcements about the study through the online student communication system. Participants could provide the initial recruitment information by email or completion of a form returned in person or by post. Graduate nurses were recruited in the final year of their nursing course and continued in the study after graduation; participants provided consent online before commencing the survey. The project was approved by the research ethics committees at both universities.

Data Collection

Data collection was through an online survey (completed during 2009–2010) covering demographic, economic, employment, education, family, health, and lifestyle information, as well as employment preferences and satisfaction with education. The questionnaire was devised specifically for the study by the cohort study investigators (Kenny et al., 2012) using questions typical of labour supply surveys. It was pilot tested as an online survey with a sample of 60 second year nursing students; free text questions were included for respondent feedback on clarity, understanding and missing issues. Online data collection was selected as the most efficient way to collect data for the cohort study, which surveys participants annually. Web-based methods have been used successfully for this purpose (Huntington et al., 2009); one of the main limitations identified was computer/internet literacy among older nurses which was not expected to be an issue for our study, given the recruitment context of university students who use computers and the internet as part of their studies.

As one component of a larger questionnaire, the satisfaction with education questionnaire was devised to be brief, covering the main components of an educational programme while emphasising work readiness. It used a 5-point response scale anchored at least satisfied and most satisfied and asked respondents to indicate how satisfied they were with the following six aspects of the educational programme: workload, engagement level in class, amount of training provided, type of training provided, preparation for work in nursing,

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