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# An analysis of Australian graduate critical care nurse education



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## KEYWORDS

Intensive care;  
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## Summary

**Background:** Preparation of specialist critical care nurses in Australia is at graduate level, although there remains considerable variation in courses offered in relation to qualification, content, assessment and outcomes. As higher education providers must now comply with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) a study was conducted to examine existing critical care courses and graduate practice outcomes.

**Methods:** Twenty-two critical care courses were reviewed. Data sources included course provider, websites, course curricula and telephone interviews with course coordinators. A framework approach, was used consisting of five key stages: preliminary immersion of raw data, conceptualising a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation of data.

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*Findings:* Analysis revealed considerable variations in course delivery and graduate practice outcomes. Most courses used professional competency standards as a framework for course curricula and clinical assessment, with inconsistency in their translation to graduate practice outcomes. Twenty-one courses included clinical assessment at graduate certificate level with no clinical assessment conducted at master level. The expected practice outcome for fifteen courses was safe practice with graduates not expected to practice at a specialist or team leadership level. Minimum graduate practice standards were not included in three courses as an expected outcome.

*Conclusion:* The AQF requires graduate nurse education to be compliant with academic outcome standards. The findings of our study indicate variations between courses and subsequent graduate practice outcomes. It is therefore timely to establish national critical care education graduate practice standards.

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## Introduction

Until the early 1990s specialty education programmes for registered nurses in Australia were largely offered by healthcare facilities as vocationally based professional development courses. With the transition of undergraduate nurse preparation to the higher education sector completed by 1993 (Lusk, Russell, Rodgers, & Wilson-Barnett, 2001), the opportunity for specialty education to also be provided by universities as a graduate qualification developed momentum. This move was supported by a number of national reviews over the next two decades.

In 1997 for example, findings from the National Review of Specialist Nurse Education were released. Funded by the Federal Government Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the review identified inconsistencies impacting on specialty nurse education in Australia including variations in length of courses, type of qualification gained, the balance between clinical and theory components and course entry eligibility criteria. Recommendations from the review included calling for criteria to define a specialty, the educational preparation required for entry to the specialisation, and a framework for the provision of specialty nursing education (Russell, Gething, & Convery, 1997).

Five years later the National Review of Nursing Education: Our Duty of Care (Heath, 2002) again recommended the need for national consistency in nurse education including graduate specialty preparation. The National Nursing and Nursing Education Taskforce (2006) (N3ET) was subsequently set up to implement and monitor these recommendations together with recommendations from earlier reports including 'The Critical Care Workforce in Australia 2001–2011' (Australian Health Workforce Advisory Committee, 2002). The N3ET brought together a range of stakeholders and outcomes that included a number of reports and recommendations to initiate change towards national consistency in nursing and midwifery education, regulation and practice. The national specialisation framework for nursing and midwifery resulted which established criteria for recognition of a specialty. Eighteen national specialties met these criteria, along with 10 skill domains and 50 practice strands (National Nursing and Nursing Education Taskforce N3ET, 2006).

One of the specialties identified by the N3ET Taskforce (2006), critical care nursing, had been well established in Australia since 1986 and specialty education courses already widely offered across the country since the 1970s (Gill,

Leslie, Grech, & Latour, 2012; Ogle, Bethune, Nugent, & Walker, 2002). More recently, an important driver for critical care nurse education has been professional health workforce standards (Australian College of Critical Care Nurses, 2003; Australian Council on Healthcare Standards, 2011; College of Intensive Care Medicine of Australia and New Zealand, 2010), which recommend that at least 50% of nurses working in an intensive care unit hold a critical care post registration qualification. While this recommendation has been widely accepted, there have been varying interpretations of what comprises a 'critical care qualification'.

Despite a call for greater consistency in graduate critical care courses (Australian Health Workforce Advisory Committee, 2002), and to establish consensus among stakeholders on desirable graduate outcomes (Australian College of Critical Care Nurses, 2006; Leslie, 2006), currently the graduate level to prepare qualified critical care nurses still remains unspecified. Whilst the variation in the award level, cost, content, assessment and outcomes of critical care courses may be viewed favourably by some prospective students and health services who have a wide choice of programmes to select from, the confusion surrounding graduate outcomes and lack of practical transferability of the qualification is problematic. From an analysis of the findings and recommendations arising from national taskforces and other reviews into critical care graduate nurse education it was evident that a gap existed in current knowledge of expected outcomes from nurses who completed a critical care programme.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), first introduced in 1995 and revised in 2011, sets national policy and standards for the regulation of qualifications across the education and training sector: determining the level of qualification, knowledge, skills, application of knowledge and skills and volume of learning (Australian Government ComLaw, 2012; Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). The new framework has ensured that Australian qualifications can be benchmarked internationally. The framework has adopted consistent terminology including the term 'postgraduate' being replaced by 'graduate' in reference to courses that follow on from a basic degree within the tertiary education sector (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

As higher education course providers gear up for compliance with the AQF, and regulation under the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2011), research into the existing status of graduate nurse specialty education is timely. This paper reports a descriptive analysis of

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