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Inside the research incubator: A case study of an intensive undergraduate research experience for nursing & midwifery students



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Summary Undergraduate research experiences are an increasing component of nursing and midwifery degrees. The Summer Research Scholarship Programme (SRSP) is a tertiary education initiative in Australia to provide an intensive undergraduate research experience. Between 2009 and 2010, six students and four academic faculty mentors in School of Nursing and Midwifery participated in an inaugural SRSP.

This study explores the experiences of both students and faculty mentors to determine how this undergraduate research experience impacted student learning and interest in research. A qualitative case study approach was used to explore the research experiences of undergraduate student and faculty participants in an inaugural undergraduate research programme.

Based on the results of two surveys four main themes were identified: (1) acquisition of research skills, (2) expectations, (3) academic engagement, and (4) continued interest in research.

An intensive undergraduate research experience is a valuable component of student learning that has the capacity to contribute to immediate and longer-term learning and research outcomes.

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Background

An undergraduate research experience [URS] is a valuable educational opportunity that can greatly enhance the undergraduate experience (Lopatto, 2004). URS are gaining momentum in nursing and midwifery, as students are

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increasingly required to engage with research and translate this into practice. Our School of Nursing and Midwifery sought to engage students in a URS, understanding that in order to become judicious consumers of research, undergraduate students need to understand the important tenets and develop an appreciation of the subtleties that are inherent to the research process (Wheeler, Hardie, Schell, & Plowfield, 2008).

The key reasons why engagement in a URS are beneficial include an increased interest in the discipline, enhanced career preparation and options, in particular professional socialisation and opportunities for networking, increased skills in research, working collaboratively, communication (such as writing, presentation, and argument), and significant gains in critical thinking and understanding how to approach research problems (Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, & Deantoni, 2004). Despite these benefits for students, a specific challenge to an effective URS may be recruitment of academic staff who are willing to mentor novice undergraduates in summer programmes (Frantz, DeHaan, Demetrikopoulos, & Carruth, 2006). Moreover recent analysis of workforce characteristics in midwives has highlighted the low uptake of research higher degrees as a concern for grooming the next generation of researchers and the same may be true of nurses given the overall workforce shortage in the tertiary sector – a looming problem that has received little attention (Hugo & Morriss, 2010).

In this research, we address some fundamental questions about the experiences of undergraduate engagement in faculty-mentored research undertaken outside of regular coursework requirements.

The inclusion of nursing and midwifery disciplines in academia is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia where the transition to tertiary education for these health disciplines commenced in the 1970s and hospital based apprenticeship education ended in the late 1990s. As a recently established School positioned in a Faculty of Health Science in which all health science disciplines are represented, at the outset we chose not to educate graduates to conduct nursing research. Rather, the vision included the development and implementation of a curriculum that would address fundamental aspects of epidemiology and population health. As a foundation curriculum construct this was developed in a systematic way through the programme and integrated into practice problems. It follows a hierarchal approach based on levels of evidence and is highly integrated into assessment items (supported learning activities, oral & written presentations, examinations, critical issue and reflective practice interpretations) (Ruddy et al., 2007). The result is the development of an integrated research curriculum which aims to prepare undergraduates to Recognise, Interpret, Critique and Apply (an organising construct which we have termed RICA) (Kain, Bogossian, & Rosenberg, 2012) evidence based research to inform their practice. As such, we believed that our students would have a pedagogical foundation, which would allow them to embrace experiential learning afforded by intensive exposure to undergraduate research experiences.

Building research capacity more broadly across the School was another impetus for engaging our students in an undergraduate research experience. Conn, Porter, McDaniel,

Rantz, and Maas (2005) identified the two main components for strengthening research output within a School of Nursing and Midwifery as: infrastructure support, and a strong research culture within undergraduate nursing programmes. Whilst we were cognizant of the notion of building our research capacity from within, we were also aware of a current national faculty shortage within academia despite the growing numbers of undergraduate student enrolments. This in turn creates further challenges for potential disciplinary researchers, with nurses and midwives tending to pursue doctorates later in their career, which then limits the number of years of research productivity (Wheeler et al., 2008). The philosophy of providing an undergraduate research experience to students was that a high quality undergraduate experience needed to expose students to new ideas and ways of thinking while actively engaging them in exploring and discovering new knowledge. This ethos underpinned the development of a 'research incubator' within the School as part of a broader strategy for building research capacity. This philosophy was, in part, motivated by the premise of rather than "telling" students about research, it was far better to immerse them within a community where they could engage in research practices 'at the elbows' of more competent peers and experts (Barab & Hay, 2001). In 2009, the School of Nursing & Midwifery at the University of Queensland actively promoted the University's inaugural Summer Research Scholarship Programme (hereafter SRSP) by offering a limited number of scholarships to engage students in research internships over the summer semester (November 2009–February 2010).

Methods

Design

A qualitative research design using a case study approach (Yin, 2009) was used because we aimed to explore the research experiences of a small number of student and faculty participants in an inaugural research programme. The study had ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee.

Sample and setting

The SRSP was administered through the Office of Undergraduate Education. All school and enrolling centres in the University were invited to participate conditional upon their commitment to contribute 50% of the stipend funding for each of the 10-week scholarships. The School committed to fund 6 scholarships for the period of the summer semester (November 2009–February 2010). In addition to the scholarships being advertised by the University, information about the scholarships was prominently displayed on the School's main webpage. Prior to this, faculty were invited to submit abstracts of suitable student projects and these were included on the website for students to access together with faculty contact details. Faculty could submit an unlimited number of projects. To be eligible students had to have completed their second year of study in at least a three-year degree.

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