



## The perceived benefits of belonging to an extra curricular group within a pre-registration nursing course



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### ABSTRACT

This study describes a qualitative research design that focuses on nursing students who were aligned to different extra-curricular groups (a student representative committee, a Nurses' Day Committee and a magazine editorial team) within the School of Health. The study explores the nursing students' experiences and perceptions of belonging to an extra-curricular group within a pre-registration nursing course. Data were collected using focus groups.

The findings of this study suggest that students who are members of extra-curricular groups perceive group membership to have many positive benefits. The findings were grouped into three main themes namely: employability, retention and personal gain. The findings suggest that students are clearly aware of their career development and expressed how group membership meant they were able to develop skills around employability. Students highlighted that they gained support and built lasting relationships through the groups which supported and reassured them which it was felt enabled them to progress successfully through the course. These themes reinforce the value of having established groups within a pre-registration curriculum.

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### Introduction

This study explored the concept of belonging for a group of nursing students through their participation in self-selected extra-curricular groups. In the ever changing climate of pre-registration nursing, there is an increasing emphasis for nursing education providers to ensure students feel supported in the diverse learning environment. As nursing students learn in both a higher education and a clinical environment there is even more risk of students feeling isolated when they are not always learning in their usual peer groups. This study supports previous research undertaken in the US (Pittman and Richmond, 2007) indicating that a sense of belonging allows students to associate and identify with their course and peers thus leading to feeling valued and integrated. Spouse (2001) suggested a need for students to feel like they belong before learning can commence. The ever present pressure to retain students requires educational strategies to be in place in order to facilitate students to increase their sense of belonging. Thomas (2012) found belonging to be critical to student retention in higher education. There is a global need for higher education

providers to consider the impact that belonging may have on a nursing student's learning experience. This study focused on nursing students who were aligned to different extra-curricular groups within the School of Health which included a student representative committee (SRC), a Nurses' Day committee (NDC) and a magazine editorial team (MET) to explore their experiences and perceptions of belonging to an extra-curricular group within a pre-registration nursing course which may lead to gaining valuable insights into factors which promote group membership.

### Background

Faircloth and Hamm (2005) hypothesised that belonging could be seen as an underlying explanatory factor that exists in the relationship between achievement and motivation. Research has demonstrated that students are most likely to be successful and motivated in contexts where they have a strong sense of relatedness and community in the environment in which they learn (Ryan and Patrick, 2001). Thomas (2012) in The What Works? Student Retention and Success project highlighted that student belonging was achieved through supportive peer relations and meaningful interactions between staff and students.

Riecher and Haslam (2006) highlighted that group memberships can have positive implications on a person's well-being and can also play a beneficial role in helping people adjust to life

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transitions. Pre-registration nursing students come from a range of diverse backgrounds including differences in age, social background, education and race. Group memberships may allow ease of adjustment and settlement into their new role as a nursing student. Haslam et al. (2008) identified how a positive transition will have positive implications and may have an impact on a person's self-esteem which could help to counteract adverse consequences that could potentially occur due to change. Levett-Jones and Bourgeris (2007) highlighted psychosocial effects that belonging could have on nursing students. Students who were deprived of a sense of belonging were more likely to suffer from stress, anxiety and depression (Levett-Jones and Bourgeris, 2007; Newman et al., 2007). Group memberships mean that students have further support networks. The student's social identity may change as the student could identify with those in their extra-curricular groups more than other students they learn with on the course.

In Thomas and Jamieson-Ball's (2011) conceptual model on student engagement they place student engagement and belonging at the centre of the model and they highlight the importance of higher education institutions (HEIs) providing opportunities that are not just academic but are also within the social sphere. This echoes research that was undertaken in Australia by James et al. (2009) which identified that opportunities to engage with campus life are important for social integration which was a key contributor to student engagement.

Haslam et al. (2008) stated that social support can provide a sense of acceptance and self-worth, that will prove useful in coping and making sense of the challenges they may face. It is inevitable that some students may struggle to cope with all the new roles, challenges and changes they face when commencing nurse training and support from peers through group memberships may provide a platform where students can buffer their concerns. Peer support has been identified as a major factor that influenced student learning (Campbell et al., 1994). Haslam and Reicher (2006) highlighted that shared social identities which may exist through group membership are a way in which individuals can collaborate in endeavours to cope with numerous changes occurring in their present lives but also pave the way to a more positive future. Some students may be aware of the benefits of belonging to a group (such as skills development) and the impact this may have on their future career progression.

Hickman and Creighton-Zollar (1998) identified that as team members spend time together, the development of interdependence and trust emerged and this appeared to lead to a greater openness among the group members to consider different ideas and there may be a willingness to take risks. This may be relevant when students are in need of support. Rather than struggling, students may be able to obtain the answers or support needed from other members of the group. Campbell et al. (1994) found that nursing students began to view each other as sources of support when they have established relationships within their peer group. The strategies developed through group memberships may lead to more effective coping strategies and this in turn could be seen as preparation to deal with difficult situations when in the practice environment. Levett-Jones et al. (2008) identified that belonging is important to fostering a positive clinical placement experience. A study carried out by Tao et al. (2000) identified that students in China who received tutor support had lower levels of perceived negative coping. Faircloth and Hamm (2005) suggested that experiences of belonging can account for and explain a significant portion of the relationship between achievement and motivation, making belonging a fertile environment within which motivation, and consequently achievement, can develop. The possible link between group belonging in an academic university environment and motivation with studies may be something to consider when addressing issues of retention. It may be said that the support

which exists within such groups may not be found or created elsewhere.

As the literature has shown that there is little work undertaken on nursing students and belonging, this study may lead to a better understanding of the motivations that promote group membership and also to determine what the students feel they gain from belonging to the group.

## Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the nursing students' experiences and perceptions of belonging to an extra-curricular group within a pre-registration nursing course.

## Method

### Design

A qualitative approach to data collection was used. Bell (2005) stated that qualitative research is concerned with understanding the individuals' perceptions of the world. We sought to attain a clear understanding of how the participants perceived and experienced belonging to particular groups. Focus groups were the method of data collection for this study. The use of focus groups allowed an insight into the students' attitudes, perceptions and feelings regarding belonging to a group. Denscombe (2007) identified how a stimulus will trigger the discussion that is created in a focus group. In the case of this study the stimulus was relevant group participation.

Focus groups are particularly useful for understanding participants' motives and meanings that explain particular views and opinions (Denscombe, 2007). The use of groups within University based pre-registration nursing courses has not been explored widely in the current literature available. The use of focus groups allowed valuable data to be obtained in a non-threatening environment where participants could voice their opinions and thoughts with friends and colleagues (Parahoo, 2006).

### Sample and setting

This study took place in a University in the North West of England within a large nursing department. The groups that the study focused on were: the student representative committee (SRC); the Nurses' Day committee (NDC) and the magazine editorial team (MET). All of the groups were based within the School of Health and all the students were registered on pre-registration nursing courses. Extra-curricular group membership was not a compulsory requirement and students had a choice of which groups they join. The Student Union offered social groups but this study focused on three groups within the School of Health.

Students from the three different groups were sent letters inviting them to take part in the study. The letter included an information sheet fully explaining the purpose of the study and what their involvement would be. A purposive sample of four nursing students from each group was selected through a volunteer selection process. The students were all at various stages in their pre-registration nurse training. Eleven female and one male nursing student ( $N = 12$ ) participated. Those students who were receiving module supervision by the researchers for the assignment they were currently undertaking were excluded as it was felt it was necessary to maintain the boundaries that exist when providing support to students in such contexts and to ensure that participants were able to openly express their thoughts in the focus groups without any fear of reprisal. Eligibility criteria included being a member of at least one of the targeted groups and that they had been a member of the group for at least three months.

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