



Is it time to consider a four year Nursing Bachelor Degree in Australia? A discussion paper



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ABSTRACT

Background: The need for new graduate nurses to have the capabilities to function effectively in increasingly complex, dynamic and diverse health care settings has energised debate about the need for four year nursing degrees.

Questions: What types of four year bachelor degrees are evident globally and what are the key arguments and evidence suggesting a need for four year nursing degrees in Australia?

Methods: A scoping of contemporary literature is conducted to identify and discuss the key trends, concerns and evidence that informs the current debate on the appropriate duration of nursing degrees.

Findings: A unique combination of emerging health care challenges and shifting health care priorities are fuelling the call to reconsider the duration of nursing degrees in Australia.

Discussion: Future nurses will need the capabilities to work effectively across organisational and geographical boundaries, work as partners with a well-informed public, engage with advancing technologies and work autonomously and collaboratively as equals in inter-professional teams.

Conclusion: The need for nurse education to produce nurse graduates with key capability for the future, gives credence to a call for a four year nursing degree in Australia.

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1. Introduction

The need for new graduate nurses to have the capabilities to function effectively in increasingly complex, dynamic and diverse health care settings has fuelled debate about the appropriate length of undergraduate nursing degrees in Australia (Ralph, Burkes, Chapman, & Francis, 2014). There has been a worldwide move towards university bachelor degree education as a prerequisite for nursing practice (Australian Nursing & Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2012; Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2010) but the length of nursing degrees vary (World Health Organisation (WHO, 2009)). While three years is the most frequent duration, there is an international trend to move from three year to four year degrees (International Council of Nursing Education Network, 2013; Ralph et al., 2014). Research has demonstrated a relationship between four year baccalaureate nurses and better patient outcomes in the clinical setting (Aiken et al., 2014). Most other Australian health-care professionals including physiotherapists and podiatrists are required to undertake a four year degree as a prerequisite for practice, while nursing remains three years. There is however, a

groundswell of opinion from both industry and educational stakeholders calling for a four year bachelor degree in nursing.

2. Methods

2.1. Aim

In this paper we aim to examine key arguments and emerging evidence relevant to the debate on the appropriate duration of undergraduate nursing programs in Australia.

2.2. Questions

1. What type of four year bachelor of nursing programs are currently delivered globally?
2. What are the key arguments and evidence supporting a call to adopt a four year bachelor of nursing program in Australia?

2.3. Search strategy

Explicit search strategies were used to identify relevant publications across a range of data sources. Electronic databases CINAHL, ERIC, MEDLINE, and SCOPUS were searched using search terms 'nurse education', 'nursing program', 'undergraduate', 'four year course', 'extended course duration', 'differentiation between three

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Summary of relevance

Problem

There is increasing concern that three year nursing degrees are insufficient to produce graduates with the capabilities to meet future health care challenges.

What is already known

The debate concerning the duration of nursing degrees has a long history in Australia, however, a unique combination of challenges and future projections is energising interest in this debate.

What this paper adds

In this paper we map, discuss and synthesise the key arguments, concerns and evidence that inform the current debate on the appropriate duration of nursing degrees in Australia.

and four year programs' 'time spent studying', 'time to degree', and 'impact of extended course duration'. Medical Subject Headings (MeSH terms) and advanced search builder features were used to expand and narrow the search.

The initial search identified no papers reporting on the different outcomes associated with four year and three year undergraduate programs. Therefore, inclusion criteria were kept deliberately broad to enable the inclusion of papers that discussed or reported on variables relevant to the duration of undergraduate nursing programs. The search process was iterative and the initial search was followed by a hand search of reference lists, relevant organisation websites, and related policy publications. A narrative synthesis of included publications was undertaken to identify the range of four year bachelor of nursing programs currently delivered globally, and the key influencing factors that indicate a need for a four year bachelor of nursing program in Australia.

3. Discussion

3.1. Four year bachelor of nursing programs in Europe, USA, Canada and South Africa

3.1.1. Western Europe

Many developed countries in common with Australia, are debating the appropriate duration of nurse preparation programs in response to changing health contexts and future workforce needs (Robinson & Griffiths, 2007; Salminen et al., 2010; WHO, 2009). Western Europe, like Australia, is characterised by multiple educational pathways into two levels of nursing. Recent decades have seen significant reform to nurse education in Europe, firstly to integrate it into higher education, and secondly to harmonise nursing qualifications to facilitate the work migration of nurses across countries (Robinson & Griffiths, 2007; Salminen et al., 2010; WHO, 2009). The Tuning Project (2011) has sought to establish minimum reference points for the design and delivery of degree programs across Europe including nursing. All countries within the European Union (EU) are required to adhere to EU legislation (European Parliament, Council of the European Union Directive 2005/36/EC) which mandates a competency based curriculum and a minimum of 2300 h of theory and 2300 h of practice in all programs leading to initial registration as a nurse.

Despite this, variation remains in terms of pre-registration program structure, level, and duration, influenced in part by historical context and socio-economic factors within each country (Buscher, Sivertsen, & White, 2009). Bachelor programs of four year duration are prevalent in Greece, Iceland, The Republic of Ireland, Israel, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden, however curriculum structures vary considerably. The Netherlands, for example, has two levels of nurse, level five and level four, both of which undertake a four year preparatory program leading to the title of Registered Nurse. After the first two years of the undergradu-

ate program, students can opt for General Health Care nursing or Mental Health nursing. The qualification allows nurses to secure employment in any fields of practice (Robinson & Griffiths, 2007; Spitzer & Perrenoud, 2006). The Republic of Ireland in contrast, has a four year undergraduate program delivered within Higher Education, with four separate specialist exit qualifications (general nursing, children and general nursing integrated, intellectual disability nursing, and psychiatry). A fourth year of study incorporates a 36 week rostered placement during which students are paid 80% of a first year nurses salary. The internship period, retained within the undergraduate framework is intended to scaffold the transition to clinical practice (An Roinn Slainte Department of Health & Children, 2012; Robinson & Griffiths, 2007).

3.1.2. USA, Canada and South Africa

The United States has two levels of nurse, registered nurses (RN's), and licenced practical nurses (LPN's), and three pathways to registration undertaken at different types of educational providers. Two and three year programs are provided in community colleges and hospital schools of nursing, respectively. The university pathway to nurse registration is a four year baccalaureate (BSN) degree in general nursing. The first two years comprise of study in the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences, with the final two years focussing on nursing studies incorporating clinical placements (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2008). It is estimated that 42% of new registrants undertake the four year baccalaureate route, 54% of students enrol in the two year associate degree, and hospital based three year diploma programs, often considered to be less academic, accounts for 4% of nurses (Rich & Nugent, 2010). A two year diploma and four year baccalaureate degree, both of which lead to generalist nurse registration are available pathways to registration in Canada (College of Registered Nurses of British Columbia, 2016), while South Africa has an integrated four year nursing degree, consisting of generalist, psychiatric, community health, and midwifery practice (Bezuidenhout, Human, & Lekhuleni, 2013).

3.1.3. Historical context of the debate in Australia

The debate concerning the appropriate length of nursing degrees has a protracted history in Australia (Kenny, Carter, Martin, & Williams, 2004). A review of nursing education undertaken by Reid (1994) acknowledged a number of submissions from both universities and industry to increase the length of standard nursing degree programs to four years. It was reported at this time however that there was insufficient and inconclusive evidence to warrant a four year nursing degree.

The debate resurfaced in submissions to a Senate Inquiry (Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs, 2002) when it was stated that:

"The demand for intelligent, imaginative nurses capable of navigating and delivering a complex course of care cannot be overstated. Nurses are the largest part of the professional health workforce, and for them to do what is required of them today and in the future will take tremendous practical, organisational and technical abilities- skills of the highest order" (p.41).

The inquiry considered the duration of undergraduate courses with many contributors arguing that programs of study should be extended to four years, to allow a sufficient focus on specialty areas such as mental health and aged care, and enable students to be exposed to the expanding knowledge base for nursing. Some suggested that a fourth year of study could act as a paid internship with graduate programs incorporated in the undergraduate course. However, the committee considered that the increased cost to the Commonwealth Government deterred a recommendation that the undergraduate degree program should be increased to

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