



## Unravelling the complexities of nursing students' feedback on the clinical learning environment: A mixed methods approach



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** Clinical placement is an essential part of nursing education, and students' experiences on clinical placement can affect the quality of their learning. Understanding nursing students' positive and negative perceptions of clinical placement experience is therefore important.

**Objectives:** To describe nursing students' satisfaction with their clinical placement experiences and identify any variations in satisfaction based on demographic characteristics.

**Design:** Mixed methods – online survey with qualitative items.

**Setting:** Four universities in Australia.

**Participants:** Students ( $n = 213$ ) enrolled in an undergraduate nursing degree.

**Methods:** Between 2010 and 2012, students completed online surveys following their clinical placement experiences. The surveys included demographic questions and the Clinical Learning Environment Inventory (CLEI-19), a 19-item tool measuring students' satisfaction with clinical placement. The surveys included two open-ended questions asking students to share their most satisfying and challenging experiences whilst on placement. Descriptive statistics and thematic analyses were undertaken.

**Results:** Of the 213 participants, those in health-related employment and those with English as an additional language (EAL) were less satisfied with the clinical facility and with clinical facilitator support respectively, as indicated by the CLEI-19 subscale scores. Qualitative findings showed students were positive about the opportunity to make a difference and be involved in nursing, and negative about clinical facilitator support. Nevertheless, those who were most critical in their written comments about their placement were those who only spoke English at home.

**Conclusions:** Although the study found overall satisfaction with clinical placement, the lower satisfaction reported by students in health-related employment, and the mixed findings regarding language spoken and satisfaction, warrant further attention.

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### Introduction

Clinical experience is an essential learning activity and integral for the professional development of all undergraduate nursing students. As the recruitment of nursing students into higher education continues to escalate to meet the looming global mass exit of retiring nurses from the workforce (Aiken et al., 2009), the capacity for clinical placements to

meet this growing student demand is increasingly being challenged. Other factors also contributing to this demand–supply strain include the decreased numbers of hospital beds, a reluctance to accept more students due to the time and resources required to support them in an already overstretched nursing workforce environment, and a lack of qualified nurse preceptors (Barnett et al., 2008; Leners et al., 2006). It is therefore vital that the nursing education sector and undergraduate students maximise learning opportunities during clinical placements.

Two factors identified as key determinants of student satisfaction of clinical learning experience are quality clinical facilitator support and the available range of clinical learning opportunities (Courtney-Pratt et al., 2012; Lewin, 2007). Both of these dimensions are measured in a recently published abbreviated Clinical Learning Environment Inventory (CLEI-19) that assessed students' satisfaction with both clinical

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facilitators' support of learning and the clinical facility (Salamonson et al., 2011). Nevertheless, one of the limitations of a standardised scale is the inability to explicate explanations for participants' ratings. The addition of open-ended questions is likely to provide richer information, and perhaps insights into the rationales for students' ratings, as well as elaboration on the type of support (or lack thereof) students received from clinical facilitators and clinical staff, and information on student views of the quality of clinical placements (Agamy and Alhakim, 2013; Grebennikov and Shah, 2013).

## Background

Over the last decade, the widening participation agenda in higher education has been at the core of education policy in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, in an attempt to redress the educational inequality between social classes and under-represented minority groups (James, 2007; Jones and Thomas, 2005; Kettley, 2007). In Australian universities, the increasing number of nursing students brings an expanding diversity, including those for whom English is an additional language, as well as those who are spending a substantial amount of time participating in paid work whilst undertaking their nursing studies (Rochford et al., 2009; Salamonson et al., 2012).

Although a number of studies have explored the contribution of the clinical facility and supervisor to student satisfaction and quality of clinical placement (Courtney-Pratt et al., 2012; Henderson and Tyler, 2011; Lewin, 2007; Salamonson et al., 2011), few studies have explored how students' demographic characteristics may affect the perceived quality of clinical placements. This study is timely given the increasing diversity of students and the impact of differing demographics on learning styles, communication skills and interpersonal relationships. For instance, students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have been reported to have different learning styles to Australian-born, English speaking students (Chan, 2003). These students are more likely to employ didactic learning techniques, showing less appreciation for problem-based and participative learning; they are also less likely to question teachers or make appointments with them due to concepts of respect and maintaining face (Jeong et al., 2011). Clinical placements provide a unique and complex learning environment that is very different to the university classroom setting. This complexity challenges students to continue to learn whilst being in an unfamiliar environment. Therefore it is important to determine how diverse student groups perceive the quality of the complex clinical learning environment.

This study sought to explore students' perceptions of their clinical learning environment by combining quantitative survey results with students' comments to open-ended survey questions. In particular, the study sought to address the following research questions:

1. How satisfied are nursing students with their clinical placement, and what aspects of their clinical placement do they find most satisfying, and most challenging?
2. Are there any socio-demographic group differences in nursing students' feedback of their clinical facilitators and the clinical facility?

## Methods

Data presented in this paper are part of a larger study. Elsewhere, we have published findings in relation to nursing students' experiences of adversity and negative workplace cultures, and tested the psychometric properties of a revised instrument used to assess students' perception of their clinical learning environment (Jackson et al., 2011; Salamonson et al., 2011). This paper reports a later phase of this mixed method longitudinal study of the Clinical Experiences of Nursing Students (CENSUS) at four Australian universities.

## Participants

Students enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing (BN) programme within four Australian universities were invited to participate in this online survey. These students were informed about the study using flyers, information on course websites, and verbally in their on-campus class sessions. Following clinical placements, a reminder email was sent to all eligible students. Participation involved students completing an online survey about their experiences during their recent clinical placement. The survey comprised of demographic items, including language spoken, employment status, age and gender, as well as the 19-item Clinical Learning Environment Inventory (CLEI-19) and two open-ended questions (Salamonson et al., 2011). The two open-ended questions were:

- i) From your most recent clinical placement tell us what was the most challenging aspect of the clinical placement?
- ii) From your most recent clinical placement tell us what was the most satisfying aspect of the clinical placement?

## Clinical Learning Environment Inventory (CLEI-19)

The 19-item Clinical Learning Environment Inventory (CLEI-19) is a validated scale (Salamonson et al., 2011) derived from the 42-item CLEI developed by Chan (2002). The 19-items explore students' perceptions of their experience and are comprised of 7 items from the satisfaction domain, 7 items from the personalisation domain, and 5 items related to the clinical facilitator. Nine of the items are negatively worded and the remaining 10 are positively worded. The CLEI-19 uses a Likert scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) for each related statement. Consistent with Chan's (2002) scoring, omitted or invalid answers are scored as 3. The total scores on the CLEI-19 range between 19 and 95, with lower scores representing a less positive perception of the clinical learning environment.

## Validity, Reliability and Rigour

To enhance rigour in the qualitative data analysis, responses to the open-ended questions were studied independently by two researchers (JM & KP) and the key clusters of positive and negative comments of the two dimensions of the CLEI-19 identified. Differences in the coding and classification of key themes were discussed and resolved by consensus.

*Factorial Validity and Reliability of CLEI-19.* The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.91 suggesting that the correlation matrix of the CLEI-19 items was suitable for factor analysis. The scree plot indicated that the optimal number of factors to be extracted was two (eigenvalues of 8.6 and 2.9 respectively), accounting for 60.53% of total item variance. Using exploratory factor analysis procedure, principal component analysis with Varimax rotation yielded the same two-factor solution as that previously reported (Salamonson et al., 2011). Component loadings ranged from 0.56 to 0.79 for the 12-item 'Clinical Facilitator Support of Learning' dimension, and from 0.76 to 0.87 for the 7-item 'Satisfaction with Clinical Placement' dimension. Cronbach's alpha for the overall CLEI-19 was 0.92, 0.91 for the 'Clinical Facilitator Support of Learning' subscale, and 0.92 for the 'Satisfaction with Clinical Placement' subscale.

## Ethical Considerations

By submitting the survey responses, students accepted that they had read the study information sheet and consented to participate in the study. Students were clearly informed that their participation in the survey was both anonymous and voluntary. The conduct of the study was approved by each of the relevant University Human Research Ethics Committees.

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