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The accreditation of nursing education in Australia



Nicholas Ralph, RN, BN, MClinPrac, PhD Candidate^{a,*},
Melanie Birks, RN, PhD, MEd, BN, FACN^b,
Ysanne Chapman, RN, PhD, MSc (Hons),
BEd (Nsg), GDE, DNE, DRM, MACN^a

^a School of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences, Monash University, Clayton Campus, Australia

^b School of Nursing, Midwifery & Nutrition, James Cook University, Townsville Campus, Australia

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Summary This paper aims to explore and discuss the role that ANMAC and the accreditation standards play in pre-registration nursing education nationally. The context of the discussion is situated in the continuum of events that mark the accreditation of nursing education in Australia.

The National Registration and Accreditation Scheme has given rise to significant challenges related to the accreditation of nursing programs of education in Australia. Given the importance of accreditation to the quality of nursing education, ANMAC in its appointed role as accrediting authority, must fill the position rather than occupy it. Enhancing transparency and effectiveness is central to ensuring accreditation facilitates quality in nursing education. Given ANMAC's key position, further work is needed in developing a broad base of expertise by fostering scholarly output in the substantive area of nursing accreditation.

There is a concerning lack of research centred on the accreditation of programs of nursing education along with the processes associated with it. This problem is not restricted to the Australian context but also extends internationally. In this context, the expertise of accreditors ought to be questioned along with the processes ANMAC use to identify individual capability. As such, the selection of experts needs to be articulated clearly by ANMAC along with the ownership of introducing a research culture into accreditation.

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Introduction

The role of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) as the accrediting authority for nursing and midwifery programs of study is arguably the most

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 0403 844 305.
E-mail address: nicholas.ralph@monash.edu (N. Ralph).

crucial one in Australian healthcare education today. Immense challenges face the nursing profession both now and in the future. The present and intensifying nursing workforce shortage threatens to undermine the efficacy of healthcare delivery across the nation while issues related to national variances in curriculum are a presiding concern. Indeed, the quality of nursing education across the nation is such that urgent attention is needed to address long-standing challenges pertaining to curriculum relevance; student attrition; student satisfaction; teaching delivery and work readiness. The profession must plan for the future by moving in a meaningful direction at a time when huge increases in nursing enrolments are called for amid the intensifying debate around the nursing role and nursing education itself. As the accrediting authority, ANMAC acts as the nation's gatekeepers of nursing education. On a national scale, their role influences the quality of nursing curriculum design, nursing graduates and nursing care in Australia; factors that are tangible outputs of what is essentially a discreet process. In this paper, we explore and discuss the role that ANMAC and the accreditation standards play in pre-registration nursing education nationally.

From the ANMC to the ANMAC

Since the transition of Australian nursing education from hospital-based training to the higher education sector was completed in 1994 (AIHW, 2003) the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC) – itself established in 1992 – has worked alongside state and territory nursing and midwifery regulatory authorities (NMRAs) towards developing nursing and midwifery standards for Australia's healthcare requirements. The ANMC has a rich history in the continuum of nursing history as they have played a role in establishing the *National Competency Standards*; the *Code of Professional Conduct*; and the *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses and Midwives* (ANMC, 2009a); a document which would later inform the present day accreditation standards that underpin pre-registration nursing education in Australia. Over time, the ANMC contributed to nursing in Australia in a variety of roles with input into statutory nursing and midwifery regulation; national standards and accreditation frameworks; registration requirements; project management; policy advice and stakeholder negotiation, all while being cognisant of the tensions arising from different processes, legislation and emphases across the states and territories (ANMC, n.d.).

In 2004, the Council of Australian Governments (CoAG) engaged the Productivity Commission to report on and propose solutions to issues impacting on the health workforce to ensure the delivery of quality health care over the following 10 years (Productivity Commission, 2005). The resultant report entitled *Australia's health workforce* proposed the establishment of a single national registration board for all health workers on the basis that responsibility for policy direction, funding and delivery of education and training for Australia's health workforce was shared across a broad range of players (Productivity Commission, 2005). A key driver of this recommendation stemmed from a system that was seen as complex, poorly coordinated, and insufficiently responsive to changing needs and circumstances (Productivity

Commission, 2005). Following agreement in 2006 to forge ahead with this proposal, the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) was finally ratified in 2008 with the aim of bringing national cohesion and consistency to the registration and accreditation of health professionals and health curricula in Australia (CoAG, 2008). On 1 July 2010, the Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council (AHWMC) appointed the ANMC as the independent accrediting authority under the NRAS heralding the ANMC to change its name to the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) to reflect its role as the accrediting authority for nursing and midwifery programs of study. Its primary function as the accreditation authority for the nursing and midwifery professions is to ensure that programs leading to the registration of nurses in Australia meet the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia's (NMBA) approved standards for accreditation (ANMAC, 2011) (Fig. 1).

The resultant transition ushered in by the NRAS was marked by extraordinary dynamism as 85 health profession boards operating under 66 Acts of Parliaments were restructured under one registering authority – the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) – and one national board – in nursing's case, the NMBA – representing each of the nine professions signatory to the NRAS. While other health professions were already accredited by national authorities established well before the start of the NRAS in 2010, the accreditation of programs of study in nursing and midwifery was a responsibility which fell to the 6 State and 2 Territorial nursing and midwifery boards dotted across Australia. For ANMAC, having to commence as an accrediting authority in an environment marked by dynamism would place them in a position of extraordinary complexity. Under the NRAS, ANMAC became responsible – from 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2013 – for the accreditation of up to 480 programs of study across 160 education providers and distributed over two education sectors (higher education and vocational education and training [VET]). Compared to accreditation authorities in other health professions, the size of ANMAC's workload is monumental; all of which is compounded by having to work through the complexities and challenges that go with being a 'start up' organisation following a complete organisational restructure to better position itself as the chief accrediting body of nursing and midwifery programs in Australia (ANMAC, 2011).

Setting the standards

In this context – and under its new organisational structure – ANMAC employed the *National Accreditation Standards and Criteria for Registered Nurses*, developed in their former guise as the ANMC in 2009 (ANMC, 2009a; ANMAC, 2011). The creation of this document was underpinned by the *National Framework for the Accreditation of Nursing and Midwifery Courses Leading to Registration, Enrolment, Endorsement and Authorisation in Australia* originally established in 2007 to reflect the commitment of each of the NMRAs to a consistent and principled approach to this accreditation scheme (ANMC, 2007). Twelve principles underpinned the creation of the national framework and ultimately informed the development of accreditation standards, namely: legality; legitimacy; validity; efficiency;

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