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# Nursing students' experiences of clinical placement in community settings: A qualitative study



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## KEYWORDS

Nursing student;  
Nurse education;  
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## Summary

**Background:** Changing community demographics and the rising incidence of chronic and complex conditions has exacerbated the primary care workload. Encouraging beginning nurses to view primary care nursing as a viable career option will help alleviate the workforce stress of this specialty. Whilst higher education institutions (HEI's) have increased the exposure of pre-registration nurses to community settings, there has been limited exploration of this experience from the perspective of pre-registration nurses. As potential key service providers, it is important to identify factors which influence how pre-registration nurses view primary care placements in the community.

**Aim:** This study seeks to explore the experiences of pre-registration nursing students following community based clinical placements and to explore the impact of this placement on their learning.

**Design:** A qualitative design was employed in this study.

**Participants:** Nine pre-registration nursing students were recruited from a research intensive single campus of an Australian university.

**Methods:** In-depth semi-structured interviews.

**Findings:** Findings are presented in the following four themes: (1) autonomy in practice: "you make your own decisions", (2) working with highly skilled nurses: "their knowledge was just incredible", (3) focusing on holistic care: "they'd obviously built rapport with these people", and (4) showing genuine interest in educating students: "they got me involved".

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*Conclusion:* Exposure to community settings was a positive learning experience for pre-registration nursing students. Further research needs to focus on the impact of these placements on both clinical skills acquisition and job choices into the future.

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## 1. Introduction

Internationally, primary health care needs have increased exponentially, largely due to increased life expectancy but also due to the rising burden of complex and chronic disease. This substantially increases demands on the existing primary health care workforce and poses significant challenges in providing greater numbers of skilled primary health care professionals to service this demand (International Council of Nurses, 2007).

Nursing education is now predominately undertaken within higher education institutions through either baccalaureate (undergraduate) or graduate entry pre-registration courses. A key component of this pre-registration nurse education is clinical placement experience. Placements provide an opportunity for students to be socialised into the health system, practice clinical skills in a real-life setting and observe the delivery of care by others. Despite the obvious benefits of placements for students, poor relationships with the supervising nurse, environments that fail to promote belongingness and a lack of supervision/support have been demonstrated to be strongly associated with elevated stress and anxiety, a poorer learning experience and increased attrition from nursing programmes (Andrews et al., 2006; Courtney-Pratt, FitzGerald, Ford, Marsden, & Marlow, 2012; Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins, & McMillan, 2009; Warne et al., 2010). Conversely, there is significant evidence that high quality placements which make the student feel welcome and supported can influence career choices following registration as a nurse (Happell, 1999; McKenna, McCall, & Wray, 2010). In order to promote primary health care as a career choice it is important to understand the experience of pre-registration students in these settings during clinical placement.

## 2. Background

Much of the contemporary clinical placement literature focusses on placements in acute care settings (Björk, Berntsen, Brynildsen, & Hestetun, 2014). This reflects the continuing predominance of acute care placements within contemporary nursing education (Health Workforce Australia, 2013b). However, two key factors are impacting on clinical education into the future. Firstly, there are insufficient numbers of acute care placements for pre-registration students in many regions. Secondly, there is growing recognition that pre-registration students need to be exposed to clinical practice in primary health care. These two factors are combining to increase interest in clinical placements in primary health care settings (Halcomb, Peters, & McInnes, 2012; Peters, Halcomb, & McInnes, 2013).

In their investigation of the preparedness of English novice nurses to work in primary care settings, Ali et al.

(2011) found that whilst some primary care nurses perceived novice nurses to be well prepared, others were felt to be unprepared for work in primary care settings. Similarly, in their investigation of Australian nursing curricula, Keleher, Parker, and Francis (2010) identified that the preparation of students in Australia for employment in primary care settings was “patchy and not keeping pace with reform agendas that promote expanded roles for nurses in primary health care, prevention and health promotion” (p. 211).

In addition to the attention required to the curriculum to enhance preparation of new graduates for employment in primary care, consideration also needs to be given to the quality of and satisfaction with clinical placement opportunities. There is an increasing body of evidence around clinical placement in Australian general practice (Halcomb et al., 2012; Peters et al., 2013). These papers highlight the potential of general practice as a viable placement opportunity, but also identify some of the challenges of placement in this setting. Whilst this provides important insights into clinical placement of nursing students in general practice, primary health care is more diverse and includes a range of settings including schools, community services, Aboriginal Medical Centers, and Ambulatory Care settings (Adrian, 2009). Exploration of the student experience in these broader community settings is essential to understanding their impact on clinical learning. Therefore, this paper reports a study of pre-registration nursing students’ experiences of community based clinical placements to explore the impact of this placement on their learning.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Research design

This study used telephone interviews to gather experiential narratives of pre-registration nursing students who completed a clinical placement in an Australian community setting. A descriptive qualitative approach was selected in order to facilitate in-depth exploration of the experiences.

### 3.2. Recruitment and data collection

Participants were recruited from the graduate entry and combined degree Master of Nursing course at a single campus Australian university. Students who had undertaken a community-based clinical placement were identified by the clinical placement team and provided with information about the study. The researcher contacted interested students to provide them with additional information about the study and a consent form. A mutually convenient time was arranged to conduct the interview. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions relating

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