



## Barriers and enablers to retention of Aboriginal Diploma of Nursing students in Western Australia: An exploratory descriptive study



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Nursing education appropriate to the learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is essential to prepare them for registration as nurses. Despite incentives to encourage the recruitment and retention of such students, a disproportionate number commence but do not finish their nursing studies.

**Objectives:** To describe the barriers and enablers to the retention of Aboriginal students in a Diploma of Nursing course (Enrolled/Division 2) in Western Australia.

**Design:** An exploratory descriptive design was used.

**Settings:** One metropolitan educational facility catering for Aboriginal people offering an 18-month course in a block release format.

**Participants:** A convenience sample of 16 students aged 18+ years.

**Methods:** Newly enrolled students (n = 10) participated in an investigator-developed survey to explore their motivation for entering the course. Nine of these students and a further seven students who were nearing the end of their course participated in focus groups to explore their experiences of nursing education.

**Results:** Survey respondents had a mean age of 32.7 years; most were female, had nominated family as influential in the decision to enroll, and commenced with a friend. Regarding recruitment and retention, the qualitative data highlighted the importance of students' perceptions of the training organisation, characteristics, experiences of nursing education, and sources of support.

**Conclusions:** Strategies that develop individual's resilience and engage supportive networks can assist Aboriginal students to negotiate tertiary nursing study. Academic skills assessments supplemented with tailored educational support at entry can resource students to navigate increasingly complex course content. Flexibility throughout the course enables students to negotiate study in a context of ongoing family and financial obligations.

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## 1. Introduction

The employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses in health care is considered important to facilitate their peoples' utilisation of health services. Nursing education appropriate to the learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is essential to prepare them for registration as nurses. Nationally, a disproportionate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students commence but do not complete nursing courses (Behrendt et al., 2012). This situation has implications for the students, education providers, and health services. Therefore, it is important to identify those factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to persist in nursing studies.

## 2. Background

The health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are reflected in a reduced life expectancy, the prevalence of chronic diseases and mortality related to trauma (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). A concomitant lack of appropriate health care makes their participation in the workforce a priority; however, the shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses in the workforce persists (Dudgeon et al., 2014). While the recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into nursing education has been increasing, the latest figures show that completion rates remain low (Behrendt et al., 2012). High attrition rates persist in both the higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors (Behrendt et al., 2012; Government of Western Australia, 2011). In 2002, the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses (CATSIN) established the Indigenous Nursing Education Working Group (INEWG). The INEWG reported on the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres

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Strait Islander nurses and significant barriers confronting students undertaking nursing studies (Goold et al., 2002). The most frequent difficulties were a lack of support, the precedence of family obligations, inadequate preparation, cultural insensitivity, limited relevant health content in courses, prejudice, and stereotyping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Incentives to encourage student recruitment and retention have focussed on financial assistance and tailored academic support (Usher et al., 2005). Such schemes, however, are not available in the VET sector where courses leading to Enrolled Nurse (EN) registration are conducted. The introduction of a pre-entry nursing course in Queensland, saw a greater proportion of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students persist in their studies (West et al., 2011). This intensive course was characterised by provision of comprehensive support, including tailored literacy and numeracy skill development, and flexible exit points. Of the 38 enrolled students, 26 (68%) completed the course; 22 of these students proceeded to further nursing studies, most to a university bachelor's degree. Educational institutions, such as Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory, have introduced culturally-relevant content in the nursing curriculum (Hinton and Chirgwin, 2010). However, the contribution of such nursing education models to the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in nursing, particularly in the VET sector, however, has not been well studied (Nakata et al., 2008).

When referring to the Western Australian (WA) context we follow the Department of Health's (2013) directive, which states: "Within Western Australia, the term Aboriginal is used in preference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Western Australia. No disrespect is intended to our Torres Strait Islander colleagues and community." In WA, a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), governed and managed by Aboriginal people and tailored exclusively to the learning needs of Aboriginal students, offers a Diploma of Nursing course. From 2007 to 2011, 56% of students enrolled in this course withdrew (M. Robinson, personal communication, 2012, Oct. 9). WA's *Aboriginal Nursing and Midwifery Strategic Plan 2011–2015* emphasised the need for projects to improve the education of, and models of practice for, Aboriginal nurses, and improved health care for Aboriginal peoples (Nursing and Midwifery Office, 2012). Within this context, the student's ability to pursue and complete a nursing education course is fundamental.

### 3. Aim

This paper aims to describe the barriers and enablers to the retention of Aboriginal students in a Diploma of Nursing (Enrolled/Division 2) course conducted in the WA VET sector.

### 4. Method

An exploratory descriptive design was used to investigate Aboriginal students' experiences of a Diploma of Nursing course conducted by an RTO based in metropolitan Perth, WA. The 18-month course, which had an annual state-wide intake, comprised 26 units in a block-release format. A convenience sample of EN students aged 18+ years from the 2011 and 2012 cohorts was recruited between March 2012 and January 2013. An investigator-developed survey inquired about the students' background and motivation for enrolling. Two focus groups then explored students' experiences of studying at the RTO. The survey was developed with input from researchers, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics, and piloted with several students from an earlier cohort. Key informant staff participated in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews about factors thought to affect student outcomes.

#### 4.1. Ethical Considerations

Study approval was obtained from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 376-12/2011) and the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 7531). Participation in the study was voluntary. The Nurse Mentor, an Aboriginal registered nurse employed by the RTO and a member of the research team, provided students with verbal and written information about the study. An Aboriginal person, either an external academic or a non-academic staff member invited students' participation and co-facilitated survey administration and the focus groups with an experienced qualitative researcher from the University. Completed questionnaire return was considered implied consent. Focus group participants provided written informed consent before data collection. A University researcher recruited RTO staff for key informant interviews. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed; to protect participants' identities, identifying information was removed and transcripts coded.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0 (IBM® Corporation, 2012, Armonk, NY) was used for quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics. All interview transcripts were analyzed independently by two experienced qualitative researchers. Keywords and phrases were coded and grouped into categories from which themes were identified (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The researchers compared their coding and any differences of interpretation were resolved.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Participant Demographics

Ten Aboriginal EN students completed the recruitment survey within two months of commencing the program. The mean age of these students was 32.7 years and most ( $n = 7$ ) were female. Their education level at entry ranged from year 7–12 of secondary schooling; most had completed year 10. All EN students ( $N = 16$ ) present on the day that focus groups were held participated. The mean age of focus group participants was 32.4 years and most ( $n = 12$ ) were female. Five RTO staff were interviewed, three educators and two administrators/managers. Most ( $n = 4$ ) had a Bachelor Degree.

Three-quarters of students surveyed nominated family as most influencing their decision to enroll, and almost half (44%) commenced with friends. The most commonly reported anticipated barriers to completion were: academic difficulty, financial problems, travel, and absence from family.

Regarding recruitment and retention, the qualitative data highlighted students': perceptions of the training organisation, characteristics, experiences of nursing education, and sources of support. These themes and associated concepts are shown in Fig. 1.

### 5.2. Student Perceptions of the RTO

Students perceived the RTO as a unique opportunity for Aboriginal students as it was a culturally safe environment with course content and delivery tailored to their educational needs. The RTO was referred to as a 'bridge' for students to become educationally prepared as ENs. Despite social and educational disadvantages and cultural variations within and between Aboriginal people and others, the staff contributed to a positive learning experience: "Aboriginal people are a society within a society and they do things differently ... A student said to me, 'You are a bridge ... [and the organisation] is a bridge'" (Staff Informant 4).

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