



## Identifying student knowledge and perception of what is valuable to professional practice: A mixed method study



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** Bachelor of Nursing programmes are designed to prepare Registered Nurses for professional practice. The Bachelor of Nursing curriculum under discussion was shaped by the conceptual framework of primary health care philosophy, including themes of social justice, Indigenous health, caring philosophy, and the advancement of the discipline through research, scholarship and application of nursing knowledge and evidence-based practice.

**Objectives:** This study was designed to identify what students and graduates found valuable in a Bachelor of Nursing curriculum conceptual framework and what value they placed on a conceptual framework and underpinning themes.

**Design:** A small study was designed to identify the student perceptions of themes which may be valuable to the new curriculum of the Bachelor of Nursing. A mixed methodology was selected as being appropriate to allow students to indicate the value that previous and completing students placed on each of these items and to explore their perceptions.

**Settings:** The setting for this small study was a regional university in NSW, Australia.

**Participants:** Previous and completing (final year) students were invited to complete the online survey and any who were willing to be interviewed were asked to provide their contact details.

**Methods:** The research was conducted via a questionnaire through Survey Monkey, using a Likert scale and open responses and follow up interviews were conducted with willing participants.

**Results:** A total of 128 responses to the survey were received and ten were interviewed. Overall responses were positive. Students were aware of and valued all aspects of the current and proposed conceptual framework. There were some themes; however which were better understood than others.

**Conclusions:** The majority of graduated students indicated that they were well prepared for the workforce. All aspects of the conceptual framework of the curriculum were valued by the majority of students.

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### Introduction

When reviewing a curriculum a great deal of discussion takes place about what to include and what can be removed. Many stakeholders have different opinions about the value of some aspects over others and decisions cannot possibly reflect everyone's opinion equally. However, there is a great deal of value in obtaining those opinions. Graduates

are unique in their understanding of current courses and how well it has prepared them for practice. For that reason this study sought their opinions on conceptual frameworks and underpinning themes and their value in structuring a nursing curriculum. Final year students were also involved due to their insight into how well prepared they felt for practice.

### Background/Literature

The review of the current Bachelor of Nursing included an appraisal of the underlying conceptual framework which subsequently led to queries about student involvement and interest in a conceptual framework and underpinning themes. Literature related to nursing education

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demonstrates an ongoing interest in and discussion about which conceptual frameworks are most useful to student learning (Benner et al., 2010; D'Antonio et al., 2013; Martyn et al., 2014).

In these discussions the 'voices' of several groups are heard clearly, including policy makers and lecturers. Student voices, however, are not always so clear. Salyers et al. (2010), describe an evaluation of a pedagogical framework which was used to structure a nursing curriculum and found that both students and academic staff benefit from a framework which reflects the general thinking and learning processes of the discipline. McIntosh et al. (2013, p. 1183) suggest "involving students more deeply in curriculum design, thereby giving them a stake in defining the essential components" of the course. Kumm and Fletcher (2012) in discussing the design of a new bachelor of nursing curriculum do not mention students as stakeholders in the process of designing a new curriculum and although D'Antonio et al. (2013) discuss the value of internal stakeholders (including students) in curriculum design they do not describe students being involved in the undergraduate curriculum renewal process.

Naturally most universities survey student satisfaction and perceptions about their courses (Adams and Shearer, 2012). Student feedback has been used to evaluate learning and satisfaction in the clinical environment (Henderson et al., 2012; Loewenson and Hunt, 2011; O'Mara et al., 2014; Papastavrou et al., 2010; Papathanasiou et al., 2014; Roxburgh, 2014; Skaalvik et al., 2011; Sundler et al., 2014) and some literature which relates to preparation for practice examining undergraduate and graduate satisfaction with models of clinical learning and preparation for practice (Hickey, 2010; Milton-Willey et al., 2014). Other literature relates to evaluation of programmes for nursing students undertaking international experiences (Kulbok et al., 2012), but this does not give them a voice in the conceptual structure of course design.

There is also literature around student perception of problem based learning (Cooper and Carver, 2012; Rowan et al., 2009) learning statistics (Hagen et al., 2013) and an increasing focus on simulation (Kelly and Fry, 2013; Reid-Searl et al., 2011) and blended and online learning (Gaudet et al., 2014; Hodges and Cowan, 2012; Lee et al., 2011; Smyth et al., 2012). This literature around nursing education and clinical learning experiences was found across global sources.

## Methods

This study took place at a regional university in New South Wales, Australia. The university has close to 40,000 students in total and approximately 1500 are enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing. Less than 10% of nursing students come from non-English speaking backgrounds, over 50% are studying part-time and over 50% are mature age students (Charles Sturt University, 2015).

A mixed methodology study was implemented to measure the value that previous and completing students placed on different aspects of the current and proposed conceptual framework and underpinning themes and to allow the researchers to explore these results in greater depth. Ethics approval was granted through the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Indigenous Health Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: 409/2013/04). Links to a survey were emailed to all students who had graduated from the course in the previous 2 years ( $n = 491$ ) and to current students ( $n = 256$ ) from a regional university in NSW, Australia. In total the response rate was 23% ( $n = 111$ ) graduates and 7% ( $n = 17$ ) current students. The survey used a Likert scale and open responses. Participants who were willing to be interviewed were asked to provide their contact details. A purposive sample of those students who indicated a willingness to be interviewed was then contacted. This sample was representative of age, gender and metropolitan/rural areas. Ten interviews were conducted of approximately 1 hour each, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. These were then thematically analysed by a different team member to the interviewer and the themes that emerged were checked by the researcher who conducted the interview. In order to maintain their

confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms and although two males were interviewed, they were also given female pseudonyms.

## Results

A total of 128 responses were received, 111 (86.7%) from previous graduates and 17 (13.3%) from current final year students. Most of the respondents were female (91.4%) which is consistent with gender percentages within the course. Respondents represented fairly evenly those between 19–25 years of age (25.6%), 26–35 years of age (27.1%) and 46–55 years of age (32%). The overwhelming majority of graduate participants were working in the health industry and 95.5% in nursing (the survey included double degree graduates, who may have sought work in other areas). On completion of their degree, 61.2% felt that they were prepared and a further 12.6% felt that they were very prepared for practice. Graduate and student participants were asked about the relevance of current and proposed central themes of the curriculum to their current or future practice. Most graduates were positive about the value of these themes as can be seen in Fig. 1, indicating that current and proposed themes of the curriculum framework were applicable to their practice. These responses are all supportive of the proposed curriculum framework and underpinning themes.

Students and graduates were asked to indicate their recognition of the presence of the five themes of the conceptual framework of the current curriculum: Evidence-based practice, person-centred care, primary health care, social justice, and Indigenous health. They were then asked whether the proposed additional themes – cultural competence, strengths based nursing, clinical reasoning and ethical comportment – would be valuable additions to the new curriculum. The responses of 'agree' or 'strongly agree' are summarised in the following chart, showing responses from graduates and students. As can be seen in the chart, all themes were reasonably equally valued.

It was gratifying that these participants did recognise the existence of the conceptual framework and underpinning themes in the curriculum and its application for practice. The focus of the interviews with the participants was around the major themes of the conceptual framework of the current Bachelor of Nursing and the proposed themes of the revised Bachelor of Nursing course. An understanding of the themes that were present in the current curriculum was highlighted in the results. An understanding of three of the proposed themes, strengths based nursing, cultural competence and ethical comportment, was less evident. The themes that were discussed were the value of the conceptual framework; evidence based practice, primary health care, clinical reasoning, person centred care; social justice, Indigenous health, strengths based nursing, cultural competence and ethical comportment.

### Value of Conceptual Framework

All participants in interviews identified the conceptual framework and underpinning themes as being very important. It was seen to offer cohesiveness to the curriculum and to instil overall values within it. Participants confirmed the need to have identified frameworks for curricula and were pleased to have been asked for their opinion about them. Participants stated that it was:

*I think it's absolutely critical, absolutely critical that there is an overarching framework that everyone is working from.*

[Toni]

Whilst recognising its value, participants also suggested how a conceptual framework acts:

*It helps to guide us, I think, without one in our course, there are some people who would not actually follow the standards that are set and I think that the nursing board having seen this has also helped to guide our subject and objective delivery and to see that we learn what we need to.*

[Michelle]

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