



## 'Ready to hit the ground running': Alumni and employer accounts of a unique part-time distance learning pre-registration nurse education programme



Jan Draper\*, Ruth Beretta, Linda Kenward, Lin McDonagh, Julie Messenger, Jill Rounce

The Open University, Faculty of Health & Social Care, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, United Kingdom

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### SUMMARY

*Background:* This study explored the impact of The Open University's (OU) preregistration nursing programme on students' employability, career progression and its contribution to developing the nursing workforce across the United Kingdom. Designed for healthcare support workers who are sponsored by their employers, the programme is the only part-time supported open/distance learning programme in the UK leading to registration as a nurse. The international literature reveals that relatively little is known about the impact of previous experience as a healthcare support worker on the experience of transition, employability skills and career progression. *Objectives:* To identify alumni and employer views of the perceived impact of the programme on employability, career progression and workforce development.

*Design/method:* A qualitative design using telephone interviews which were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim prior to content analysis to identify recurrent themes.

*Settings:* Three geographical areas across the UK.

*Participants:* Alumni (n = 17) and employers (n = 7). Inclusion criterion for alumni was a minimum of two years' post-qualifying experience. Inclusion criteria for employers were those that had responsibility for sponsoring students on the programme and employing them as newly qualified nurses.

*Results:* Four overarching themes were identified: transition, expectations, learning for and in practice, and flexibility.

*Conclusions:* Alumni and employers were of the view that the programme equipped them well to meet the competencies and expectations of being a newly qualified nurse. It provided employers with a flexible route to growing their own workforce and alumni the opportunity to achieve their ambition of becoming a qualified nurse when other more conventional routes would not have been open to them. Some of them had already demonstrated career progression. Generalising results requires caution due to the small, self-selecting sample but findings suggest that a widening participation model of pre-registration nurse education for employed healthcare support workers more than adequately prepares them for the realities of professional practice.

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### Introduction

This study explored the impact of The Open University's<sup>1</sup> (OU) pre-registration nursing programme (PRNP) on students' employability, career progression and its contribution to developing the nursing workforce across the United Kingdom (UK). The PRNP is the only part-time supported open/distance learning programme in the UK leading to registration as a nurse. First approved by the Nursing and Midwifery

Council (NMC) (the UK regulatory body for nursing and midwifery) in 2002, over 1000 students have successfully completed the four year programme and registered as either adult or mental health nurses. Purposefully designed for healthcare support workers (HCSWs) sponsored by their employers, the programme promotes widening participation in higher education (HE) and enables employers to invest in and develop their support workforce. Partnership working between the university, employers and education commissioners is crucial to its success.

The project is timely in relation to UK policy across both the HE and health sectors. In HE, there is emphasis on widening participation (HEFCE, 2010), employability and flexible approaches to learning, including eLearning (JISC, 2008) and open supported learning. In the health sector, and following the publication in England of a number of reports into poor standards of nursing care (Francis, 2013; Keogh,

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: + 1 908 652461.

E-mail address: [jan.draper@open.ac.uk](mailto:jan.draper@open.ac.uk) (J. Draper).

<sup>1</sup> The Open University is a UK-wide university with an international reputation for supported open/distance learning and is founded on a commitment to widening access to higher education.

2013), the education of nurses (RCN, 2012) and support workers (Cavendish, 2013) has come under increasing scrutiny. This has led to a range of initiatives such as national minimum training for HCSWs (Skills for Care/Health, 2013) and pilots of exposure to clinical practice for aspiring pre-registration nursing students (DH, 2103).

In this context the project explored the perceived impact of the OU's unique approach to pre-registration nurse education with particular reference to employability, career progression and workforce development, issues that also have wider international relevance.

## Background/literature

A literature search identified relevant international research. Databases searched were ASSIA, CINAHL and Medline supplemented by searches of a number of journals including *Nurse Education Today*, *Nurse Education in Practice*, *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* and the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*. Search terms included 'practice readiness', 'fitness to practise', 'employ nurse qualification', 'promotion' and 'grow staff'. The search identified 37 relevant papers although few studies specifically investigated the experiences of student nurses who were also employed and sponsored HCSWs. Although relatively little is therefore known about the impact of previous experience as a HCSW on the experience of transition, employability skills and career progression, it was possible to identify a number of more general themes.

### Transition to Newly Qualified Nurse

The first theme refers to the experience of the transition to newly qualified nurse (NQN) (Brennan and McSherry, 2007; Mooney, 2007; Newton and McKenna, 2007; Draper et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2012). Reference was frequently made to 'the reality shock' (Kramer, 1974) or being 'in at the deep end' (Draper et al., 2010) where participants reported increasing anxiety associated with the recognition of their accountability as NQNs. They expressed feeling overwhelmed and, in many instances, ill-prepared to move to NQN roles. Increasing research interest in this transition to NQN in general has led to the development of theoretical frameworks to better understand the nature of the transition (see for example, Duchscher, 2008, 2009). However, there is comparatively little evidence concerning the impact of previous employment as a HCSW on this transition. The limited research available indicates that familiarity with the practice setting (Hasson et al., 2013) eases the transition to NQN (Kenny et al., 2012), enhances decision-making skills and team working (Phillips et al., 2012) and promotes the development of emotional resilience (Brigham and Smith, 2008).

### Fitness to Practise

A second theme concerns the competence of practitioners at the point of registration and there are conflicting views regarding the impact of previous employment experience on students' fitness to practise.

Drawing on another practice-based discipline, an evaluative case study of 36 employment-based social work students (Dunworth, 2007) found that these students had improved knowledge, better social worker skills and demonstrated more reflective practice than traditional social work students. Dunworth (2007) suggests that practice-based learning means practitioners are aware of the complexities of practice and are able to understand and demonstrate confidence in their professional roles.

These findings resonate with those of Phillips et al. (2012) who reviewed students engaged in paid employment in the final year of their undergraduate nursing studies in Australia. Their findings illustrate that, apart from the financial independence associated with employment, participants demonstrated increasing autonomy,

confidence and ease of transition to their registered nurse role. In contrast, Rochford et al. (2009) highlighted the challenges faced by full-time nursing students also engaged in part-time employment, including the negative impact on achievement and performance.

### Practitioner Expectations

The final theme addresses 'practice readiness' and highlights concerns of potential gaps in the readiness of new graduates (Romyn et al., 2009; Wolff et al., 2010). The tension between the urgent needs of service and the time necessary for graduates to make the transition to the role of NQN is widely acknowledged. Wolff et al. (2010) argue that this is a 'key concern of nurses in education, practice and regulatory sectors' and that 'a rapidly changing, ever more complex, healthcare system has contributed to ongoing tensions about the preparation of registered nurses' (p. 187).

The expectation of nurses being 'fit for practise' and able to practise independently and competently is a key theme in the literature (Clark and Holmes, 2007; Danbjorg and Birkelund, 2011; Holland et al., 2010). Although findings differ in the extent to which programmes prepare students to be fit for practise, each identify the importance of support in the period immediately following registration to aid transition and enable growth into the role.

For example, Swallow et al. (2007) reported that students (n = 20) who were both HCSWs and pre-registration nursing students used their familiarity with the workplace to effectively explore practice issues and implement change. These students reflected that they 'had become more assertive and questioning, more disciplined in relation to time management, increasingly independent as learners and very proud of their own development' (p. 144). These attributes are valued by employers and the recognition that such students understand the pressures of practice and their employment setting could easily result in employers believing that such students add extra value to the workforce. However, being both a HCSW and student can present challenges including role confusion (Thomas et al., 2012), replication of learning (Hasson et al., 2013) and lack of recognition of their learning needs (Hasson et al., 2013).

## Methods

Given the OU's unique approach to practice-based professional learning in nursing, the overarching aim of this project was to identify the perceived impact of the PRNP with reference to employability, career progression and workforce development. Funded internally, the objectives of the project were to:

- Examine alumni and employer experiences of the programme
- Investigate perspectives on how the programme prepares students to be fit for practise at the point of registration
- Identify career progression trajectories following completion
- Examine employer views on the contribution of the PRNP to workforce development
- Feedback findings into future programme developments to benefit all stakeholders.

### Recruitment and Selection

Ethical approval was granted by the university and the ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent were upheld throughout the study. Signed consent was obtained and participants reassured that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. The intention was to identify a sample of approximately 50 interviewees (two thirds alumni and one third employers). Inclusion criteria for alumni were a) previous nursing students of the OU PRNP with b) a minimum of two years' post-qualification experience. Inclusion criteria

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