



Opportunity lost? The major in mental health nursing in Australia



Brenda Happell^{a,b,c,1}, Margaret McAllister^{d,e,f,2}, Cadeyrn J. Gaskin^{g,h,i,j}

^a Central Queensland University, Institute for Health and Social Science Research, Bruce Hwy, Rockhampton, Queensland 4702, Australia

^b Central Queensland University, Centre for Mental Health Nursing Innovation, Bruce Hwy, Rockhampton, Queensland 4702, Australia

^c Central Queensland University, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Bruce Hwy, Rockhampton, Queensland 4702, Australia

^d Central Queensland University, Institute for Health and Social Science Research, 90 Goodchap Street, Noosaville 4566, Queensland, Australia

^e Central Queensland University, Centre for Mental Health Nursing Innovation, 90 Goodchap Street, Noosaville 4566, Queensland, Australia

^f Central Queensland University, School of Nursing and Midwifery, 90 Goodchap Street, Noosaville 4566, Queensland, Australia

^g Central Queensland University, Institute for Health and Social Science Research, Australia

^h Central Queensland University, Centre for Mental Health Nursing Innovation, Australia

ⁱ Central Queensland University, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Australia

^j Gaskin Research, Australia

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SUMMARY

Background: The ongoing difficulty in educating and sustaining an adequate nursing workforce in mental health settings has been identified throughout the world. Different strategies have been implemented internationally to deal with this situation. In Australia major streams in mental health nursing were introduced in some Australian universities to promote mental health nursing as a viable career choice for nursing students. Fourteen universities had implemented or planned to implement a major stream in mental health nursing. From a survey of these programs a lack of consistency in the structure and content of programs was evident. For most programs the intakes had been relatively small, although retention rates appeared promising.

Objectives: To determine the extent majors in mental health nursing introduced in Australia have been sustained since their implementation.

Design: Cross-sectional design. A survey instrument used in 2010 was readministered in 2013.

Setting: Schools of Nursing in Australia where a major in mental health nursing had been implemented or planned.

Participants: Subject and program coordinators.

Methods: The survey was administered via email.

Results: Of the 14 majors in mental health nursing originally proposed or implemented, only five were remaining, three had never commenced the program despite plans to do so and six programs once operating had now ceased. Numbers of students undertaking the program have tended to be small. Few modification changes in the structure and content in the majors since initial implementation were reported.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that the major in mental health nursing has not been a successful or sustainable strategy, and therefore is unlikely to contribute positively to strengthening the mental health nursing workforce. The availability of sufficient graduate nurses with the interest and skills to pursue a career in mental health nursing is becoming urgent. The adequate resourcing of strategies to address this issue needs to be considered as a matter of priority.

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Introduction

Internationally, the mental health nursing workforce has been described as being in crisis (Hanrahan et al., 2003; Nadler-Moodie and Loucks, 2011; Whitehead et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2005; O'Connell, 2003). In Australia, the ongoing difficulties in producing sufficient graduates for nursing practice in mental health settings have been consistently identified through government inquiries and research

literature (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012; Happell, 2008b; National Health Workforce Taskforce, 2009; Roche and Duffield, 2007; Gough and Happell, 2007; Stevens et al., 2013). Difficulties in recruiting sufficient graduate nurses into mental health settings have been largely attributed to the inadequacy of the theoretical and clinical mental health nursing component within undergraduate nursing curricula (McCann et al., 2009; Warelow and Edward, 2009; Happell and Cutcliffe, 2011; Clinton, 2001; Stuhlmiller, 2005). There is now a large body of research literature, demonstrating that nursing students tend not to view mental health nursing as a desirable area for practice following graduation (Happell and Gaskin, 2013; Stevens et al., 2013; Surgenor et al., 2005; Rushworth and Happell, 2000). Although awareness of these issues has been ongoing, enhancements

E-mail addresses: b.happell@cqu.edu.au (B. Happell), M.mcallister@cqu.edu.au

(M. McAllister), drcade@gmail.com (C.J. Gaskin).

¹ Tel.: +61 7 49232164; fax: +61 7 49306402.

² Tel.: +61 754407082.

in the mental health nursing component of undergraduate nurse education have generally been minimal, limited in scope, and generally not sustained over time (Happell, 2010).

The Mental Health Nursing Education Taskforce (MHNET) was established in Australia in recognition of these prevailing problems (Stevens et al., 2013) and the need to develop solutions. The final report presented several recommendations to strengthen mental health nursing within undergraduate curricula, with the ultimate goal to impact positively on the mental health nursing workforce. One suggested approach to improving the interest and readiness of graduate nurses for practice in mental health was to create majors in mental health within undergraduate nursing degrees. This recommendation led to the Commonwealth and one State Government providing funding for, and the implementation of, majors in mental health nursing (Kenny et al., 2009).

The term major (as used in this paper) refers to the inclusion of content in a specific area (in this case mental health nursing), additional to the core content all students must cover. The additional mental health content allows students with an interest in this area to increase their knowledge and skill in this field to prepare them for practice and hopefully further stimulate their interest in a career in mental health nursing.

A study of majors in mental health nursing that was undertaken in 2010 found that 14 universities had proposed or were offering a major stream at that time. Nursing student enrolment in these majors was modest, however; between 5 and 30 students were typically enrolled in each of the courses (Happell et al., 2011).

With no clear guidelines for what constituted a major in mental health nursing, considerable variation in the structure and content of courses had developed. The most minimal change comprised an augmentation of existing nursing subjects to include mental health examples of concepts, and assignments that required a mental health focus in students' responses (but with no additional classroom hours). The most significant change was a program that added two specialist mental health subjects as well as the augmentation of existing subjects to include a greater focus on mental health. Additional clinical experience in mental health associated with the major showed similar variation, with students receiving between 28 and 360 h of extra placements in mental health settings (Happell et al., 2011).

Only one major has been described in detail in the published literature. La Trobe University's Bachelor of Nursing degree with a mental health major had six specialist mental health units: promoting mental health (one unit), mental health nursing practice (four units on children and adolescents, adult mental illnesses, older people, and drugs and alcohol), and intervention modalities (one unit) (Kenny et al., 2009).

To date, no evaluation of majors in mental health nursing, either individually or collectively, appears in the literature, so it is uncertain what impact the implementation of the major has had in terms of the number of students interested in the major, particularly the numbers commencing and completing the major in mental health nursing.

Objective

In recognition of the existing paucity of information, a study was undertaken to determine the sustainability or otherwise of majors in mental health nursing introduced into Australian universities. The primary focus was to determine whether programs previously established were still functioning, whether new ones had commenced, what changes to structure or content had occurred, and the degree of student interest in these programs.

Methods

Design

A cross-sectional design that used a survey to gain descriptive information about the majors of mental health nursing.

Sample

The Heads of Schools of Nursing of the universities who participated in the 2010 study of majors in mental health nursing in Australia were contacted via email in March 2013 with a request to participate in the study. An email was also sent to all Heads of Schools of Nursing in Australia, through the mailing list of the Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery, seeking information about any majors in mental health nursing that may have commenced since the previously published study. No further programs were identified.

Procedure

The Heads of School provided the name and contact details for the academic staff member best able to inform the project. In most cases the academic was the undergraduate program coordinator, or a mental health nurse academic with responsibility for, or a keen interest in the major, either currently or in the past. The identified staff were contacted via email. A copy of the plain language statement and consent forms were included with the survey. Participants were asked to complete the survey and return their responses to members of the research team. Staff from all but one university returned completed surveys. It was a requirement of one university that all documentation pertaining to ethics approval was submitted to the university ethics committee. Unfortunately, the process was very lengthy and approval had not been obtained by the time data collection for the project was concluded.

Materials

The same survey tool was used as for the 2010 study to enable a direct comparison across time points. The survey questions included information about: the structure and design, current operation status, additional clinical and theoretical contents and numerical information about students commencing and completing the program.

Ethical Issues

The project was approved by the relevant university Human Research and Ethics Committee. The plain language statement and consent form were sent to all participants and they were encouraged to ask questions if necessary. Those who were willing to participate were asked to return the completed consent forms to the researcher. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the project. The confidentiality of individual participants was assured. Because most information presented in this paper is/was publically available, however, the universities have been named with approval of the Heads of School.

Findings

Current Status of the Major in Mental Health Nursing in Australian Universities

Of the 14 (from a total of 38 Australian universities that offer nursing) universities that reported in the 2010 study that they had implemented, or planned to put in place, a major in mental health nursing, only five were currently offered to new intakes of students. Six programs originally implemented had now either ceased or were in a 'teach-out mode' for current students. One additional major had commenced since 2010. Further information is presented in Table 1.

Uptake of the Major in Mental Health Nursing

The number of students enrolling in the major in mental health nursing was generally quite low. The one exception, University of Sydney Technology, showed that high numbers of students were both

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