



New graduate nurses' experiences in their first year of practice

Vicki Parker ^{a,d}, Michelle Giles ^{b,*}, Gena Lantry ^b, Margaret McMillan ^c

^a University of New England, Australia

^b Centre for Practice Opportunity and Development, Hunter New England Area Health District, Australia

^c School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

^d Hunter New England Health, Australia

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SUMMARY

Aims: This study aimed to explore new graduates' experiences of entering the nursing workforce in NSW, Australia, and to identify factors that impact on their transition to the workforce, satisfaction and likelihood of retention.

Background: The nature of new graduates' experiences in their first year of employment has been shown to have a significant impact on their future career directions. It is well reported that often these experiences are stressful and unsatisfying.

Methods: A mixed method cross sectional design was used combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data was gathered by online survey and focus groups.

Results: A total of 282 new graduates, aged 21 to 54, responded to the online survey (response rate 24%). Overall, respondents were satisfied with their recruitment process (mean 3.54) and support for professional development (mean 3.37) but job satisfaction was rated lower (mean 2.91). Qualitative findings from focus groups and survey comments revealed a number of key factors impacting on the experience of transition for new graduates. These are; the nature of the workplace environment, the level and nature of support available to new graduates, together with their propensity to learn and adapt to workplace cultures and to accommodate their own expectations and the expectations of others, and to a lesser degree, the amount of prior experience.

Conclusion: There is an urgent need to develop and test a range of evidence based approaches that will both empower nurses and embed systematic approaches that enable equitable and contextually relevant stewardship of new graduate nurses into the future.

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Introduction

Transition to work has been the focus of concern in Australia since the transfer of nurse education to the tertiary sector in the 1980s. The new graduate nurse's ability to assimilate into a workforce, workplace and cultural milieu is challenged by an environment of constant change and complex organisational and social dynamics. Understanding the complexity of health care and health workforce issues that impact on new graduates is essential to maintaining the future workforce and a positive and productive workplace environment. In this paper we report the findings of a study conducted in New South Wales (NSW), Australia that investigated new graduate nurses' experience of becoming part of the nursing workforce.

Background

The body of literature examining new graduates' experiences, ranging across 30 years, is large and diverse. Researchers, both qualitative and quantitative, have been particularly interested in transition to professional practice, socialisation, satisfaction and review of transition programmes. The nature of new graduates' experiences in their first year of employment has been shown to have significant impact on their future career directions. It is well reported that often these experiences are stressful and unsatisfying (Madjar et al., 1997; Chang and Hancock, 2003; Beecroft et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2008; Spence Laschinger et al., 2010). This is concerning given the critical shortage and maldistribution of the nursing workforce in many countries. Issues, in relation to attracting and retaining nurses in the workforce have been a major concern for policy makers, both within Australia and internationally (Cowin, 2002; O'Brien-Pallas et al., 2006; Cho et al., 2006). These concerns are in response to cyclical nursing shortages, concerns in relation to the adequacy of under-graduate education/preparation (Kelly and Ahern, 2008), a decline in the public image of nursing as a

* Corresponding author at: School of Health, Armidale, NSW, 2351, Australia. Tel.: +61 0249469630, +61 0457714528 (mobile).

E-mail addresses: vicki.parker@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au (V. Parker), michelle.giles@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au (M. Giles).

career, and the increasing demands of “reformed” health care environments (Cowin, 2002; O’Brien-Pallas et al., 2006; Cho et al., 2006).

The challenges associated with beginning practitioners entering the workforce are numerous and complex. The difficulties of reconciling the disparity between “idealised role conceptions” and “actualized role conceptions”, reported as “reality shock”, give rise to nursing role conflicts (Duchscher, 2009; Feng and Tsai, 2012). Nursing role conflict and associated role ambiguity impact on the beginning practitioners’ ability to meet the bureaucratic mandate, whilst maintaining a sense of professional integrity.

These tensions, in addition to the well documented problems of excessive workloads, variable degrees of organizational and professional support, and negative workplace cultures, have all been extensively reported as being major determinants of job dissatisfaction (Cowin, 2002; Hegney and McCarthy, 2000; Hegney et al., 2002; Roberts et al., 2004; Tourangeau et al., 2006; Lea and Cruickshank, 2007; Wilson et al., 2008). Job dissatisfaction is widely regarded as the primary contributor to turnover amongst nurses, with consistent associations between intention to leave and actual turnover being well documented (Forsyth and McKenzie, 2005; Simmons, 2008; Takase et al., 2006; Tourangeau et al., 2006).

The transition period, (the first 12 to 24 months of practice) for new graduate nurses is reported as the most vulnerable time during which they formulate decisions about their intent to commit to the profession and/or their organization (Beecroft et al., 2006; Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2008; Scott et al., 2008; Price, 2009). Many new nurses will change clinical areas or leave the profession altogether during this period (Kovner et al., 2007; Park and Jones, 2010) with as many as 50% of new nurses leaving their first job within a 12 month period (Winfield et al., 2009).

There is abundant evidence to suggest that intern, preceptor and mentor programmes are successful in supporting new graduate nurses in their first year of employment (Nelson et al., 2004; Santucci, 2005; Beecroft et al., 2006), however, the exact composition of programmes, in terms of duration, degree of supernumerary support, extent of clinical exposure and autonomy in early practice, and associated funding have not been defined or rigorously examined (Zizzo and Xu, 2009). Whilst variable approaches allow for facilities to tailor their programmes based on local needs, the prevailing sentiment in the literature is that they require revision in relation to consistency, efficacy and transparency and more research is needed using more objective and reliable outcome measures (Edwards et al., 2011).

In NSW, new graduate nurses are employed across public and private sectors. Those employed in the public sector are recruited into new graduate support programmes, usually for a period of 12 months with placement in at least two different clinical areas. On completion of the new graduate programme graduates apply for positions in areas offering employment.

The Study Aim

This study aimed to explore new graduates’ experiences of entering the nursing workforce. In particular, we sought to identify factors that impact on transition to the workforce, new graduate satisfaction and likelihood of retention.

Methods

The study was conducted using a mixed method cross sectional design incorporating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative core component of the study was supplemented by qualitative methods to enhance description and provide explanation (Morse and Niehaus, 2009). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently via survey and focus groups. The protocol was reviewed and approved by the Hunter New England Health Research Ethics Committee.

Data Collection

Participants were drawn from the cohort of newly graduated nurses who were recruited as registered nurses in the NSW public sector in 2008. The required target sample for the on line survey was 300 or greater based on the overall target population of 1604. New graduates were invited to participate in the survey via postal mail outs and email.

The survey, developed from a review of the literature included questions related to demographics, current employment, prior nursing experience, the nature of current employment, the nature of the initial recruitment process, the nature of transition to the workforce, employment intentions, career aspirations, confidence in practice, job experience and job satisfaction. The satisfaction items were derived and modified from a survey developed by Hegney and McCarthy (2000). Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement, level of confidence or level of satisfaction with a statement using a 5 point Likert scale. To assess content validity expert review was sought from 15 nursing clinicians and educators. Items were then added, deleted or modified based on the information gathered from all sources.

Focus group questions related to the transition experience in terms of support, expectations, workload, relationships, intention to stay and career opportunities. Participation in focus groups was sought across six sites in metropolitan and rural NSW. Fifty-five new graduate nurses who gave informed consent participated in seven focus groups (6–10 per group) of between 60 and 90 min duration. One rural focus group was conducted via video conferencing.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed using SPSS. Differences in scores were compared using contingency table analysis, with chi-squared and analysis of variance using Kruskal Wallis to identify variables predicting differences using a significance level of 0.05. The rating scale items within the survey were combined to derive several factors; recruitment satisfaction, level of support, job satisfaction, job experience and job confidence. Factor analysis confirmed groupings and further reliability of responses was assessed using Cronbach Alpha scores for each item group. Values of 0.7 or better were obtained.

Qualitative survey data were coded and themed to inform low level inference qualitative description (Sandalowski, 2010). Focus group transcripts were coded and categorised according to themes and the research question by individual researchers and then compared and revised for consistency. Representativeness and auditability were ensured through grounding and reporting the findings through reference to excerpts from within each and across all the focus groups.

Results

A total of 282 new graduates responded to the online survey (24% response). Respondents ranged in age from 21 to 54 years (mean 29) and 85% were female. Thirty five percent reported English as a second language (ESL), with Chinese language as the most common. Those with ESL were significantly proportionally higher in metropolitan areas (40%, rural 8%, $p < 0.01$). Distribution of respondents across area health districts was representative of the larger cohort. Seventy-three percent ($n = 207$) of respondents had prior experience in nursing (Table 1) and half of these had greater than 2 years experience. Seventy six percent were in full-time positions at the time of responding to the survey. The majority (77%) were employed in a metropolitan area and 84% of those currently employed worked in an acute public health facility, predominantly in medical and/or surgical wards (41%), critical care (16%), mental health (10%) and emergency nursing (9%). A higher percentage of male respondents were working in critical care and mental health than their female counterparts.

The majority of respondents (92%) were employed in one of their four preferred clinical areas and males (92%) were more likely than their

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