



Models of nursing student employment: An Australian action research study

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SUMMARY

Over the last few years, Australian interest in the part time employment status of nursing students has increased. International models of paid employment, that target undergraduate students to work in a specific student nurse capacity, have attracted interest. The aim of this action research study was to consider nursing student employment models and develop recommendations that could be used to guide future policy and planning. An expert group was convened and used the cyclic process of planning, action, observation, evaluation and reflection to explore the issue. Through the process, the benefits and pitfalls of innovative, employment models were explored and resulted in consideration of whether there is potential for these models to provide a small push of the pendulum to a point where theory and practice are more closely aligned.

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Introduction

The transfer of nurse education to the higher education sector was completed in Australia in 1992 and was touted as a means of developing skilled graduates to meet industry need (Sax, 1978). While the 2002 National Review of Nurse Education (Heath et al., 2002) highlighted the success of the move to an all degree, registered nurse workforce, debate on nurse education continues. There has been criticism of universities by industry, with claims that programs fail to produce graduates that meet service needs. Universities have criticised industry for failing to provide supports, such as strong placement programs (Productivity Commission, 2005). There exists a dichotomy between the expectations of universities and industry, with reports identifying the tension and fragile nexus that exists (Heath et al., 2002; Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2002; Productivity Commission, 2005).

While Australia's nursing students were previously employed under a paid apprenticeship model, the majority of students now complete a three year, six semester Bachelor's degree (Heath et al., 2002). Course structure must allow for entry and exit pathways, and there is a requirement for recognition of prior learning, including recognition of enrolled nurse status [Australia continues to educate enrolled nurses] (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2009). While entry for practice requires a minimum of a Bachelor's degree,

variations such as integrated honours programs, double degrees, and graduate entry programs are emerging (Heath et al., 2002).

A national framework for the accreditation of nursing and midwifery courses (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council 2007) does not prescribe the allocation of hours between theory and practice, rather, it is indicated that theory and practice should be integrated and that time allocation should allow for competencies to be developed. Most degree programs are structured with 50% theoretical and 50% practical hours (Clare et al., 2002). There is, however, considerable variation between universities on the hours allocated for practical experience (Ogle et al., 2002), with researchers reporting that students spend between 600 and 1100 h of supernumerary unpaid practice in a six semester, full time degree (Gabb and Keating, 2005). Supervision for practical placement varies, with common models being preceptorship or clinical teachers with responsibility for a small number of students (McKenna and Wellard, 2004).

Although there is some means tested Australian Government support for university students (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011), there is widespread reporting of student poverty (Australian Institute for Primary Care, 2004). While there are no figures that provide an accurate account of employment amongst nursing students, it is estimated that up to 90% of all Australian tertiary students engage in part time employment of at least 15 h per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

The Exploration of Paid Student Employment Models

There is increasing Australian interest in nursing students' part time employment. This has been fuelled by concerns of poverty, work

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readiness, students working as unregulated health workers or enrolled nurses during their degree [Australia continues to educate enrolled nurses and students from some Bachelor degrees can gain enrolled nurse registration at a predetermined point in their degree] and debates on whether students should be working in health, rather than in areas such as hospitality and retail (Phillips et al., *in press*).

In 2002, the Australian Senate included a recommendation about nursing student part time employment:

Hospitals should be encouraged to provide for paid, part-time employment for nursing students during their undergraduate courses, which from evidence has proved to be a good learning experience for the students (Senate Community Affairs Committee, 2002).

The Concept of Explicit Student Employment

Nursing student employment models have appeared in the Canadian and United States (US) literature for over a decade, largely driven by workforce recruitment and a need for improved graduate 'work readiness' (Kee and Ryser, 2001; Boyer, 2002; Williams et al., 2002; Blanzola et al., 2004; Gamroth, et al., 2004; Goode and Williams, 2004; Rosenfeld et al., 2004; Alsup et al., 2006; Hoffart et al., 2006). These models are different to the employment of students in a part time capacity as health care assistants or other like roles as they target students for employment in a specific student nurse capacity. They may be part of a health service/university arrangement, but in many cases are organised independently of universities.

International reports of these models vary on whether the student's employment hours contribute to their degree and whether the students are part of the effective full time staffing of the service or are supernumerary. Most programs include a supportive element such as preceptorship (Kee and Ryser, 2001; Gamroth et al., 2004; Hoffart, et al., 2006).

Researchers have reported benefits from these models including greater confidence, skill and knowledge development among students. The models are reported as having a positive impact on recruitment and improved client care, through the development of a strong learning culture (Olson et al., 2001; Gamroth et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2004; Alsup, et al., 2006; Hoffart et al., 2006).

Critiques of Paid Employment Models

In critiquing paid employment models, researchers have identified similar issues. The lack of standardization of models has created strong debate (Goode and Williams, 2004). A lack of equity for students has been acknowledged, as all students are not offered this experience, and researchers have identified the tendency to treat students who have participated in these models as 'stars' and cautioned against having unrealistic expectations of new graduates (Olson et al., 2001).

Lack of clarity, regarding roles and responsibilities of participating students, have been identified, with concerns raised about the misuse of students to replace staffing shortages. The risk of compromised student learning has been identified (Gamroth et al., 2004).

The need for clear communication between all stakeholders has been recognised, with issues such as timetabling problems and balancing the demands of health service and universities acknowledged (Olson et al., 2001; Rosenfeld et al., 2004).

Australian Paid Employment Models

Within the Australian context, there are anecdotal reports of paid student employment models but little appears in the published literature. Given significant interest in workforce development, the

need to consider these models and provide commentary on their use for future planning was deemed important.

The Study

Aims of the Study

The aim of this study was to consider explicit nursing student paid employment and develop recommendations that could be used to guide policy and planning.

Study Design

Action research was deemed appropriate as it provided a systematic approach of working through the issue of paid student employment by bringing together an 'expert' group to engage in the cyclic processes of planning, action, observation, evaluation and reflection (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). By sharing knowledge and experience through a group process we believed that we could achieve Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher's (2007) ideal of actively engaged participants offering multiple perspectives. The group that was convened were enthusiastic about generating useful outcomes.

Ethics Approval

The study was approved by a university ethics committee and all participants were provided with extensive information about the study prior to giving informed consent.

The Action Research Group

The Department of Human Services Victoria [now Department of Health] identified a fifteen member action research group. The group included government, professional body, education, industry and student representatives. Consistent with action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), the group met eight times over a six month period and engaged in planning, action, observation and reflection. Each action cycle involved in-depth discussion, planning and reflection on the topic of paid nursing student employment. Detailed minutes of each meeting were taken and circulated to the group for confirmation. Between group meetings, members participated in email discussions and provided detailed commentary as the study progressed. Finally, a set of recommendations were built that reflected the overall work of the group.

Phases of the Action Research Group

Phase One

Background papers were sourced and considered by the group. The need to collect information about student employment from across Australia was identified. The registering board in each State, the State's Chief Nurse or equivalent [senior government appointment] and the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) were invited to participate in a telephone interview of approximately 30 min. Reflecting the interest in the topic area, representatives from all Australian States participated [18 interviews in total]. The questions asked included; how are student nurses employed in your state? Is it in an unregulated role such as Assistant in Nursing (AIN) or Personal Care Assistant (PCA)? Do you have any models of specific paid student employment, i.e., where students are employed and paid as a student nurse? Do any paid employment hours contribute to the hours required as part of a student's degree? Participants were asked to make any other comments around the topic area. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

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