



“If you haven't got a PhD, you're not going to get a job”: The PhD as a hurdle to continuing academic employment in nursing

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SUMMARY

This paper is drawn from a larger study that sought to identify and examine issues around the employment of sessional academic staff in baccalaureate nurse education. Twelve sessional teachers and 12 continuing academics participated in the interviews. Examination of the data revealed the PhD was perceived as a hurdle to continuing employment in nurse education in the university sector. In the current climate, sessional teachers continue to be an essential part of the nursing academic workforce and are necessary to meet the teaching and learning demands associated with implementing nursing curricula. Findings suggest a need for scrupulous processes in relation to the recruitment of sessional staff, and highlight the difficulties that sessional teachers may have in securing continuing academic employment. We provide recommendations to facilitate the appointment of appropriate individuals into sessional roles and highlight the need to mentor and support sessional teachers wishing to pursue a career as nurse academics. Questions are raised about how nursing can plan for future academic workforce needs in a context of an aging academic workforce, the demand for doctoral training for nurse academics, and widespread casualisation of the nursing academic workforce.

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Introduction and background

Internationally, there is an increase in the number and proportion of sessional teaching staff employed by universities (Halcomb et al., 2010). Indeed, it has been estimated that approximately 50% of all university teaching is undertaken by sessional staff (Brendtro and Hegge, 2000), and these staff teach across the curriculum, in all subjects including postgraduate programs. Furthermore, they teach on-campus in laboratory, clinical and classroom-based settings. Various reasons are proposed for this including an aging academic workforce, increasing demand for nurse education from both local and international markets, and economic imperatives that have restricted the availability of full-time continuing academic positions (Brendtro and Hegge, 2000; Berlin and Sechrist, 2002; DeYoung et al., 2002; Halcomb et al., 2010).

In many parts of the world, a doctoral degree is increasingly an essential criterion to continuing (tenured) faculty appointments in nursing (Brendtro and Hegge, 2000). Allan and Aldebron (2008:287) note, “most university faculty positions demand a doctorate”, and

Hinshaw (2001:1) comments that an earned doctoral degree for faculty teaching is the “academic norm”. However, questions have been raised about the ability of the profession to provide doctorally qualified nurses in the numbers needed to meet demand and ensure a sustainable academic workforce (Berlin and Sechrist, 2002; Brendtro and Hegge, 2000; Potempa et al., 2009). Indeed, it has been noted that “nursing schools are limited in the number of students that can be admitted... where there are insufficient numbers of doctorally-prepared faculty to teach them” (Rich and Nugent, 2009:2). Possession of a doctoral degree is linked to tenure (Messmer, 1989), and so because of a lack of doctorally qualified nurses, increasing numbers of sessional staff not holding doctoral degrees are recruited to meet the teaching demands of schools of nursing (Halcomb et al., 2010).

In view of projected continuing staff retirement and increasing demand for nurse education, nursing faculties have a need to consider succession planning strategies to ensure a reliable and suitably qualified workforce into the future. The aging baby boomer generation means that the nursing academic workforce is currently being affected quite significantly by retirement. The literature suggests that inadequate numbers of younger nurses are seeking careers as nurse academics (Brendtro and Hegge, 2000). Brendtro and Hegge (2000) further suggest that increased expectations in terms of higher qualifications and performance are factors discouraging nurses from seeking academic careers. It is also noteworthy that, even with doctoral qualifications, academic salaries do not compare favourably with other career options available to nurses holding higher degrees (Allan and Aldebron, 2008).

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The large numbers of sessional staff working in many nursing schools (Halcomb et al., 2010; Andrew et al., 2010) represent a possible future source of tenured academic staff, and so it is important to explore the concerns and aspirations of these individuals. This paper is drawn from a larger study that sought to identify and examine the issues associated with the employment of sessional academic staff in a school of nursing and midwifery. Elsewhere we have published findings pertaining to sessional staff perceptions of their contributions to the BN program (Andrew et al., 2010). The aim of this current paper is to capture the views and experiences of both sessional and continuing staff related to the identification of the PhD as a hurdle to continuing employment as a nurse academic, and to suggest strategies for assisting sessional teachers to make the transition to continuing academic positions.

Study context

This study was conducted in a single school of nursing in a large Australian city that has a student body of approximately 3000 undergraduate nursing students in addition to a large postgraduate cohort. At the time of the study, the School employed approximately 60 full-time equivalent continuing academic staff and 30 sessional staff (Andrew et al., 2010). For the purposes of this study, sessional staff were defined as teaching staff paid on an hourly basis to deliver tutorials or clinical laboratory sessions, and who, rather than holding a continuing or tenured position, are employed on a short-term, fixed, time-limited basis (Andrew et al., 2010).

Methods

This study was part of a larger sequential exploratory mixed methods study combining face-to-face interviews with both tenured (continuing) and sessional staff, as well as a survey of sessional staff (for full description of methods, see Andrew et al., 2010). In this current paper, we have integrated the data from both sessional and continuing staff because of the emergence of concerns raised by both groups about the PhD as a barrier to permanent employment. The study had ethical approval from the university human ethics committee.

Interviews

Twelve sessional teachers and 12 continuing academics participated in the interviews. To protect participants from potential coercion, the interviews were conducted by a research assistant who was not a member of the academic staff. The interviews were audio-taped and to protect the anonymity of the participants the interview data was de-identified when transcribed by an independent transcription service before data analysis was undertaken by the researchers (Andrew et al., 2010).

Three of the sessional staff participants were male while all of the tenured staff were female. The sessional staff had teaching experience ranging from novice through to quite extensive. None held PhDs; the highest qualification held was coursework masters degree, with the majority having bachelor's degree as their highest qualification. All tenured academics had a broad range of experience from co-ordination of large undergraduate units to senior leadership roles within the School. At the time of the study, three of the tenured academics held a PhD.

Data analysis

Data analysis, as described by Coffey and Atkinson (1996), was undertaken by two members of the research team. Codes were compared for consistency between those undertaking the data analysis, thus contributing to the rigour of the study.

Findings

Analysis of narrative collected from both continuing and sessional staff highlighted absence of a PhD as a barrier to continuing employment in nurse education in the university sector. The PhD was viewed as the passport to a secure, permanent academic position, and its lack was seen as being a resolute and immovable barrier to reaching the "holy grail" of a permanent academic job.

That is why, this is my understanding of it ... they don't actually employ people here on a full-time contract, permanent position, unless they have got a PhD (Sessional participant 5).

There was a strong sense that sessional teachers were used primarily as a stop-gap measure, rather than being seen as future continuing academics. This belief was reinforced when people with quite considerable experience as sessional teachers were unsuccessful when applying for continuing positions.

I went for an interview with the school, but was basically told no because I didn't have my PhD... they said oh you probably won't make interview. I thought well I'll try. I got in [for interview] but I was told in the interview you're not enrolled in your PhD... so you're not eligible (Sessional participant 11).

This insight was also validated by permanent staff, who could not recollect recent instances of sessional staff being recruited into continuing positions. This stance was problematic for those staff responsible for ensuring adequate staffing to meet the teaching demands of the curriculum.

I can't think of who's, who we've appointed over the last little while that might have been a sessional. There're not — none of the sessional people have got jobs because they haven't got PhDs, you see ... Because no one's getting employed now without PhD... While ever the university won't let us employ staff that don't have a PhD, we're between a rock and a hard place, and we have to have sessional; we've got to have someone in front of the classroom. (Continuing participant 5).

The immovable stance in relation to a PhD when recruiting for permanent staff was seen as being quite incongruous with the somewhat more casual approach to recruiting sessional staff. Indeed, the recruitment processes described below could also help explain why few sessional teachers are able to successfully transition into continuing academic positions.

They require a permanent academic now to have a PhD, yet they don't have any requirements or any interview process for someone who is teaching casual classes? They require a CV to be sent and that's it. And then the casual will get a phone call. Do you want to teach on this day? What days are you available to teach? That's the process. (Continuing participant 1).

Notwithstanding comparatively casual employment practices around the recruitment of sessional teachers, when considering career development in relation to the attainment of an academic position, the weight of the PhD was such that it was considered to be more important than all other attributes.

What it does is it says that clinical experience is worth nothing. But we're not competing on a nursing basis. We're competing on an academic employment basis and I guess it must be the same for teaching and it must be the same for arts. It's so hard to demonstrate an equivalence to a PhD when it's just work practice or work experience. (Continuing participant 10).

The domination of the PhD was an issue that also concerned a number of the permanent participants. These people were recruited in

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