



# A qualitative study of the factors influencing the submission for publication of research undertaken by students

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**Summary** While there is general agreement that research capacity in nursing needs to be increased, there has not been a great deal of attention paid to the possibility of increasing publications by students of research undertaken for dissertations. This is potentially a useful way of increasing the evidence base in nursing. This paper reports a qualitative study undertaken in a School of Nursing in the UK, where supervisors ( $n = 10$ ), students who had published a paper based on their dissertations ( $n = 10$ ), and students who had not published were interviewed ( $n = 10$ ). The findings show that while there is a great deal of enthusiasm for publishing students' work from both students and supervisors, a variety of factors determine whether or not an individual dissertation leads on to a submission for publication. These factors are discussed, and recommendations are made to increase the number of this type of submissions.

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## Introduction

It is acknowledged by the NHS and the nursing profession (Department of Health, 2000) that research capacity in nursing needs to be improved, in terms

of both numbers of researchers and the skills of those researchers. This will enable nursing to generate the evidence from which care can become truly evidence-based. Various initiatives are in place to address this (Department of Health, 2000). At the same time, a large and increasing number of students of nursing are undertaking research as part of dissertations at undergraduate, and master's level. In the school of nursing studied, this amounts to (in the region of) 150 dissertations per year. Only a small number of these are

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disseminated in the form of conference papers or journal articles, though those that are published are usually well received. While some students view the dissertation as purely an academic requirement, many are enthusiastic about taking their research further, but seem to be prevented from so doing. This paper reports on a study that sought to gain a better understanding of why some students publish, and others do not. We also asked students and supervisors for their advice and suggestions on how submission rates could be improved.

The most substantial study of academic publication in nursing (in a UK context) is the [Centre for Policy in Nursing Research](#) (2001) report "*Promoting research in nursing and the professions allied to medicine*". This report shows that, though the number of academic publications in nursing grew rapidly in the years that it studied (1989–1999), nursing still lagged behind other comparable academic disciplines (notably education and social work). [Hicks](#) (1995) also shows that publication rates are lower in nursing than other disciplines. It is acknowledged that both of these sources do not cover data from 2000 onwards where it is possible that upward trend described in the [Centre for Policy in Nursing Research](#) (2001) report may have continued.

Despite the potential of student research in extending the evidence base for nursing, we found only a small range of papers which consider this issue. Most are North American, many appear to be editorials (e.g. [Giefer, 1996](#) or [Highfield, 2000](#)) and only a few reported on empirical studies. The most substantial empirical study appears to be [Whitley et al. \(1998\)](#) who surveyed authors in the journal 'Nursing Research' to see if they were graduate students. This was a large, well-conducted study. The authors conclude "Factors that influence graduate students to engage in the process include academic requirements, faculty involvement and support, and the ability to self-select the research topic" (p182). The limitations of this study, in our view, include that it was conducted only in the USA, and the period studied was 1987–1991. [Mosher-Ashley et al. \(2001\)](#) report on an initiative where student research (in psychology) completed as part of a course was developed for publication. [Wing and Smith \(2001\)](#) report their experience in this field. They are supportive of publication by students (not least because it can build students' self-confidence), and make some helpful suggestions on how to encourage it. The other papers that a CINAHL search for "student" and "publication" found were [Banoub-Baddour and Gien \(1991\)](#), [Davidhizar \(1993\)](#), [Gay \(1994\)](#), [Broome and Richards \(1999\)](#), and [Sharps and Benjamin \(1997\)](#) all of whom

suggest various approaches to faculty mentoring students writing for publication with little empirical data mentioned, and nothing on the issues studied in this paper. More recent papers ([Heinrich et al., 2004](#); [Pearson et al., 2004](#); [Sbaih, 1999](#)) still seem to be largely focussed on persuading students to publish, and on advice about how best to facilitate this process, again, without much data that explores the reasons why students may or may not submit papers for publication. Likewise, the wider literature on building nursing research capacity (e.g. [Tanner and Hale, 2002](#); [Hicks, 1995](#); [Sellick et al., 1996](#)) does not seem to discuss this issue in detail. More directly relevant to the study we report in this paper is the systematic review by [McGrail et al. \(2006\)](#) of methods for increasing the publication output of academics (not students), in so far as it compares three principal methods (writing groups, writing courses and mentors). All were found to be effective, though to varying degrees.

## Methods

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the relevant research ethics committee. A purposive sample of 10 supervisors in the School of Nursing was interviewed. All academic staff who had supervised dissertations in the School of Nursing was invited to take part. Of those who agreed an effort was made to ensure that the sample included supervisors who had some experience of student publication, and others who had none. The supervisors interviewed had a total of 88 years experience supervising students, almost entirely within the School of Nursing (range 4–16 years, mean 8.5 years). During this time at least 254 dissertations had been supervised (range 9–50+ per person) 27 dissertations had been published (11%) and nine are currently undergoing this process (potential total 14%). Supervisors gave estimates that around 95 dissertations also had the potential to be published of which the maximum actually published is only 28%. If all 95 extra plus those published had been successful this would amount to 113 (52% of all dissertations supervised). Face to face interviews were conducted (by JP) in the School of Nursing lasting 30–50 min.

A purposive sample of ten graduates who had and ten who had not published were interviewed. Alumni from the undergraduate masters degree programme, postgraduate masters degree programme, and post-registration bachelors programme were invited to take part. Of those who agreed to participate, a balance was sought in the sample between the three groups of students included. Characteristics of the interviewees are

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