



Graduate entry nurses' initial perspectives on nursing: Content analysis of open-ended survey questions



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 June 2016

Received in revised form 23 October 2016

Accepted 3 November 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Content analysis

Graduate entry

Media

Nursing roles

Open-ended questions

Perceptions

ABSTRACT

Background: Graduate entry nursing courses offer individuals with prior degrees the opportunity to gain nursing qualifications and facilitate career change. While it is known that accelerated graduate entry courses are increasingly popular, the perceptions of nursing held by such individuals and the influence this has on those seeking to enter the profession are less clearly understood.

Objective: To explore graduate entry nursing students' perceptions of nursing on entering their pre-registration course.

Design: A descriptive design utilising cross-section survey with two open-ended questions: *What do you believe the role of the nurse is? What things have influenced that view?* were asked. Demographic data were analysed using descriptive frequencies, while the two open-ended questions were analysed using summative content analysis.

Setting: One university-based postgraduate graduate entry nursing course in Australia

Participants: Eight cohorts ($n = 286$) commencing students with prior degrees other than nursing.

Results: The course attracts students from diverse backgrounds. Exposure to nursing and nurses, either as a consumer of health care or other health care role, plays a primary role in influencing career change. However, similar to those found with school leavers, there remains much misinformation about nurses' roles for students in these courses. Most identify the role of caring in nursing. For some, media representations are the only information sources.

Discussion: Graduate entry courses offer opportunities to attract new nurses and contribute to addressing workforce shortages. However, there is still a lack of knowledge of nursing roles among students on entry. More work is required by the profession to ensure nursing is accurately and positively represented to the community.

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1. Introduction

Similar to other countries, Australia faces future nursing workforce shortages. Workforce modelling predicts a shortfall of 85,000 registered nurses by 2025 (Health Workforce Australia, 2014). Hence, strategies are required to attract suitable individuals into nursing careers. The factors that influence the choice of a career in nursing have been widely explored, particularly with the school leaver population. Price et al. (2013) examined nursing career choice for millennial generation students in Canada, finding that students demonstrated altruistic reasons underpinning their decision-making, seeking a career where they were able to help people. Nursing was viewed as 'honorable and noble'. A systematic review conducted by Wu et al. (2015) further reinforces the role played by altruism in influencing career choice in nursing. In Australia, Wilkes et al. (2015) surveyed undergraduate nursing students to

examine reasons for entering nursing, also finding altruistic reasons for entering nursing however, another dominant feature was having career security.

Public perceptions have been viewed as playing a role in influencing nursing career choice. Neilson and Lauder (2008) interviewed high achieving secondary school students in the United Kingdom to understand their potential to seek nursing careers. These students' perspectives were largely negative, seeing nursing as a practical and undemanding profession without the need for high cognition, thus entering nursing would squander their high scores. Furthermore, students were strongly influenced by media representations that doctors cure patients and save lives, while nurses merely care for them. Students did not perceive they could make a difference to the community by being a nurse.

Perceived status of nursing as inferior to other professions has been argued as impeding high quality healthcare delivery with highly achieving academic students seeking professions rather than nursing (Wu et al., 2015). In their study, Neilson and Lauder (2008) identified that the main source of information for high school students was through television. Furthermore, these students held stereotypical views on female

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and male nurses. The media has been argued as continuing to portray nursing in out-dated and demeaning stereotypes. Heilemann (2012) asserts that television often depicts doctors performing roles that nowadays are done by nurses, while storylines lack accuracy in portraying nurses.

Another factor that influences the choice of a nursing career is the direct involvement of family members. This has both positive and negative effects. The systematic review by Wu et al. (2015) found for some parents, low pay and status did not make nursing attractive, while in others it was viewed as 'a very worthwhile career' (p.558). In a large Italian study of nursing and non-nursing university students, Dante et al. (2014) found that nursing students were more likely to have at least one family member working in nursing, than non-nursing students.

Graduate entry nursing education has become a popular pathway into nursing for individuals with previous qualifications seeking career change and provides one possibility for recruiting individuals who might not otherwise enter into the profession (Everett et al., 2013). Internationally, the concept of 'graduate entry' nursing does vary. In the United Kingdom, this term has been used to refer to education programs leading to initial nursing registration being at bachelor degree level (Ali and Watson, 2011; Ingrams, 2016). While in other countries, such as Australia and the United States, graduate entry represents a shift towards registration as a nurse through postgraduate courses, aimed for people with prior degrees other than nursing (Seldomridge and DiBartolo, 2007; McKenna and Vanderheide, 2012). Such courses provide accelerated progression through an undergraduate nursing degree, or at masters level.

Demographics of students in accelerated postgraduate nursing courses have been found to differ from traditional nursing courses. Graduate entry courses report older students with a higher proportion of males and international students (Everett et al., 2013; McKenna et al., 2015; McKenna and Vanderheide, 2012; Seldomridge and DiBartolo, 2007) than traditional courses. Furthermore, academics have reported that these students are challenging to teach, being more likely to engage in critical questioning (Lindsey, 2009; Seldomridge and DiBartolo, 2007). Little has been written about why individuals choose to assume nursing as a second career. In one Australian qualitative study, Neill (2012) interviewed six graduates from a graduate entry program, seeking to explore their journey from student to nurse. This study revealed that participants held long-term interest in pursuing nursing careers, and expressed wanting a caring role.

The Master of Nursing Practice is a four semester long accelerated program designed for baccalaureate degree holders in disciplines other than nursing, leading to initial nursing registration, introduced at Monash University in 2009. Since its inception, a range of aspects of the course and students has been evaluated to ensure that the course is responsive to students' needs as well as those of the nursing profession and health care more generally. While it is known that accelerated graduate entry courses are increasingly popular, students' initial understandings of nursing are less clear. It is possible that these may have later implications for future nursing career progression, and may differ to traditional undergraduate students. Furthermore, perspectives may have an impact on early graduate career offerings. Hence, this study sought to examine their views of nursing on entry to the program and what influenced these.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

A descriptive design utilising questionnaire was employed to address broader study aims of understanding individuals' motivations to undertake nursing as a second or subsequent career and what they were seeking from a future nursing career. The questionnaire examined demographic characteristics of individuals commencing the graduate

entry Master of Nursing course, and their perceptions of nursing on entering the profession. Cross-sectional data were collected from beginning students to ensure their entry perceptions had not been influenced by the course content.

2.2. Participant Recruitment

The total population of eight cohorts (302 students) of the Master of Nursing Practice from 2009 to 2015 were invited to participate within the first two days of commencing the course. During allocated lecture time, one of the research team not directly engaged with the students' learning provided a verbal introduction to the study and invited their participation.

2.3. Survey

The total questionnaire consisted of 12 items covering demographic characteristics including age, gender, whether from a non-English speaking background or not, previous studies, along with education, employment history and reasons for wanting to undertake a nursing course. Some demographic findings have been published elsewhere (blinded for review). This paper concentrates on the findings of two open-ended questions asked to enhance the quantitative findings: *What do you believe the role of the nurse is? What things have influenced that view?*

2.4. Ethics

Prior to the commencement of data collection, approval was sought from the relevant university ethics committee. Interested students were provided with an Explanatory Statement outlining the study. Consent was implied with the return of a completed survey.

2.5. Analysis

Demographic data were analysed using descriptive frequencies, while the open-ended questions were analysed using summative content analysis. This is an analytic approach commonly used for open-ended survey questions, whereby key words are identified and quantified to understand a situation (Hseih and Shannon, 2005). Hence, this approach sought to enable analysis of the usage of terminology arising in response to the questions posed. Two researchers independently read and re-read the text to identify key words from the responses. These were subsequently sorted into like categories and sub-categories. These were then quantified using frequency counts. This approach was considered the most suitable as responses were in single word and short sentence formats. The main categories and sub-categories that arose were then identified to enable further interpretation. The researchers then compared identified categories for validation purposes.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics

Out of a potential sample size of 302, 286 surveys were returned, representing an overall response rate of 95%. Characteristics of the sample are provided in Table 1. Due to an incomplete survey for one cohort, some of these contain larger amounts of missing data than others. However, the findings do indicate a diverse group of students with regard to age, gender, cultural background and previous education.

3.2. General Roles of the Nurse

A total of 255 participants responded to the first open-ended question: *What do you believe the role of the nurse is?* Four key categories

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