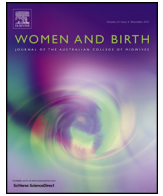




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### ORIGINAL RESEARCH – QUALITATIVE

# Young student's motivations to choose an undergraduate midwifery program

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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Within the context of an ageing health workforce it is important to gain a greater understanding of the motivations of young people (aged less than 21 years) to choose a career in midwifery.

**Aim:** To explore the reasons why young students decided to study midwifery and enrol in one Australian Bachelor of Midwifery program.

**Method:** A descriptive exploratory qualitative design was used. Eleven midwifery students aged less than 21 years on enrollment participated in a semi-structured tape-recorded interview. The transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Findings:** Direct and indirect exposure to positive constructions of childbirth as well as the midwives role fuelled young student's fascination with midwifery and drove their desire to enrol. While some young students entered midwifery studies as a result of their 'love of babies' others took a more pragmatic 'wait and see' approach about their career choice. Many young students however clearly distinguished midwifery from nursing demonstrating an intention to be a midwife rather than a nurse. This decision often took place within the context of opposition from within their family, school and social networks where the public discourse continued to reinforce nursing as the preferred pathway to midwifery.

**Conclusion:** Creating opportunities for young people to be exposed to positive constructions of childbirth as well as midwifery role models may increase the number of young students entering midwifery. There is also a need for information to be provided to school careers officers to assist them to understand the distinction between midwifery and nursing.

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## 1. Introduction

The introduction of undergraduate midwifery degrees within the Australian context has removed the requirement for a nursing qualification prior to undertaking midwifery education and gaining registration as a midwife with the Australian Health Professional Registration Authority (AHPRA). As a result there has been a change in the demographic profile of the students entering the profession. The age range of students in many undergraduate midwifery programs now varies from 17 years to mature aged students; with many of the non-school leavers having completed qualifications in other disciplines.<sup>1,2</sup>

Both British and Australian studies examining the experiences of midwifery students have highlighted concerns relating to gaps in their perceptions and expectations of their chosen programs such as their capacity to balance academic, work and family commitments.<sup>3,4</sup> Other studies of undergraduate midwifery students have highlighted how the specific demands of midwifery can be overwhelming and may contribute to program attrition.<sup>5,6</sup> Some researchers argue that additional insight into the motivations and beliefs of commencing students is needed to better understand how these factors effect successful completion of their midwifery program.<sup>1</sup>

One study undertaken by Williams<sup>7</sup> explored the motivations and understandings of 15 first year undergraduate midwifery students in the United Kingdom. Using interviews to collected data, Williams was particularly interested in each student's decision to become a midwife and the level of congruence and/or discontinuity between their understanding and the dominant

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public discourses of midwifery. Four themes emerged. The first 'a sense of inevitability' described how students always 'knew' they would be in a caring profession and midwifery seemed to fit their need to nurture and help others. The second theme 'not nursing' described the participants desire to be a midwife rather than a nurse. The students held firm beliefs that midwifery was different to nursing. For some this was accompanied by a specific interest in women's health. The third theme described students wish to 'make a difference' to women and ensure that childbearing women experienced a sense of choice and control. The final theme outlined the student's constructs and understanding of the midwifery profession and clinical practice. Here Williams<sup>7</sup> expressed surprise to find that many of the participants, despite a seemingly woman-centred philosophy, accepted the medical model of pregnancy and birth. Williams<sup>7</sup> drew parallels between the altruistic motivations of nurses and other health professionals but identified a clear distinction between the nursing and midwifery professions. While six of the fifteen students were aged less than 21 years of age Williams<sup>7</sup> did not report any age related differences between the participants.

More recently Carolan and Kruger<sup>1</sup> explored the motivations and beliefs of 32 commencing students within a high demand Bachelor of Midwifery program in Australia. Using thematic analysis the researchers analysed a reflective essay completed by the students within the first five weeks of the program. Three themes emerged that influenced the decision to become a midwife. Not unlike Williams<sup>7</sup> these reflected a sense of altruism, a fascination with pregnancy and a view of midwifery as a personally satisfying career that was not nursing. While the majority of responses were not considered age dependent ( $n = 23$ : 71% students were aged less than 25 years old with no children) the researchers reported that students who had experienced their own birth as empowering were keen to facilitate this for other women.

Another earlier UK study exploring the factors influencing midwifery students constructs of childbearing before and during their first undergraduate midwifery year found motivational differences between 'non-mothers' and the 'mothers'.<sup>8</sup> The age range of the 58 participants was 18–48 years. Mothers with positive childbirth experiences were keen to see other women have similar experiences, with those who had negative experiences wanting to prevent this happening for other women. The 'non-mother' group, who were predominantly younger, tended to be motivated by wanting to be involved in healthcare (but not illness) and/or they liked the idea of working with women and babies.

Younger/school leaver student midwives do not have the benefits of the accumulated life experience of more mature students and are potentially still immersed in the transition to adulthood. This may mean that younger students are more likely to struggle to develop feminist perspectives that commonly underpin midwifery philosophy and educational programs.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, young people's often pragmatic approach to life may in fact be protective. Regardless, attracting and retaining appropriate students within educational programs is essential to building a robust midwifery profession. This is especially important within the context of an ageing midwifery workforce and projected workforce shortages.<sup>10</sup> Likewise with the increasing separation of midwifery as a profession distinct from nursing it is important to adopt strategies to recruit school leavers directly into midwifery programs. Little is known currently around how accessible midwifery programs are to school leavers and what motivates and attracts them to enrol into midwifery programs from school.

## 2. Aim

In this paper we explore the reasons why a number of young students decided to study midwifery in one Australian Bachelor of

Midwifery program. These findings are part of a study that aimed to describe the expectations and experiences of young student midwives (defined as 20 years or under on enrollment).

## 3. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Understanding a phenomenon through rich description provides insight into what people think and how they behave.<sup>11</sup> Qualitative descriptive studies do not always declare a specific theoretical or philosophical framework when investigating a research question or phenomenon. While this was an earlier common criticism of the method authors such as Sandelowski<sup>12</sup> (p. 334) addressed this by arguing that lack of philosophical underpinning allows the researcher to remain 'close' to the data and is useful when description of the experience is of preeminent importance. Descriptive exploratory methodology allows for description of the data in terms of what 'is there', as opposed to what the researcher interprets as 'being there'. Over the last decade 'descriptive exploratory' approaches have become increasingly common and well accepted within the nursing and midwifery domain.<sup>13,14</sup>

### 3.1. Study setting and participants

The eleven young undergraduate students who participated in this study were all drawn from a Bachelor of Midwifery program offered at one University in South-East Queensland Australia. Participating students were less than 21 years at enrollment.

### 3.2. Recruitment

Approximately 28 students were eligible to participate when the study commenced in 2013. After ethical approval was received from the University's Human Research Ethical Committee a number of recruitment strategies were initiated. Firstly, a personalised invitation was sent to all eligible enrolled students via their student email account. The invitation outlined the aims of the project, the background to the study, and what was expected in terms of participation (an interview). The contact details of the research team were also provided. Secondly, the Student Representatives were briefed about the study and subsequently used social media forums to share information about the study with their respective year groups. Lastly, those who initially participated were asked to encourage other young students. This technique is referred to as snowball sampling.<sup>15</sup>

When the student contacted the researcher the aims and objectives of the study were reiterated. In addition participants were reassured that participation was voluntary, that not participating would in no way affect their progress through the program and that all data would be de-identified. Upon consent to participate a suitable location and time was negotiated to conduct a tape-recorded interview.

Thirteen students made contact. However, one student moved to a different location and did not respond to any further email contact. Another student changed her mind about participating but did not provide a specific reason for her decision. Of the eleven participants, six were aged 17 years at enrollment, two were 18 years, two were 19 years and one was 20 years. At the time of interview one student was in first year, four were in second year, five were in third year and one was a newly qualified midwife.

### 3.3. Data collection

Nine students participated in face-to-face interviews while two shared their experiences via the telephone. All interviews were recorded digitally and ranged from 45 to 90 min in duration. The

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