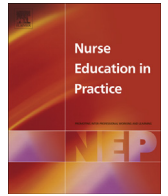




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Nurse Education in Practice

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/nejpr

Original research

Disadvantaged? Dual level learning in pre-registration graduate entry nursing and midwifery education: An evaluation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 March 2017

Received in revised form

9 September 2017

Accepted 28 September 2017

ABSTRACT

Preparation for health or social work professional registration is offered at undergraduate and postgraduate level and the requirement to co-teach is often resource and logistically mediated. This learning context creates opportunity to explore student perceptions of learning in dual level cohorts.

Evaluative research of dual level learning is limited but suggests that the quality of learning experiences is influenced by factors such as establishing a cohort identity, managing individual perceptions of ability and the value of individual contributions to the cohort experience.

Completing health care students from one HEI who were part of a co-taught cohort were asked to evaluate their learning experiences, using an anonymous questionnaire. A total of 81 undergraduate and 18 postgraduate students participated. All responses submitted were from Nursing and Midwifery programmes.

Responses suggested lack of consistency in student expectations. Whilst the majority of undergraduates were satisfied with their experience, post graduate students were less so. Good practice in facilitation of learning was identified but was inconsistent and some undergraduates felt overawed by their post graduate peers. The findings of this small study suggest it is possible to achieve positive learning experiences for co taught cohorts but this requires careful and consistent planning and management.

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1. Introduction

Within pre-registration undergraduate nursing programmes in the United Kingdom (UK), the experience of students learning with others who are working towards registration at a different award level has been common for many years with the co-teaching of diploma and degree students. Nursing diploma entry routes ceased with the introduction of the UK [Nursing and Midwifery Council \(2010\)](#) pre-registration nursing standards and the subsequent move to all graduate entry to the register. Following this change a number of UK education providers introduced pre-qualifying nursing education at postgraduate (PG) as well as undergraduate (UG) level; similar changes have been seen in other health and social care programmes for example in midwifery, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and social work. Shared level learning within professional education is also seen in other disciplines for example

in teacher preparation. Professional development modules between post qualified individuals working towards a higher academic award are also shared with those preparing for an initial registration. Graduate-entry and school-leaver routes have been offered for entry into medicine for some time, with some universities offering accelerated routes for graduate-entry students ([Shehmar et al., 2010](#)).

In preparation for the introduction of PG pre-qualifying programmes in the authors' own Higher Education Institution (HEI), a small unpublished internal review was undertaken with faculty teaching staff to explore their expectations of the potential impact and challenges of supporting dual level cohorts. Through informal focus groups, staff were asked to identify any expected issues or challenges, share any prior relevant experience and as a group consider how any identified challenges might be managed. The potential challenges identified by participants included recognition that PG students would be a minority and may feel insufficiently challenged when learning with the UG cohort. It was also acknowledged that some members of faculty would not have previously supported PG learning and assessment and may lack

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confidence, for example in project supervision and therefore may not meet student needs or expectations. There was also a view that the students may not establish a cohesive cohort identity. Through collegiate discussion a number of strategies were proposed to help teams develop confidence and capability in the support of this new and growing group of pre-registration learners. This included staff peer buddying and embedding opportunities for level specific support in the curriculum timetable.

Working with a curriculum delivery model of dual level cohorts across a wide number of programmes placed us in a strong position to explore student perceptions of learning in a co-taught cohort and from this consider how we can best facilitate a positive learning experience.

As we reached the stage where we had run a number of programmes through to completion, programme teams were asked to include in their final course evaluations some additional questions which focussed specifically on the experience of learning in dual level cohorts. The questions were addressed to all Bachelor's and Master's graduating students who had experienced learning together in a programme cohort. This paper presents the findings from the nursing and midwifery students evaluation and makes recommendations for future practice and research.

2. Literature review

A narrative literature review was undertaken, the findings of which are shown here and reveal limited research specifically related to the practise of dual level learning as a pedagogy. Those studies which have been completed, are mainly from the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the United States of America (USA).

Rodgers and Healy (2002) explored the experiences of UG and PG students studying a shared curriculum and concluded that a dual programme experience can be enriching for all students as they draw on each other's diverse strengths and backgrounds; however their findings were based on staff observation rather than an evaluation of student perceptions.

McGarry et al. (2011) and Stacey et al. (2014) who discussed the use and efficacy of an enquiry/problem based learning approaches (EBL/PBL) found that flexible learning approaches and having the opportunity to study independently at a time and place of their choosing were helpful learning strategies for graduate entry nurse (GEN) students. Conversely Halkett and McLafferty (2006, p165) describe how participants recruited from an accelerated pathway studying alongside "traditional route" students found the PBL classes as 'problematic', 'scary' and 'horrible'.

Much of the research from the USA and Australia focuses on student experiences of 'accelerated' GEN courses whilst studying alongside students on a more traditional route. Whilst they do not report specifically on the perceptions of or pedagogic efficacy of the shared learning experiences they do however highlight that different pedagogic approaches are valued differently by individuals and groups.

Wade and Thompson-Lynch (2000) writing about dual level learning experiences with post qualified nurses, concluded that a significant determinant of the quality of their learning experiences was the more human factor of the nature of the relationships established within the student groups rather than any specific pedagogic approaches. This included developing mutual respect and empathy.

Research into the experience of transition into higher education, whilst not specifically exploring dual level learning practice can offer useful insights into contextual factors influencing cohort learning experiences and particularly if referenced to developing a cohesive and mutually supportive learning group. Thomas (2012)

suggests that transition into higher education is supported through a sense of connectedness, fostered through engagement processes; helpful engagement activities included academic, social and professional which should be collaborative with staff and peers, echoing the significance of connectedness on the quality of learning experience, described earlier by Wade and Thompson-Lynch.

The literature does identify contradictions possibly reflecting individual differences in learning preference but potentially mediated by the context and the skills of facilitation of learning. Seldomridge and DiBartolo (2007) found that although there could be said to be some advantages to having a mixed level student group (a variety of experiences in the classroom, efficiency of resources) not all students thrived, with PG students reporting a preference for and feeling there was support to be gained through studying with academic peers. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that confidence in learning ability can differ amongst GEN students entering a professional discipline and when considering how the needs of a mixed UG and PG pre-registration student group can be met, false assumptions may be made about their academic abilities. This reflects findings by Scott et al. (2011) who, as part of a larger project, explored transition for PG students who were moving from a pure to an applied discipline. Whilst this strand of their study had the least underpinning research and probably the least clear outcomes, they identified that PG students struggled to self-measure their progress as, within an applied context, their previous academic reference points lacked relevance. This suggests that PG students when working in a new and applied discipline may not possess confidence in their academic abilities and may need similar scaffolding of learning as UG first degree students.

In summary, there is to date a limited body of international literature which has explored how GEN students transition and learn. Specifically there have been no recent studies which evaluate the learning experiences of PG students being taught alongside UG students.

3. Method

In addition to national student evaluation surveys it is faculty practice to invite students to participate in a course evaluation event, the nature and focus of which is determined by their programme team. This practice provided an opportunity to include some specific evaluation questions about student experiences of dual level learning. All pre-qualifying programmes in the faculty where UG and PG students were co-taught were invited to participate. This included nursing (adult, child and mental health), midwifery, allied health professions and social work.

A number of free text questions were devised by the researchers, informed by informal narrative from students and staff and from the limited themes which had emerged from the literature. The questions were designed to elicit; whether students had understood that they would be taught in a dual level cohort; whether they felt dual level teaching was advantageous to their learning or otherwise and whether their learning felt level appropriate, well supported and allowed them to achieve their learning objectives, as evidenced through the assessment process. Students were also invited to add any additional thoughts about their dual level learning experiences. The questions can be seen in Box 1 below. Each programme team was asked to incorporate the same set of questions into their programme evaluation events and return the responses to the researchers. Prior to proceeding ethical approval was sought and gained; the study was viewed as low risk to participants.

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