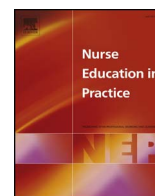




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Original research

## Graduate entry students' early perceptions of their future nursing careers

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## ABSTRACT

Graduate entry nursing programs designed for individuals with prior degrees in other disciplines are becoming increasingly popular internationally. They provide entry into nursing for people with unique skill-sets. Yet, little is known about why these individuals choose career change into nursing and what they expect from their new careers. This component of a larger study sought to explore graduate entry nursing students' short and longer term career intentions on commencement of their courses. A cross-sectional survey was used. Descriptive frequencies were used to analyse demographic data, while summative content analysis was used with the open-ended questions. Participants were drawn from eight cohorts of commencing students from enrolled in one graduate entry masters program in Australia between 2009 and 2015. Content analysis identified three main categories: *professional role*, *work location*, and *work context*. Longer term responses were categorised under four categories: *professional role*, *work location*, *work context* and *personal and professional goals*. Many students had clear directions about their future nursing careers. On graduation, many envisioned working in advanced roles or in clinical specialty areas, primarily in hospital settings. However, in the longer term, there was diversity among with many envisaging work outside traditional hospital settings, and some in other health disciplines.

## 1. Introduction

Research indicates that students enter their nursing courses with preconceived ideas about where they want to work following graduation (Hayes et al., 2006). Midwifery and working with children have been identified as particularly popular clinical roles among new students. To explore students' early careers preferences, Happell (1999) surveyed year one nursing students at nine universities in Victoria, Australia in the first three weeks of their course. Happell found that students entered with preconceived ideas. Of the 793 participants, 26.2% expressed wanting to pursue midwifery and 22.7% reporting wanting to work with children. Next popular was working in the operating theatre (16.8%) and intensive and critical care (15.9%). In a later study, Birks et al. (2010, 2014) identified and then tracked the progression of students' career preferences in three undergraduate nursing courses at one rural Australian university. Collecting data at three points in the students' first year of study, they identified midwifery, emergency nursing and paediatric nursing as the three most popular clinical areas at the three time periods, although popularity order did alter at each time point. Least popular fields were aged care, community, operating theatre and mental health. In a Dutch study with

first year nursing students, Hoekstra et al. (2010) reported that many students entered the course with negative stereotypical views of people with mental health issues. Identifying the career interests of first year nursing students may not accurately predict their ultimate graduate career choice. In a longitudinal study, McCann et al. (2010) surveyed a cohort of nursing students at one Australian school of nursing at first, second and third year level. These researchers found that career preference does change as the course progresses. In first year, acute care, paediatric nursing and midwifery were most popular, however by third year, acute care and mental health were most popular.

Despite the existence of increasing ageing populations, working with the elderly has been reported to be low on career preferences for nursing students. In a literature review of studies examining career intentions of nursing students and new graduates, Hayes et al. (2006) found negative views on working with older people, including unpleasant environment and unexciting work. Haron et al. (2013) surveyed nursing students in Israel to explore nurses' views on working in geriatric nursing. Of 486 final year participating students, 61% reported having no intention to work in the area, 12% were considering it and 27% reported they would be willing to consider working in geriatric nursing after receiving specialist education in the area. More males than

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females reported interest in pursuing careers in geriatric nursing.

Primary health care is another emerging practice context in nursing. Bloomfield et al. (2015) surveyed 519 pre-registration students in Australia about their intentions to work in primary health care after graduation. These authors found that only 22.8% reported primary health care as their first priority for workplace following graduation, despite 92.8% reporting having educational exposure and 87.1% having had clinical placements in primary health care.

In many countries, such as Australia and the United States, graduate entry nursing programs have been gaining popularity as a pathway to nursing careers. Offered at bachelor or masters level, these courses offer accelerated progression into nursing for individuals with prior degrees in other disciplines. The demographics of graduate entry programs have been demonstrated to be different to those of traditional programs, in particular attracting more males and people from highly varied prior disciplines, and those seeking career changes or finding more secure employment (Everett et al., 2013; McKenna et al., 2015; McKenna and Vanderheide, 2012). The pre-registration Master of Nursing Practice (MNP) was introduced at Monash University in 2009. This course is offered as a four semester accelerated program for bachelor degree holders in disciplines other than nursing. It leads to eligibility for initial registration as a nurse. Being a new type of nursing program, different aspects of the MNP have been evaluated at a range of points. With the non-traditional nature of the student group, it was unclear what career intentions they held on entry, and whether these differed from traditional undergraduate students. Furthermore, it was important to ensure that the course was responsive to their career intentions on completion of the course. This paper emerged from a larger study that sought firstly to examine graduate entry students' motivations to undertake the course, and secondly to understand their students' perceptions of where they saw themselves working after completion of the course. The first component of this study has been published elsewhere (McKenna et al., 2017). This paper presents findings from the second aspect, that is, students' perceptions of their future nursing careers on commencement of their course.

## 2. Methods

For the overall study, a descriptive design utilising a cross-sectional survey was employed. The questionnaire contained 12 main items. These consisted of a range of demographic data including age, gender, previous education and work history and country of origin. It sought information about the respondent's reasons for undertaking the course, career change and future career preferences. This paper reports specifically on two prospective open-ended questions addressed towards the aim of understanding students' initial career intentions: *At this early stage, where do you see yourself working on completion?* and, *In the longer term, where do you want the course to take you?*

From 2009 to 2015, a total of eight cohorts of commencing MNP participants (in all 302 students) were invited to complete a questionnaire on their perceptions of nursing and career intentions following the course. At the conclusion of an allocated lecture, students were provided with an overview of the study and invited to participate by a team member not directly engaged with their course. Most questions were analysed using frequency distributions, while summative numerical content analysis as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) was used to analyse open-ended questions. This entailed thorough and repeated reading of the text and initial coding of key terms and ideas. Codes were collated and quantified using frequency counts. This enabled identification of key categories and concepts. Percentages were calculated on responses coded from the overall pool of responses to each question. To enhance reliability of the findings, the process was undertaken separately by two members of the research team who then met to confirm interpretations and overall findings.

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics (n = 286).

	N	%
<i>Age (yrs)</i>		
Under 21	1	0.3
21-30	161	56.3
31-40	73	25.5
41-50	43	15.0
51+	7	2.4
Unknown	1	0.3
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	191	66.8
Male	71	24.8
Unknown	24	8.4
<i>From Non-English Speaking Background</i>		
Yes	127	44.4
No	136	47.6
Unknown	23	8.0
<i>Previous highest education level</i>		
Bachelor degree	224	78.3
Postgraduate diploma or degree	49	17.1
Doctoral degree	8	2.8
Other	5	1.7
<i>Previous discipline</i>		
Science	108	37.8
Business	39	13.6
Arts	28	9.8
Psychology	16	5.6
Public health/health science	15	5.2
Other allied health profession	15	5.2
Medicine	14	4.9
Nursing	8	2.8
Information technology	7	2.4
Law	6	2.1
Paramedicine	6	2.1
Pharmacy	6	2.1
Education	5	1.7
Engineering	5	1.7
Tourism, international work	3	1.0
Social work	2	0.7
Veterinary science	2	0.7
<i>Years in the workforce</i>		
0-5	134	46.9
6-10	75	26.2
11-15	37	12.9
16-20	15	5.2
over 21	24	8.4
Unknown	1	0.3

### 2.1. Ethics

Prior to inviting student participation, ethical approval was sought and obtained from the university's human research ethics committee. Students who were interested in participating were provided with an Explanatory Statement outlining the study and consent was implied through completion of the questionnaire.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Demographic data

A total of 286 questionnaires were returned out of a total potential sample of 302 students. This provided an overall response rate of 95%. Demographic data is presented in Table 1. There is some missing data for one cohort due to a questionnaire complication, however the data does indicate a very diverse cohort in relation to age, gender, background and prior educational preparation.

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