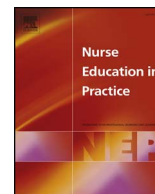




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Students' experiences of embedded academic literacy support in a graduate entry nursing program: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Graduate entry nursing (GEN) programs were designed to address the predicted nursing shortfall. In Australia, although these programs attract students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, the workload is compounded by cultural differences and a new academic learning environment which presents additional challenges. This qualitative descriptive study explored the experiences of GEN students enrolled in the introductory unit of their nursing program with embedded academic literacy support in Sydney, Australia. Twenty-four commencing GEN students were interviewed in January 2016. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. Three main themes emerged which illustrated that GEN students were 'diamonds in the rough'. They possessed a raw natural beauty that required some shaping and polishing to ensure academic needs were met. To ensure retention is high, institutions need to evaluate how best to support and harness the potential of these unique students.

1. Introduction

Graduate entry nursing (GEN) programs, also known as accelerated second degree nursing programs were originally designed to address the global issue of nursing shortage by enabling students to complete an accelerated program of study which recognised and acknowledged prior learning (Neill, 2012; Seldomridge and DiBartolo, 2007; Stacey et al., 2016). In Australia, this pathway was introduced in the mid-1990s (Neill, 2012) to address a predicted nursing workforce shortfall resulting from: (i) an ageing workforce, (ii) declining nurse retention and (iii) higher patient acuity (Health Workforce Australia, 2014).

There are a variety of pathways and or courses available for overseas-qualified nurses, to gain registration with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), which help support integration into the Australian workforce (Australian Centre of Further Education, 2015; Southern Cross University, 2017). The GEN program in this Australian study is designed for individuals interested in pursuing a career in nursing who either have a previous postgraduate

qualification or are overseas-qualified Registered Nurses (Western Sydney University, 2016). GEN programs recognise students' prior learning and experiences as facilitators and motivators, fortifying graduates' commitment and dedication to study, and enhancing their academic ability for success (Everett et al., 2013; Stacey et al., 2014).

Despite the attractiveness of an accelerated program of study, students have identified detractors, including heavy workloads, fast pace and at times lack of support which heighten stress levels (Neill, 2012). In Australia, there has been a steady increase in both the number of overseas nurses and domestic students entering nursing courses from non-English speaking backgrounds (Glew, 2013), including those enrolling in GEN programs. Similar to the United Kingdom (UK), the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia requires an academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) level of 7 in all components prior to registration of overseas-trained nurses and midwives from countries where English is an additional language (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2015). These students require support to develop their academic literacy and English language skills for

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safe nursing practice (Boughton et al., 2010).

There remains a paucity of studies, particularly qualitative studies that have examined the contemporary academic support needs and experiences of GEN students (Neill, 2012). This study aimed to explore graduate entry students' experiences of a specific unit within the GEN program and the delivery of embedded literacy support.

1.1. Background

Graduate entry nursing programs have gained popularity as a pathway into the nursing profession in recent decades (Everett et al., 2013; McKenna et al., 2017). They appear to be particularly attractive to men and mature aged students who are highly motivated, resilient, assertive, and results-driven learners whose understanding of nursing is built upon a foundation of real life, work and previous academic experiences (Codier et al., 2015; Everett et al., 2013; McKenna et al., 2017). While GEN programs offer an accelerated pathway to a nursing degree, multiple unique challenges are experienced by these students. These may result in difficulties in adjusting to both academic and social life, in particular, adjusting to language barriers, cultural differences, conflicting expectations of teaching and learning, loneliness and social isolation (Boughton et al., 2010). In English-speaking countries such as Australia, GEN programs are more likely to attract students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds including international students for whom English is an additional language (McKenna et al., 2017; Seldomridge and DiBartolo, 2007). This could be due to the perception that a nursing degree obtained in Australia qualifies them for professional registration and permanent residency, alternatively, it could be that the nursing qualification obtained in Australia offers better career prospects upon their return to their home country (Jeong et al., 2011). Communication difficulties among CALD students associated with accents, use of colloquialisms, shortened quick speech, and complex technical language have been identified as key issues (Jeong et al., 2011). Further, lack of English-language proficiency and difficulty in adjusting to the classroom environment, have been shown to negatively impact on the academic performance of these students (Everett et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2011).

In response to the challenges experienced by GEN students, a number of educational institutions have initiated academic literacy support programs to promote successful student transition to their new academic learning environment (Boughton et al., 2010; Crawford and Candlin, 2013). These initiatives include the introduction of academic literacy experts, with qualifications in English-language education, into teaching teams to provide embedded academic literacy support for commencing nursing students (Glew, 2013). Although embedded academic literacy support has been shown to be effective in improving academic performance among first year nursing students from CALD backgrounds (Salamonson et al., 2010), the experiences of GEN students enrolled in programs with embedded academic literacy support have not been explored.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

A qualitative descriptive design utilising semi-structured interviews was used to explore participants' experiences of an intensive introductory unit in the Bachelor of Nursing Graduate Entry (BNGE) program. From a constructivist epistemological perspective, participants constructed their own unique meanings based on context and time specific events (Gray, 2014). This design allowed the researchers to stay close to the data and present a comprehensive summary of events in everyday language (Sandelowski, 2000) while employing a moderately low level of interpretation (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

2.2. Setting and sample

The study was undertaken during January 2016 at a large, metropolitan university in Sydney Australia which offers a standard three-year Bachelor of Nursing program and a two-year program for graduate entry students. Graduate entry students must have completed a previous degree or an approved overseas registered nurse program to be eligible to enrol. An introductory unit conducted in an intensive study mode and compressed into 6 weeks provides foundational core learning activities integral to the nursing curriculum to support students' transition into the second year units of the standard Bachelor of Nursing program.

Following approval by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (H10338), all students enrolled in the 2016 Graduate Entry program were invited to participate in the study. The study was advertised on the students' e-learning site and during workshops. Students who volunteered to participate in the study contacted the researchers. Except for one member of the research team (ST) who was not involved in data collection, all the other researchers did not teach in the GEN program. In total, 30 students consented and agreed to be interviewed however data saturation was achieved after interviewing 24 students. This purposive sample was representative of the student cohort that engaged in the intensive academic literacy support embedded in the GEN curriculum. The student interviews were conducted immediately following student completion of the 6 week program.

2.3. Data collection

Data for this study were derived from individual, semi-structured interviews that ranged from 15 to 45 min. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Open-ended questions were used to explore students' experiences of the curricula design and delivery of the introductory unit of the BNGE program, their accounts of the course, the quality of resources and learning activities available, and the preparation of their academic writing skills.

2.4. Data analysis

Data were analysed using manual inductive thematic analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To obtain a sense of the whole (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), the verbatim transcripts were read several times and examined closely by four researchers (LMR, DM, PG & YS) who undertook the analysis. After independently generating initial open codes, potential themes were identified and reviewed by the researchers by cross-checking the themes both with the keywords or phrases in the coded extracts and against the complete data set. Three major themes and accompanying sub-themes emerged which were further refined and named, and final extracts were selected to report in the results. Trustworthiness and credibility were maintained by ensuring the researchers initially coded the data independently before comparing their findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and adopting semi-structured interviews using a well-developed interview schedule (Shenton, 2004) (Table 1). A detailed audit trail of the analysis was kept to ensure dependability and confirmability.

3. Results

3.1. 'Diamonds in the rough' - GEN students' experiences of embedded literacy support in the introductory nursing unit

A total of 142 GEN students who undertook the 6-week intensive academic literacy program were surveyed. Over three-quarters of participants were females (78%) with a mean age of 28 years (range of 21–53, median = 27, SD = 5.14). An overwhelming majority (94%) were overseas-born and of these, more than three-quarters (79%) were

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