



Exploring nursing students' experiences of a drop-in support-centre: A mixed-methods study

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ABSTRACT

Background: The increased use of blended learning approaches in undergraduate nursing programs has resulted in reduced on-campus contact with academic staff and other students.

Objectives: To explore student's experiences of a Drop-In-Support-Centre and assess the impact of attendance on academic performance.

Design: Concurrent mixed-methods.

Setting: A large metropolitan, multi-campus university in Sydney, Australia.

Participants: Undergraduate nursing students enrolled in a 3-year Bachelor of Nursing program.

Methods: In March 2016, to support students' learning, a weekly Drop-In-Support-Centre (DISC) initiative was piloted. The DISC provided an informal, learning space one day a week for students to access academic support. Baseline quantitative data was extracted from the University administrative dataset with a 12-month follow-up Grade Point Average (GPA) in January 2017. Attendance at the DISC was collected progressively throughout 2016. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews.

Results: Of 1016 undergraduate nursing students enrolled on the campus, 163 (16%) attended DISC at least once. Attendees were older, more likely to be Overseas-born (74% versus 45% native-born, $p < 0.001$). Sub-group analysis of first year students revealed attendees had a higher grade point average than non-attendees (4.20 versus 3.85, $p = 0.005$). Controlling for demographic factors, they were over three times more likely (Adjusted Odds Ratio: 3.75, 95% CI: 1.44–9.78) to achieve a higher GPA (> 4.0) compared to non-attendees. Thirteen students were interviewed. Two main themes emerged; 1) 'Home away from home' and 2) 'A sense of community: Everyone supports each other' with three accompanying sub-themes.

Conclusions: This study supports the usefulness of a Drop-In-Support-Centre in enhancing students' learning experiences and outcomes. The success of the program is highlighted by an improvement in academic performance of students who attended the DISC.

1. Introduction

Immigration and a simultaneous growth in international students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds has increased student diversity in undergraduate nursing education programs in English-speaking countries, including those in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia (Bednarz et al., 2010; Garone and Van de Craen, 2017; Terwijn et al., 2012). These students face challenges with intercultural interactions, prejudice during clinical practicum or the

classroom. They may also have difficulty in making themselves understood because of their accent, and hence, can be reluctant to speak up in tutorials (Henderson et al., 2016). Such experiences lead to feelings of isolation and embarrassment, principally, due to a lack of English language proficiency (Jeong et al., 2011).

Inadequate English language proficiency among higher education students from CALD backgrounds has been linked with academic underachievement, reflected in lower grade point averages (GPAs) (Crawford and Candlin, 2013; Salamonson et al., 2008). Likewise the widening

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participation agenda has broadened admission pathways for under-represented groups, including mature age students and those enrolling with qualifications from the vocational education and training sector. These students can struggle with the demands of academic literacy, university workloads and are likely to discontinue their studies prematurely (Long et al., 2006). Further, students have also reported the inadequacy of academic support due to limited opportunities for seeking assistance from mentors or teachers regarding course materials (Jeong et al., 2011; Testa and Egan, 2014). Compounding this problem has been an increase in the use of blended learning in undergraduate nursing education (Hsu and Hsieh, 2011; Sweeney et al., 2016). Comprised of face-to-face and online teaching delivery format, this approach has resulted in less face-to-face contact time. This is despite a growing recognition that commencing students in transition, particularly the non-school leavers, require more face-to-face support (Jones and Lau, 2010).

2. Background

While the widening participation agenda of recent years has made higher education more accessible to non-traditional students, it has also contributed to the growth and expansion of blended learning (Jones and Lau, 2010). Ironically, while traditional students (typically school-leavers) are comfortable with the increased use of online learning embedded within a didactic approach (Kennedy et al., 2006), non-traditional students, including non-school leavers and students from CALD backgrounds, have reported barriers with this learning delivery format (Holley and Oliver, 2010). In a study by Owston et al. (2013), the authors reported that high-achieving students were more satisfied with blended learning; the authors suggested that low-achievers may not have had the capacity to cope with this mode of delivery. This failure to succeed academically among low-achieving students may be due to reduced opportunities for students to participate and engage with the learning materials in the same time and space, which require high levels of group motivation and commitment from the community of learners (Greener, 2008).

Despite the rapid growth of online learning formats, students continue to value face-to-face interactions (Conole et al., 2008), particularly the opportunities for discourse with the tutor and other students about course content and expectations. It is also recognised that students respond positively to face-to-face settings as live student-instructor feedback creates a dynamic learning environment which serves to support the students' development and understanding (Johnson et al., 2000).

In 2014 a blended learning approach was adopted in the undergraduate nursing curriculum in a large nursing school located in the western Sydney region of New South Wales, Australia. Informal student feedback from commencing students suggested students felt socially isolated and disconnected from academic staff, largely due to the limited face-to-face contact time on-campus. Recognising a need for face-to-face connectedness with students, a Drop-in Support Centre (DISC) was commenced in the first week of Autumn semester in 2016 and concluded in the final examination week of Spring semester. Students were able to spend time working on their own assessment items individually or with peers, in a learning environment overseen by a literacy support staff member who was present each week. Individual tutors voluntarily dropped in to the sessions to assist students, particularly at peak times when assessments for their units were due, to provide academic support as required. While the campus had its own library, the University librarian would also drop in to DISC to assist students with individual academic referencing or online research needs. Attendance at DISC was voluntary and at the students' own choice of time and duration. A communal open study space was booked where students could stay and study for up to 8 h, or drop-in between tutorial classes.

2.1. Aim of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to explore nursing students' experiences attending a drop-in support centre (DISC). In addition, this study sought to examine the academic performance of students who utilised the DISC over a 12-month period and compare this to students who did not use the centre.

3. Method

3.1. Study Design

The current study used a concurrent mixed-methods design. Baseline quantitative data, extracted from the University administrative dataset, were collected in March 2016 and the 12-month follow-up Grade Point Average (GPA) was collected in January 2017. Attendance at the DISC was collected progressively throughout 2016 using an attendance sheet (register) signed on entry to the centre. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews.

3.2. Participants and Setting

The study was undertaken at one campus of a large, multi-campus university in Sydney, Australia which offers a three-year full-time (or equivalent part-time) Bachelor of Nursing program. The University serves a region noted to be one of the most culturally diverse in Australia with students from over 100 different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Western Sydney University, 2017).

In order to better support student transition, progression and retention, the University has a Human Research Ethics approved program level of research in place. Upon commencement, students are provided an opportunity to opt-out of this research and those who select this option are not contacted nor are their administrative data used for any research project. In the current study, administrative data of students who did not opt-out were used and additional ethics approval granted for the qualitative component of the study (approval number H10338).

3.3. Data Collection

Administrative data were collected for nursing students enrolled at the campus during the study. Nursing students who attended the DISC sessions were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and invited to participate in an interview to discuss their experiences as an attendee at the DISC (convenience sample). The face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who expressed interest and consented to being interviewed about their motivation, expectations and experiences with attending the DISC, as well as their overall thoughts about the DISC service.

Administrative data were extracted from the University's Student Management System into Microsoft Excel and then imported into SPSS. Thirteen students who attended the DISC participated in semi-structured face-to-face interviews which were audio recorded and transcribed.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Two continuous variables, age and GPA at 12-month follow-up, were checked for normal distribution using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Test results of both variables were statistically significant, indicating non-normal distribution. Hence, for group differences between age and GPA with DISC attendance, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was used. These two continuous variables were dichotomized at the mean (Age: Up to 26.8 years, > 26.8 years; GPA: Up to 4.0; > 4.0) for analysis. Univariate models were initially used to identify crude odds ratio between DISC attendance and student

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