



## In the shadow of the ivory tower: Experiences of midwives and nurses undertaking PhDs

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### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** The aims of this study were to gain an understanding of the experiences of nurses and midwives enrolled in a PhD, explore any barriers that PhD students encounter whilst completing the degree, and develop recommendations for consideration in formulating support strategies to encourage completion for nurses and midwives enrolled on a PhD degree.

**Background:** It is important to understand what is happening at doctoral level education for nurses and midwives, and how those enrolled on PhD courses can successfully complete their studies, transition learning, and acquire the ability to undertake research into the clinical environments.

**Design:** The criteria for inclusion into the study was that participants were either a Registered Nurse or Registered Midwife enrolled in a PhD degree.

**Methods:** A mixed methodology, non-experimental design approach was used with purposive sampling in an anonymous survey, that included both qualitative and quantitative questions to collect data in 2017.

**Findings:** Supervisors and supervision were the focus of the participant's responses, and issues were identified in negotiating the right supervisors for nurse/midwife PhD students. PhD students would benefit from specific teaching and the opportunity to discuss issues that occur as part of the PhD process.

**Conclusion:** Academia needs to consider new approaches to more effectively integrate teaching time into supervision, thereby optimising PhD completion for nursing and midwifery PhD students.

### 1. Introduction

The role of midwifery and nursing academics is currently undergoing a major change worldwide; until recently, what academics lacked in learning and teaching skills was tempered with the vast clinical and managerial experience brought to the novice academic role (Thomson, 2015). Nurses and midwives are also encouraged to produce research and contribute to the body of nursing and midwifery knowledge in both clinical and academic roles (Braidford and Terry, 2015). This has led to a global rise of nurses and midwives embarking on and obtaining Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees (Kim et al., 2015). Undertaking a PhD in any discipline is challenging, and there are high attrition rates and the possibility of failure after many years of study (Leijen et al., 2016). The professional disciplines of Nursing and Midwifery value a PhD qualification, as it is a requirement in most academic positions, providing opportunities to engage in leadership and policy making, enhances teaching, and research and clinical practice (Conti and Visentin, 2015; Tarvid, 2014).

However, University attrition rates are high in many countries, with

one in three students failing to complete the course they began within six years of enrolling (Litalien and Guay, 2015). In the international context, the United Kingdom (UK) currently has a 40% failure to complete Higher Degree by Research (HDR) studies, the Netherlands has a 38% expected failure rate, and the United States of America (USA) has a 53% failure to complete rate (Sokol, 2012; van de Schoot et al., 2013).

None completion of a PhD is detrimental to Universities, leading to individual stress for both supervisors and students, including loss of valuable time and resources invested in the training and supervision invested in the candidate (Feldon et al., 2010), which can lead to a loss of competitive advantage for Universities (Bourke et al., 2004). Many countries encourage PhD studies to be completed over three or four years (Sadlak, 2004), but in reality, PhD candidates often take much longer to complete their doctoral studies (van de Schoot et al., 2013).

Therefore, it is important to understand what is happening at doctoral level education for nurses and midwives, and how those enrolled on PhD courses can successfully complete their studies and transition learning and the ability to undertake research into the clinical

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environments.

## 2. Background

This study was guided by the conceptual model of generic doctoral-level threshold concepts that provide a strong theoretical framework to support the learning of research and teaching at graduate level (Kiley and Wisker, 2009). Concepts and theoretical frameworks help PhD students make important links between theory and practice, and in the case of nursing and midwifery PhD students, increase the ability to complete doctoral studies. From the institution's perspective, a greater understanding of the learning requirement process would help inform supervision and support, and help enhance the quality of the educational experience (Petty et al., 2012). Globally, nurses and midwives who obtain higher research degrees and doctoral degrees, are usually most likely to contribute to nursing and midwifery development and research, therefore, it is essential to strengthen nurses and midwives with research skills provided by PhD preparation (Squires et al., 2014).

## 3. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of nurses and midwives enrolled on a Doctor of Philosophy degree, explore any barriers that PhD students encounter whilst completing the degree, and develop recommendations for consideration in formulating support strategies to encourage completion. There are currently no studies that have been identified that focus specifically on the experiences of nurses and midwives undertaking a PhD in Western Australia. The study could be significant as attrition rates between the various disciplines has been suggested as 11%–68%, with higher attrition rates in the Humanities and Health Sciences Schools (Bagaka et al., 2015; Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2005).

## 4. Methodology

A mixed methodology non-experimental design approach was used in this study, as there was no known published information regarding nurses and midwives enrolled in a PhD in Western Australia. The mixed methodology approach used both qualitative and quantitative questions in an anonymous survey, to understand the experiences of nurses and midwives who were enrolled on a PhD degree.

## 5. Methods

### 5.1. Setting

The study was conducted at one University in Western Australia, and participants were recruited from a School of Nursing and Midwifery within this University.

### 5.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was used for this study, and the criteria for inclusion into the study was that participants were either a Registered Nurse or Registered Midwife enrolled in a PhD degree within the School of Nursing and Midwifery, at one University in Western Australia. The participants were all at different stages of their PhD journey, and were recruited through posters in the department, invitations at PhD social events and through PhD social media networks. The participants were emailed a link to the survey and supplied with an invitation letter that introduced the study and purpose of the study. As this was an anonymous online survey, responses could not be attributed to any participants, guaranteeing there would be no consequences and no re-primations.

### 5.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Edith Cowan University Ethics Committee, number 17547. There were no identifiable costs to potential participants, other than up to 20 min of their time for completion of the survey. Participants were informed that they had the right to decline participation by simply disregarding the link to the online survey. Informed consent was implied by all participants who completed the online survey; which reflected the participants' willingness for involvement in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality of all participants was assured in an invitation letter and was maintained by the researchers; nil identifying factors or information of the participants have been disclosed throughout this study and publication.

### 5.4. Data Collection

The data was collected using Qualtrics™ software via an online self-administered anonymous survey, and this approach was implemented as it offered a cost effective and time saving approach in comparison to interview style approaches. The survey comprised of 22 questions to enhance the likelihood of survey completion. The online survey comprised of closed and open-ended questions requiring a brief response providing quantitative data, and short answer questions providing qualitative data. The questionnaire included questions that focused on their experiences of being enrolled as a student enrolled in a PhD and supervisor interaction, as well as demographic data such as age, gender, and current clinical employment. In addition, information was collected on how participants were coping with studying and how the PhD experience could be improved. Finally, an opportunity for wider comment was provided. The participants were given a six-week period to complete the survey.

### 5.5. Data Analysis

In this study the data was analysed using Qualtrics software, that provided question summaries and results from the survey, as well as viewing the individual survey results of each participant. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data using percentages and proportions. A thematic interpretive process was used for the qualitative data, with the participant responses entered onto an Excel spreadsheet. Manual thematic analysis was used to code and categorise the responses, to establish common themes, and to identify distinguishing links between participant's experiences. Theme titles were created directly from the participant's quotes following thematic analysis.

## 6. Validity/rigour

Prior to administration to the ethics committee, the online survey was submitted to two recently graduated PhD former students for peer review. Positive feedback was yielded from peer review of the online survey, and the survey was found to be user friendly and appropriate and some amendments were recommended and utilised.

### 6.1. Findings

The online survey was completed by 16 participants, from a survey sample of a possible 44 participants, giving a survey response rate of 36.6%; this is a significant aspect as the average response rate for online surveys has been reported as 25% (Penwarden, 2014). Demographic statistics revealed that 15 participants were female, and 1 participant was male; 12.5% of participants were aged 25–34 years ( $n = 2$ ), 37.5% aged 35–44 years ( $n = 6$ ), 25% aged 45–54 ( $n = 4$ ), followed by 25% aged 55–64 years ( $n = 4$ ). Thirteen participants were part-time PhD students, and three were full time PhD students.

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