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Being a young midwifery student: A qualitative exploration

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ABSTRACT

Background: undergraduate midwifery programmes offer opportunities for school leavers and young people (aged less than 21 years) to enter the profession. There is limited research exploring this age groups experience of their Bachelor of Midwifery programme. In order to retain these students we need to ensure that their experiences of undertaking a Bachelor of Midwifery program are positive and barriers and challenges are minimised.

Aim: this study explored young midwifery students' experience of their Bachelor of Midwifery program.

Method: a descriptive exploratory qualitative approach was used to explore the experiences of eleven students aged 20 years or less on enrolment. Data was collected using face-to-face or telephone-recorded interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analysis the data set.

Findings: three major themes described the young students' experiences. The first labelled 'The challenges of being young' presented a number of age related challenges including transport issues with on-call commitments as some students had not gained a driver's license. Students experienced some degree of prejudice relating to their age from their older student peers and some clinical staff during placements. 'Finding your way' was the second theme and described the strategies students used to build

confidence and competence both in the university and clinical environment. The young students reported a strong commitment to the profession. They demonstrated high levels of connection with women and found the continuity of care experiences invaluable to their learning. The final theme 'Making the transition from teenager to midwife' demonstrated some unique insights into how studying to become a midwife impacted upon their personal and professional growth.

Conclusion: the young students in this study encountered some unique issues related to their age. However as they progressed through the program they developed confidence in themselves and visualised themselves as having a long midwifery career. They were strongly motivated towards providing woman-centred maternity care and considered their continuity of care experiences fundamental to them developing a strong sense of themselves as midwives. Attracting and retaining young students is essential if the profession is to realise its goal of ensuring all women have access to a known midwife.

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Introduction

The first Australian Bachelor of Midwifery programs commenced in South Australia and Victoria in 2002. They were underpinned by a new national educational framework and designed to prepare the future workforce for contemporary midwifery practice (Cutts et al., 2003). Australian midwifery education was

aligned, for the first time, with many other OECD countries already providing this type of direct entry to midwifery (Australian College of Midwives, 2006). There has been sustained growth in the development of direct entry midwifery programmes. Currently there are 13 Bachelor of Midwifery Programs offered across Australia.

The introduction of Bachelor of Midwifery programs removed the requirement for midwifery students to be registered nurses and, as a consequence, younger students (17–20 year old) including school leavers could enrol in the program and enter the profession. The implication of recruiting, educating and employing different generations (e.g. Gen X, Y (Millennials), or Z) has not been fully addressed in midwifery literature. Gen Z are only just

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Qualitative Interview Guide

- What did it feel like to start the course as a young student?
- What do you think are the advantages of being a young student midwife?
- Are there any disadvantages you have encountered?
- Where have you found support during your academic and clinical learning experiences?
- What have you found most enjoyable?

Fig. 1. Interview Guide.

emerging from high school and are described as excited about their career, curious and driven, mature, fast learners, independent, emotionally intelligent and keen to connect with people (Levit, 2015). In addition they are described as wanting to take an active role in their communities and are said to value career and financial stability (Levit, 2015).

In order to meet future workforce needs it is vital that the midwifery profession attracts and retains younger students including school leavers as the average age of Australian midwives is 48 years and 52.4% of employed midwives are aged 50 years and over (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). The demographic of the Australian midwifery workforce picture is consistent across the world. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2014) report, 'State of the World's Midwifery', there is still a serious lack of trained and educated midwives. This midwife shortage, or projected shortage, is played out in resource rich countries too including Australia and the United Kingdom (UK). In Australia, current modelling shows a slight over supply of midwives however limitations associated with midwifery workforce data collection are acknowledged (Health Workforce Australia, 2012, p. 112). Furthermore, the Australian modelling is based on the historical demand for midwives with midwives scope of practice largely employer determined. As midwives move to assume the role of primary maternity carer, proving continuity of care in line with the evidence (Sandall et al., 2015), demand for midwives will increase. It is imperative therefore that employers and educational institutions understand the specific needs of young students and adopt strategies to attract and retain young students into midwifery.

While there is a growing body of knowledge on the expectations and experiences of undergraduate midwifery students in Australia (Carolan and Kruger, 2011; Carolan-Olah et al., 2014; Bass et al., 2015; Sidebotham et al., 2015), there is a paucity of research investigating the experience of being a young student (defined as less than 21 years at enrolment) within a undergraduate midwifery program. There is also some historical evidence suggesting that some health service partners providing the clinical practice component of the Bachelor of Midwifery program were concerned about the suitability of young students to meet the challenges of midwifery practice (Leap, 1999; Leap et al., 2003; Williams, 2006). In order to attract and retain young students into the midwifery profession we need to ensure that their experiences of undertaking a Bachelor of Midwifery program are positive and barriers and challenges are minimised. Gaining much needed insight into the motivations and experiences of young midwifery students will inform recruitment strategies and guide retention measures.

The aim of the study was therefore to explore the expectations and experiences of young student midwives, age 20 years or less on enrollment, undertaking a Bachelor of Midwifery program. In this paper we focus on describing the students' experiences of the program. A previous publication presents the findings related specifically to expectations and motivations of young midwifery

students (Cullen et al., in preparation, in press).

Method

A qualitative descriptive approach was used to explore the expectations and experiences of eleven midwifery students who were aged 20 years or younger on enrollment into a Bachelor of Midwifery program in South East Queensland Australia. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the host University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Students were invited to participate via email, social media and snowball technique (Llewellyn et al., 2004). See Cullen et al. (in preparation, in press) for a more in-depth description of the research design and method.

Consenting students participated in an in-depth interview either face-to-face ($n=9$) or over the telephone ($n=2$). The option of conducting telephone interviews enabled participation of geographically distributed students. Interviews were semi-structured, used open-ended questions, were audio-recorded and lasted on average 60 minutes. A guide was developed to assist the flow of the interview process (Fig. 1). At the conclusion of the interview permission was sought to contact the participant should further clarification be required. In addition, a number of demographic details were collected such as age and level of education. Field notes were recorded after each interview to capture the first author's thoughts and feelings.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The first step involved becoming immersed in the data set. Transcribed interviews were read and re-read. Initial ideas and thoughts were jotted down and shared between the research team. Questions for subsequent exploration were noted. Line-by-line coding also referred to as open coding then commenced (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Here words and phrases were underlined and meanings assigned. As the process progressed clusters of 'like' coded data were grouped together. As the process continued these groupings started to form embryonic themes that were successively explored with participants not yet interviewed. Constantly comparing the data refined the grouping process and the development of themes and subthemes. Relationships or links between the themes were then examined. The patterns emerging described the phenomena of young student midwives experience of undertaking a Bachelor of Midwifery program.

During the analysis process strategies to ensure trustworthiness included sharing emerging themes between the research team and colleagues at research meetings. Talking through what was being 'seen' in the data stimulated debate and discussion that eventually lead to ensuring assumptions were checked and emerging themes were grounded in the data. In addition, links were sketched between different subthemes and/or themes in an attempt to establish how the themes 'fitted' together. Audit trails were also used to organise data providing a visual outline of the decisions and justifications were made around data grouping

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