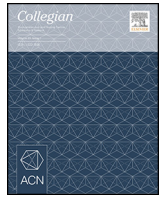




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Bachelor of Nursing Honours programs in Australia: Current trends and key challenges

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ABSTRACT

Background: To prepare nurses for a role in knowledge generation they need to engage in research training. Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs are a first step in this training. Developing a better understanding of current programs, their challenges and outcomes will provide an evidence base to inform curriculum development and policy making.

Aim: The aim of this study was to explore current Australian Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs in terms of their composition, delivery and number of enrolments/graduates.

Methods: Bachelor of Nursing Honours Coordinators or Heads of Schools of Nursing and Midwifery at Australian Universities were emailed an invitation to participate in an online survey.

Findings: Of the 19 academics who responded to the survey, 15 (78.9%) reported currently offering a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program in their institution. A steady decline in mean enrolments was evident over recent years. There were clear differences in course delivery and assessment tasks between courses.

Conclusion: This paper highlights the need to further explore Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs across Australia to ensure consistency in outcomes and to explore innovations in course delivery and project development. Such changes should incorporate feedback from students, supervisors, curriculum developers and professional stakeholders to ensure that programs address their various needs.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents a descriptive study of contemporary Australian Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs. The aim of the study was to explore the commonalities and differences in Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program composition, delivery and number of enrolments/graduates across the Australian tertiary education sector. Results from this research provide insights for faculty to understand the position and nature of Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs in the broader context of nursing education, for students considering studying Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) courses and for other nurses to understand the nature of the course.

2. Background

Nurse education has dramatically changed over recent decades. Traditional nurse education occurred under an apprenticeship training model but the mid-1980s saw the en masse movement of registered nurse education to the tertiary sector (Daly, Speedy, & Jackson, 2017). As a result, hospital based training ended in the early 1990s and the way registered nurses learned their art and craft in Australia would change forever.

Since the move to the tertiary sector there has been an increasing emphasis on evidence based practice (EBP) with concomitant research into nursing practice being strongly encouraged (DiCenso, Guyatt, & Ciliska, 2014). EBP is, according to Florin, Ehrenberg, Wallin, and Gustavsson (2012) “a process where, in cases of perceived uncertainty on appropriate care, the clinician defines a searchable question, seeks out relevant knowledge, critically appraises and compiles the identified knowledge, implements it in clinical practice and evaluates the outcome” (p. 888). This has resulted in the need to teach students how to engage with research and translate this into their practice (Ellis, 2016; Halcomb

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Summary of relevance**Problem**

Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs provide a first step for nurses in research training. However, there is little known about these programs in terms of the number of graduates, format and content of courses and what 'value add' these graduates make to the profession.

What is already known?

Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs contribute to research training among new graduate nurses, providing a pathway to a research career or a role in knowledge generation. However, there is limited discussion of these programs within existing literature.

What this paper adds?

The paper provides the first national snapshot of Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs across Australia. As such it provides important benchmarking data to inform curriculum review and policy development.

& Newton, 2017). There are a number of ways to get students to engage with research. Whilst many of these opportunities occur at post graduate level some occur at the undergraduate level. In addition to research subjects undertaken during the students' pre-registration education, many Australian nursing schools offer a discreet Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) course which extends high achieving students' experience of research.

Previously, honours programs were primarily intended to connect undergraduate and postgraduate research work, however some honours programs have evolved to meet other professional needs (Shaw & Holbrook, 2006). In their report, Kiley, Boud, Cantwell, and Manathunga (2009) assert that Honours has multiple meanings with multiple models encompassing a diverse set of practices that have developed to meet the needs of students, staff expertise, the discipline, relevant employers and professional associations. They further suggest that Honours offers graduates various pathways and are highly valued degrees within the Australian higher education sector. With regard to honours convenors, Kiley, Boud et al. (2009) suggested that in most cases they expressed considerable pride and enthusiasm in their programs citing examples of successful graduates and positive feedback from employers.

So what is the place of a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program in nursing? Halcomb and Newton (2017) describe an honours course as providing a means for enhancing knowledge and skills related to the successful conduct of a research project which can then be applied with the academy or within the clinical context. Successful completion of the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) at a First Class level also provides a clear pathway to doctoral studies for high achieving students, which is important in building the nursing academy. Honours program marketing typically make claims that successfully completing an honours degree will enhance skills and learning gained from completing a Bachelor of Nursing, build research capacity, upgrade qualifications, maintain currency in clinical practice and/or expand career path opportunities. Research capacity, in terms of skills for knowledge generation and translation, is a key performance criteria for advanced roles such as Clinical Nurse Consultant and Nurse Practitioner.

Many Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs suggest that they produce graduates who are prepared to engage in research and apply findings in clinical practice. However, Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs currently present both institutions and students with a number of challenges, largely influenced by the nature of nursing as a practice based profession. These programs have essentially been unregulated by the tertiary sector since 2005 when the Principles for the Provision of Education by Australian Universities ceased to provide specific guidelines for Honours

programs (Kiley, Boud et al., 2009). Whilst Bachelor of Nursing programs are regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA), the NMBA does not consider Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) as they do not lead to qualification as a nurse or midwife. The recent introduction of new national standards for Australian higher education in the form of the Australian Qualifications Framework, however, does provide greater clarity regarding Australian Honours programs. Under this Framework, future graduation statements will include reporting of a definition of the Honours specialisation, as well as the proportion and nature of research or research related study within the actual Honours program (Australian Government- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2016). To understand how this Framework will impact Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs it is important to understand the current state of such programs across Australia.

Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs are prominent in Australian university curriculum and an examination of many university websites will see their Honours programs making multiple claims. However, with increased expectations to continually professionalise nursing, something that can be achieved by nurses gaining higher qualifications such as Honours, minimal data about student experience, course outcomes and graduate attributes are actually currently publically available. There is a need then, to understand current Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs composition, delivery and number of enrolments/graduates to develop evidence that may enable key stakeholders to design appropriate workforce planning measures. This study contributes to this gap by providing a national snapshot of current Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs.

4. Ethics

Approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong for the conduct of the study (Approval No. HE16/323).

5. Methods

An online survey of Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) Coordinators/Heads of Schools of Nursing at Australian Universities was used to collect data. Bachelor of Nursing Honours Coordinators, or Deans/Heads of Schools of Nursing, from Australian Universities were recruited via the Australia and New Zealand Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery and Institutional websites. Potential respondents were sent an email containing information about the study and a link to the online survey. Individuals were asked to pass on the information to relevant colleagues if they were no longer the Coordinator or Head of School. Reminders were sent at one and five weeks after survey distribution to encourage response.

The survey tool was developed by the researchers based on their professional expertise and a review of the literature (Jukkala et al., 2016; Lewis, Brand, Duckett, & Fairbanks, 1997; McInerney & Robinson, 2001; Williams & Snider, 1992). It included both multiple choice and short answer questions about the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program at the respondents' institution. Specifically, questions asked about the program structure, composition, number of enrolments, recent graduates and the key challenges of running the program. The survey was hosted online by Survey Monkey® (2015).

Data were exported from Survey Monkey® (2015) into SPSS for Windows Version 22 (IBM, 2013). Descriptive data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Short answer responses were coded into themes, in a process informed by the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), by two authors (EH and ES).

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