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Beyond orientation: Evaluation of student lifecycle activities for first-year Bachelor of Nursing students

Peta-Anne Zimmerman^{a,b,c,*}, Rebecca Eaton^d, Thea van de Mortel^{a,b,c}

^a School of Nursing and Midwifery, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia

^b Gold Coast Hospital and Health Service, Gold Coast, Australia

^c Menzies Health Institute, Queensland, Australia

^d Griffith Health Executive, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The first year experience has been identified as a key indicator of student success in the higher education environment. Co-curricular activities that support the transition and engagement in university life are key to this, hence a number of initiatives are provided for students to engage in.

Method: To assess the value of co-curricular activities to support the first year student experience, an evaluation of Orientation and Common Time experience for Bachelor of Nursing students in a metropolitan university was undertaken using Lizzio's Five Senses of Success as a framework.

Findings: The evaluation demonstrated that supporting students beyond the Orientation Day can significantly increase participating students' confidence in their senses of resourcefulness, capability and academic culture.

Conclusion: The ongoing integration of co-curricular initiatives into undergraduate programs is supported. **Summary of relevance:** The orientation experience of first-year university students has been well explored, but little has been reported about the efficacy of a dedicated co-curricular program once study has commenced. This is particularly true for undergraduate students studying nursing at university. This paper evaluates the co-curricular activities of the Bachelor of Nursing program at an Australian university to support the transition of undergraduate students and their confidence in engaging in the tertiary environment.

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1. Introduction

In Australia, recent interest in the first year experience (FYE) highlights the challenge of successful transition to university (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The first year is an important area for investigation (Ballantyne, 2012) due to the problem of non-completion of tertiary studies (Krause, 2005). A 2008 retrospective analysis of the average attrition rate of nursing students in seven Australian universities, by Gaynor and colleagues, estimated the average attrition rate in Queensland universities was 24.5%, which is consistent with the findings of a recent systematic review of published primary studies (Gaynor et al., 2007). Yorke and Vaughan (2013) argue that the FYE is exceptionally important as it can augment, lessen or even extinguish a student's chances of accomplishment. While Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordström (2009) add that

the FYE impacts on attrition and consequently on university funding, which is often bound to the number of students enrolled.

Exploration of the first year student experience yields a critical insight into the broader concerns of student engagement, development, and retention with a positive first year being pivotal for a successful undergraduate experience and facilitating adaptation to the educational environment in the long term (Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosentreich, & Dobson, 2013; McKendry, Boyd, & Andrew, 2010). It should therefore be the goal of higher education providers to ensure that first year students are nurtured within an expert community where they are exposed to excellence in scholarship, practice, and supervision to promote successful transition and professional development (Andrew, Robb, Ferguson, & Brown, 2011).

1.1. First-year nursing students

Nursing is a discipline that has moved from vocational to professional status (Andrew et al., 2011), promoting and valuing nurturing and the holistic care of the individual (Lemonidou, Papathanassoglou, Giannakopoulou, Patiraki & Papadatou, 2004). The complex and challenging nature of undergraduate nursing pro-

* Corresponding author at: Office 2.47, Clinical Sciences 2 (G16), Parklands Drive, QLD, 4222, Australia.

E-mail address: p.zimmerman@griffith.edu.au (P.-A. Zimmerman).

grams has been acknowledged, and the literature highlights that it is a steep learning curve for nursing students to adapt to and encompass both an academic and professional environment (Andrew, McGuinness, Reid, & Corcoran, 2009). Early experience is extremely influential in forming personhood and 'moral agency' and is a vital part of the nurse's development (Lemonidou et al., 2004). Andrew et al. (2011) comment that nursing students want to belong to the community, to feel part of the profession, to develop a sense of professional identity, and to be adequately prepared for being both a university student and a novice practitioner from their very early stage of development.

Learning to balance the demands of study, work, family, and social life can be challenging for many nursing students (Andrew et al., 2009; Higginson, 2006), and for some students, entering nursing education can induce fear and generate anxiety (Higginson, 2006). Higginson (2006) explains that some stresses are common to all students, including exams and financial worries, but many stressors are specific to nursing education such as patient death, bodily fluids, clinical procedures, role conflict, and socialisation clash. A study conducted by Mehta, Robinson, and Hillege (2008) discovered that students across three universities were scared of learning science in spite of realising the importance of science subjects in becoming a nurse. Timmins and Kaliszer (2002) find that student nurses can experience both academic and clinical related stressors, which may be caused partly by general 'non-integration' into the university due to frequent rotations between academic and placement settings and not spending enough time in either location sufficient to develop a sense of professional identity and belonging. However, nursing is essentially a practice-based discipline and Henderson, Twentyman, Heel and Llyod (2006) demand that a supportive learning environment be in place for the successful and smooth transfer of learning into a clinical context.

Contemporary student nurses are not a homogeneous group (Andrew et al., 2011). It is reported that the profile has changed to include older, educationally unprepared students, particularly since the early 1990s (Bittman et al., 2004). This trend is significant as mature students experience the battle of balancing academic study and home life more often than younger students (Christensson, Vaez, Dickman, & Runeson, 2011). Particularly, family commitments, financial concerns, and childcare issues are found to be the main aspects impacting on mature age students' study (Montgomery, Tansey, & Roe, 2009). These students report feeling disadvantaged in terms of the maths and science components of the course (Mehta et al., 2008; Stewart, Mort, & McVeigh, 2001), but they tend to self-refer for learning support such as family support and support from other off-campus sources for maintaining motivation and contributing to positive learning experiences (Stewart et al., 2001). As such, mature students require a key approach to enable their successful transition to university study, and tertiary institutions are encouraged to support mature-age students through the adoption of tailored part-time study programs and bursaries (Montgomery et al., 2009).

This paper is an explorative evaluation of: 1) a full day targeted induction "Orientation" and, 2) first semester "Common Time" (CT) academic support sessions, that run for 60 minutes per week, for Bachelor of Nursing (BN) students entering the first year of the program. The results of this evaluation are considered in light of the relevant literature to identify future directions for these initiatives.

2. Method

2.1. Intervention

The targeted 'Orientation' program included welcome addresses from school officials in addition to presentations informing students about their program and the factors that predict success

in first year. Students were then introduced to key support staff and services, both within the school and across the university (e.g. course convenors, BN peer mentors, and advisors from Student Services, Library and Learning Services, and the International Office). Information and resources were provided regarding preparation for clinical placement. Subsequently students were taken on a campus tour and received an introduction to the online learning environment.

The 'CT' program consisted of an 11-week workshop program that was aligned to clinical tasks and assessment across the first semester of study. The program structure across the semester consisted of workshops focusing on professional practice preparation, time management and effective planning, deconstructing semester one written assessment tasks, formatting and referencing guidance, exam planning and preparation, and tips for preparing for Objective Structured Clinical Assessments (OSCA's). A collaborative approach was utilised in workshop design and delivery, involving both school/academic staff and support staff from library and learning services.

2.2. Sample

An initial sample of 182 students from the first-year cohort of the Bachelor of Nursing program at a metropolitan university volunteered to provide pre- and post-evaluative feedback on the first-year activities of Orientation and CT as part of standard quality improvement initiatives.

Demographics were not sought as the size of the overall cohort limits the ability to target initiatives and a whole of School approach is required to support the heterogeneous student body.

2.3. Measures

Pre- and post-evaluative questionnaires for both Orientation and CT were developed based upon the Five Senses of Success Model, which highlights how student success at university is dependent on students' sense of purpose, capability, resourcefulness, connectedness, and academic culture (Lizzio, 2006). The questionnaires were anonymous and utilised as part of continuous quality improvement initiatives. As sense of purpose was determined to be a developmental process that unfolds across the entire student lifecycle, this aspect of Lizzio's (2006) model was not investigated, as both first-year transition activities evaluated in this quality improvement process took place within the first semester of program study.

In order to minimise student burden, each questionnaire was deliberately designed to be brief. The pre- and post-Orientation questionnaires included measures of student capability (e.g. "Overall, how confident do you feel that you can successfully navigate the university's online learning environment?"), resourcefulness (e.g. "How confident do you feel that you know where to go for help or advice?"), connectedness (e.g. "Overall, did you find attending Orientation Day helped you meet new people in your cohort?"), and academic culture ("How confident are you that you know what to expect next week when you turn up for your first classes?"). To assess student confidence in relation to these senses of success, a 7-point Likert-type response scale was utilised ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very confident*). The post-Orientation questionnaire also obtained qualitative feedback, assessing aspects of the day-long program that students enjoyed the most, enjoyed the least, and what other activities or information they would have liked presented during the session.

As the CT workshop series were more focused on preparing students to transition into university study and engage successfully in their coursework and assessment, the CT pre- and post-questionnaires concentrated on assessing the senses of

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