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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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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.

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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.

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

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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.

Keywords:

Nursing Education Research; Surveys and Questionnaires; Curriculum

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.

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.

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 late 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 & Newton, 2017). There are a number of ways to get students to engage with research, many occur at post graduate level but some strategies occur at undergraduate level. In addition to research

subjects undertaken during the student's 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 Consultants and Nurse Practitioners.

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 and 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 that we understand the current state of these 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.

Recruitment

Bachelor of Nursing Honours Coordinators, or 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.

Ethics

Approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the ##### for the conduct of the study (Approval No. ###).

Methods

An online survey of Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) Coordinators / Heads of Schools of Nursing at Australian Universities was used to collect data. 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 on 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 (## and ##).

Results

Respondent demographics

Nineteen individuals (52.7%) responded to the survey with one respondent providing partial data. The majority of respondents were current Bachelor of Nursing Honours Course Coordinators (n=13, 68.4%), whilst others were previous Bachelor of Nursing Honours Course Coordinators (n=2, 10.5%), or Heads of School (n=2, 10.5%), Director of Research Students (n=1, 5.3%) or Bachelor of Nursing Coordinator (n=1, 5.3%). Respondents were employed across Australia, with campuses spread across NSW (n=5, 26.3%), Victoria (n=5, 26.3%), Queensland (n=3, 15.8%), Western Australia (n=3, 15.8%), South Australia (n=2, 10.5%), Australian Capital Territory (n=1, 5.3%).

Four institutions (21.1%) reported that they did not currently offer a program, with most stating that this was due to low demand. Fifteen universities (78.9%) reported currently offering a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program. Most of these 15 programs were offered with the option of full or part-time enrolment (n=13, 86.7%), however, one university only offered the program full-time and another only offered a part-time program. The following data refers to the 15 respondents who reported currently offering a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program.

Course delivery

There was noticeable variation in the delivery of programs. Four programs (26.7%) did not have any on-campus requirements. Five (33.3%) respondents indicated that attendance at

classes or tutorials was compulsory. On campus attendance was required for classes or tutorials, presentation days, workshops and supervision sessions. Two respondents (13.3%) identified that they facilitated virtual participation for students.

Program size

On average, institutions reported 2.58 full-time enrolments in 2016, with one institution reporting 10 students currently enrolled full-time. The mean number of students enrolled in programs has reportedly decreased consistently since 2013, with a mean enrolment of 4.6 students in 2013, 3.9 students in 2014, and 3.0 students in 2015 (Figure 1).

One third respondents expected that all of their current full-time students would complete the course (n=5; 33.3%). However, one respondent (6.7%) reported that half of their current full-time enrolments would complete the course and one respondent (6.7%) estimated that only one-third of their current enrolments would successfully complete.

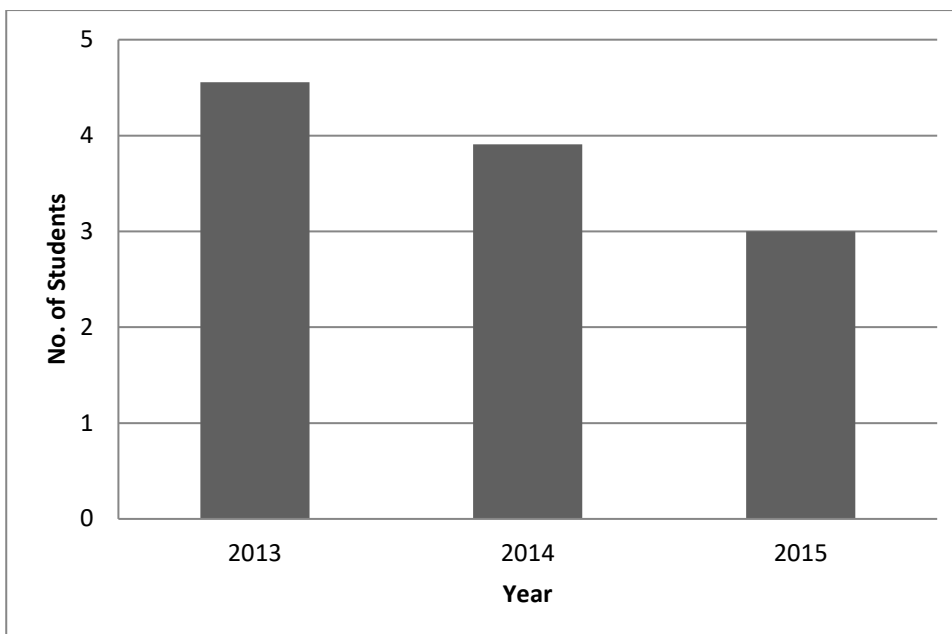


Figure 1: Average BN (Honours) graduates per institution

Supervision

All respondents indicated that students were allocated or chose a supervisor. Most programs allocated two or more supervisors to each Honours student (n=12, 80.0%), although three respondents (20%) described single supervisor models. The qualifications of supervisors were varied but in general they held an academic qualification higher than Bachelor of Nursing (Honours)(Table 1).

Table 1. Supervisor Experience*

Qualifications (n=15)	n	%
Completion of own Masters by Research	10	66.7
Completion of own PhD	8	53.3
Demonstrated research activity	8	53.3
Completion of own Masters by Coursework	6	40.0
Previous completion of research student at BN Honours level	3	20.0
Completion of own BN Honours	2	13.3
Previous completion of research student at Doctoral / Masters level	2	13.3
Other (please specify)	2	13.3
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>We use the program to mentor staff. Often supervisory team is one experienced research active academic and a staff member with an interest in Honours</i>• <i>As an undergraduate the honours student can be supervised by any lecturer.</i>		

*Note: Respondents could choose more than one response

Course Content

Only two respondents (13.3%) reported that their program didn't involve any coursework. Other programs reportedly had up to 50% coursework program with an average coursework component of 31.3% (SD=19.0). All programs included a research project, ranging from 50 to 100% of the total course mark. On average programs consisted of a research project component worth 68.7% of the total mark (SD= 19.0).

Assessment

The number of assessment items ranged from one to fourteen with an average of 6.8 assessment items per program (SD=3.57). Thirteen (86.7%) programs required a thesis be submitted. The length of the thesis required ranged from 10,000 to 25,000 words (Mean=16,730, SD=4,182). Other assessment items included; both written and oral assessments (n=5, 33.3%), written tasks (n=4, 26.7%), oral presentations (n=2, 13.3%), and other assessments (n=3, 20.0%).

Marking

Theses were often marked by staff within the School (n=13, 86.7%) or academics from other universities (n=11, 73.3%). Staff from within the University but outside the School or external clinical experts were used by five respondents respectively (33.3%). Only one respondent (6.6%) reported that the Honours coordinator marked all assessment items.

Post honours

The number of Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) graduates who enrol directly into a PhD appears relatively consistent from 2013 to 2015, with 10 respondents (66.7%) reporting a total of forty one Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) graduates enrolling directly in to Doctoral study in this period. Respondents reported between one and six Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) graduates enrolling in Doctoral study (Mean 3.7; SD 1.5). Despite this pathway, many respondents reported that their graduates largely sought clinical nursing work following graduation.

Rationale for program

Many respondents identified the benefits of Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) completion to entering a Doctoral pathway and developing a research career. However, others described

how it provided “a unique skill set to graduates. In a time of surplus [nurses] it provides an ‘edge’ to candidates”.

When asked why enrolments in Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs are low compared to other disciplines, respondents described how research is “not valued” in clinical settings and does not attract increased remuneration during study or following graduation. Others described how there is a lack of research culture in nursing and an “emphasis on entry to clinical practice”. One respondent also identified that enrolment in a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program adversely affected graduates from gaining employment within acute care new Graduate Nurse programs.

Key challenges & strategies

Respondents were asked to identify what they perceived to be the key challenges in offering the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) course. As can be seen in Table 2, these challenges could be clustered into themes. The three major challenges were around recruitment and small cohorts, that availability of experienced supervisors and navigating the difficulties of balancing clinical work and study.

Table 2. Key Challenges in BN Honours Coordination *

Challenge (n=15)	n	%
Recruitment difficulties / Low Numbers	6	40.0
Supervisors - Support and Development / Availability/ Experience	6	40.0
Supporting students undertaking work and study / new grad programs	5	33.3
Promotion of Importance of Research / value of course	2	13.3
Retention	2	13.3
Appropriate small projects	2	13.3
Supporting novices to contextualize their research, encouraging independent learning	2	13.3
Attendance in class / Logistics across campuses	2	13.3
Reliability of standards for thesis examination / Finding Thesis examiners	2	13.3
Transition to online course	1	6.7

*Note: Respondents could choose more than one response

In terms of the strategies used to assist in program delivery, respondents identified the use of communication technology to facilitate meetings (n=4, 26.7%), promotion of the course throughout the Bachelor of Nursing program (n=3, 20.0%), showcasing previous Honours students (n=3, 20.0%) and demonstrating relevance to clinical practice (n=3, 20.0%) as the key strategies they used. One respondent suggested that they had Honours students join academic research teams and another identified the option to do new graduate nurse program and part time study in the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours).

Discussion

This important study provides a unique insight into Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs across Australia which addresses a gap in knowledge and informs both policy and educational practice. It is clear from this study that Australian Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs show diversity in terms of course structure, delivery of the programs, supervision, assessment items and examinations. Whilst this is not dissimilar to the findings of Honours programs across disciplines (Kiley, Moyes, & Clayton, 2009) or indeed tertiary education in general, it has important implications for the graduate attributes that will be demonstrated at the completion of each program.

What is clear from this study is that the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) courses provide beginning research training, and most involve the completion of a research project under supervision. However, the workload percentage and weighting given to these elements varied. Indeed only 13 (86.7%) programs had a thesis as an assessment item. Despite the variation in curriculum and assessment demonstrated in these data, a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) qualification is an entry pathway to the PhD program in most institutions. As such, it is important to consider the variation highlighted by this study within the process of

curriculum development in order to provide students with an equitable preparation for undertaking future Doctoral research. Perhaps the change in higher education standards currently occurring in Australia makes it timely to review Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) curriculum (Australian Government- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2016). Any curriculum review should include consideration of these data and innovation in program delivery. Strategies such as paid internships and embedding students within existing research teams have shown positive outcomes amongst undergraduate students (Burkhart & Hall, 2015; Klemm, 2012). The support and mentoring resulting from working within a research team has the potential to enhance recruitment and retention of students, as well as facilitating research capacity building. Additionally, the perceived value of the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) qualification to employers may be enhanced working more closely with Health Services to ensure that projects explicitly link with local clinical practice (Reutter et al., 2010; Schumann & McNeill, 2008). Alternatively, linking students with suitable existing clinical projects may strengthen links between the university and health sector.

High quality supervision of Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) students is vital to provide targeted support for research capacity building and high quality research training (Moxham, Dwyer, & Reid-Searl, 2013). It is interesting to note that only just over half (53.3%) of programs reported requiring supervisors to either hold a PhD or have demonstrated research activity. The importance of the research supervisor cannot be overstated. Moxham et al. (2016) highlighted this as one of the most significant factors in successful project completion.

The number of full time Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) enrolments in Australia is low and these data show it to be decreasing over time. Whilst this study did not focus on students and enrolment data, a range of issues including the competing priorities of continuing study

and new graduate employment programs, the economic climate which privileges employment over study (Lim, Nelson, Stimpfel, Navarra, & Slater, 2016; Reutter et al., 2010; Schumann & McNeill, 2008; Taber, Taber, Galante, & Sigsby, 2011), and the rise in Bachelor of Nursing (Advanced) programs that provide advanced clinical study rather than research could be impacting. In other disciplines it has been reported that students' motivations for undertaking Honours included having an employment advantage (Flynn & Brydon, 2013). However, in nursing, completion of a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) alone will likely not provide direct financial gain. The employment advantages of attaining the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) are more likely to be related to evidence of research capacity and the potential to directly enter the PhD pathway.

Further research with students is required to explore the motivations for selecting to either enroll or forgo enrolment in Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs. However, low participation in research training by new graduates has important implications for the nursing profession if it is to grow its' capacity in knowledge development, translation and implementation. Without young graduates gaining the skills to be independent researchers there is likely to be a gap as the nursing clinical and academic workforce ages (Fang & Kesten, 2017).

Limitations

Although this study has provided new insight into Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) offered across Australia, some limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, although we asked all 35 Australian Universities who have a School of Nursing and Midwifery to respond regardless of whether or not they offered a Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) course, not all provided a response. Therefore, whilst our study reports on the 19 programs for which data was provided it is unclear if the non-responders offer this program. A second limitation relates to the fact that data was provided by various academic staff, as the individual staff

member responsible for the course at each institution was unclear from publically available data. Whilst we did ask Heads of School to forward the study information to the relevant staff in their institution, we are unable to ascertain if this occurred where no response was obtained.

Further research investigating the course from a student perspective, including graduates and those high achieving students who do not choose an Honours pathway, using longitudinal methods and including examination of curriculum documents could provide more insight from a different perspective. Closer examination of the content of the coursework components, perhaps through review of curriculum documents, could also reveal more depth than was possible in this online survey. Additionally, international investigations could provide a different insight and comparison of the challenges and innovations.

Conclusion

This study has provided a much needed insight into Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs across Australia. A key challenge was the recruitment of students. Future recruitment strategies need to include targeting first year Bachelor of Nursing students and developing more flexible learning approaches to enable students to balance work, study and family commitments. The majority of graduates were reported to have taken up clinical employment after their course. This outcome needs to be integral to promotion of an Honours degree to ensure high achieving students focused on clinical careers consider Honours as their pathway to nursing leadership. Further research is required to identify the leadership roles these Honours graduates are now fulfilling. Lack of supervision for Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) students was identified as a major barrier to delivering a successful Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) program. Despite nursing being in University education for over 30 years, there remains a need to undertake capacity building within academic staff to

ensure sufficient numbers of research active staff are available to mentor and educate the future generation of nurse researchers. Australian and New Zealand Universities providing nurse education need to learn from other disciplines and from international schools of nursing about how to better promote and deliver Honours programs. With more Australian Schools of Nursing than ever receiving an ERA ranking of five, nursing is in an unprecedented place and we must make the most of this joint success and cease this time to further develop our Honours programs. Perhaps the time is ripe for cross-institutional collaboration to enhance the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) programs and their outcomes for our graduates.

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