

Continuing success of a strategy to support accelerated nursing students at two diverse campuses

Sally Schaffer, Sheila A Doggrell, Adam Polkinghorne, School of Biomedical Sciences,
Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

Abstract

A strategy initiated in 2010 to support and improve the retention rate of diverse cohorts of accelerated nursing students at two QUT campuses continued to be successful in 2012. An additional procedure involving the formation of learning communities was trialled in 2012 to address the social dimension of learning and assist in enhancing the quality of accelerated nurse's first year university experience. A supported formative assessment activity was planned to allow the students to collaborate in learning communities.

Introduction

Few studies have described intervention strategies to address attrition of nurses from accelerated nursing programs. A review of intervention programs by DiBartolo and Seldomridge in 2008 suggested that it was not possible to evaluate these interventions due to poor study design. The strategy devised by the authors to improve student retention and support accelerated nursing students was based on four factors identified by Yorke and Thomas (2003) as having a positive impact on student retention, especially for low socioeconomic (SES) students. These were as follows: providing a supportive institutional environment, giving support during the first year of study, introducing formative assessment early and recognising the importance of the social aspect of learning. The intervention was successful in improving retention rates of these students at QUT's small, low SES regional campus (Polkinghorne & Doggrell, 2012) as well as the large city campus with a diverse student population (Schaffer, Doggrell & Dallemagne, 2012).

The main aim of this paper is to determine whether the intervention has continued to be successful in supporting varied cohorts of accelerated nursing students at two QUT campuses in 2012.

The social dimension of learning includes supportive, collaborative learning as may be provided by learning communities. Tinto (2003) states that such cooperative learning can improve student involvement and learning experiences. These learning communities typically involve the students, academics and student affairs professionals (Tinto, 2003). It was decided that the intervention devised by the authors might be augmented by introducing strategies to enhance the quality of the first year experience of accelerated nursing students.

Thus, the secondary aim was to improve the quality of the first year experience by trialling the formation of learning communities of accelerated nursing students.

The low SES regional campus story so far

Students at the low SES regional campus are domestic students with a non-university diploma in nursing. Accelerated student numbers varied between 15 and 28 and comprised between 29% and 51% of the nursing cohort from 2009 to 2011.

Polkinghorne & Doggrell (2012) noted that in 2009 at the regional campus, withdrawal rates for accelerated students in a second year Bioscience and Pharmacology unit were considerably higher than for continuing students (i.e. students who had completed the first year of their nursing degree) (Figure 1).

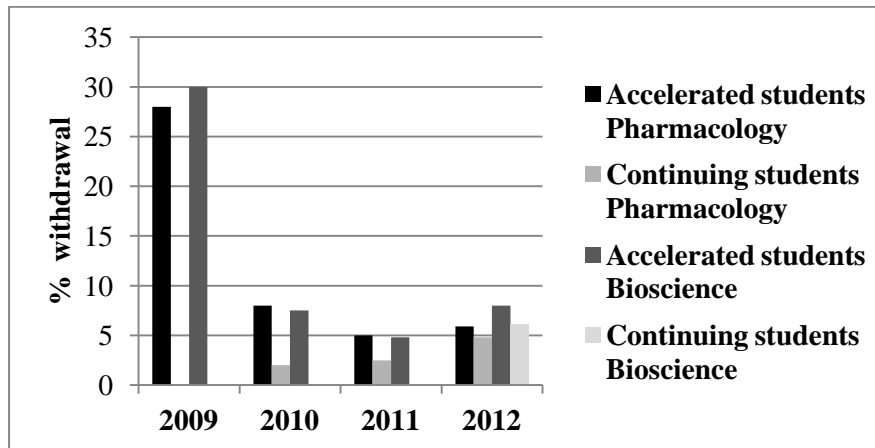


Figure 1. Withdrawal rates of accelerated and continuing students in Pharmacology and Bioscience at the regional campus

An intervention was devised to improve the retention of accelerated students at this campus. Review Bioscience lectures, consisting of material normally given in the first year of the nursing course, was presented to the accelerated students in week 1 of semester in 2010. Following this intervention, a dramatic drop in the withdrawal rate from the Pharmacology and Bioscience units (from about 30% to less than 10%) was observed in this student cohort (Figure 1).

Following the analysis of an accelerated nursing student questionnaire and the actions proposed by Yorke and Thomas (2003), the intervention was expanded in 2011 to include a “Bioscience and Pharmacology for Advanced Standing Students” community website on Blackboard and a workshop in “O week”. The community website provided supportive resources for the students, including a formative assessment activity in the form of on-line MCQ quizzes with feedback; additionally students had access to an on-line tutor.

The decrease in accelerated student attrition was maintained in 2011, to less than 10%, when the full intervention was introduced for these students (Figure 1).

The large, diverse city campus story so far

The accelerated students at this campus include those with a nursing diploma or other non-university qualifications or equivalent life or work experience and university graduates with non-nursing degrees; they were also a mix of international and domestic students. The

number of accelerated students in the Pharmacology unit varied between 96 and 216 between 2009 and 2011.

In 2009 and 2010, withdrawal rates for accelerated students in the Pharmacology unit were higher than for continuing students (Schaffer, Doggrell & Dallemagne, 2012) (Figure 2). The withdrawal rates were also much higher than those of accelerated students completing a Bioscience unit, which was designed specifically for the accelerated nursing students at this campus, with limited knowledge of biosciences. The full intervention devised for the small cohort of domestic students at the regional campus was introduced to the accelerated students at the city campus in 2011.

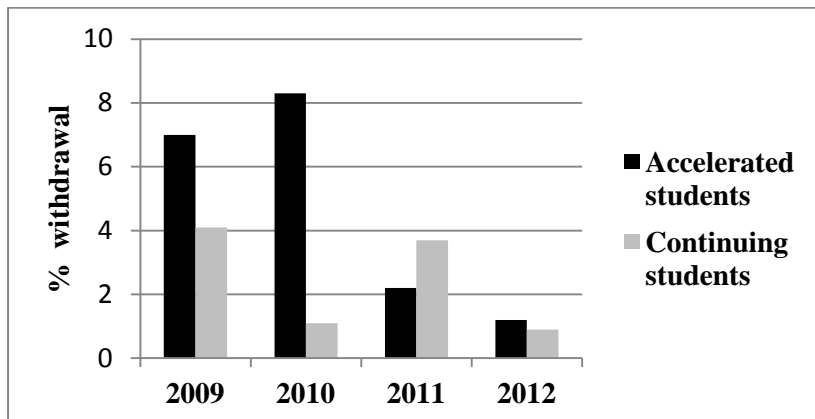


Figure 2. Withdrawal rates of accelerated and continuing students in Pharmacology at Brisbane campus

Withdrawal rates of accelerated students in the Pharmacology unit decreased from 7 or 8% to less than 3% in 2011 (Figure 2). The withdrawal rates of continuing students were less than 4% for this period and withdrawal rates for the Bioscience students between 2009 and 2011 were less than 3%.

Continuing success in 2012

The intervention was continued in 2012 at both campuses, with the exception of the online tutor facility which was removed from the intervention due to the poor student uptake.

There were 19 and 25 accelerated students in the Pharmacology and Bioscience units, respectively, at the regional campus. The number of accelerated students in the Pharmacology unit at the city campus, increased to 328 in 2012; there was an approximate tripling of these student numbers over the four years of this study.

Withdrawal rates of less than 10% were maintained at the regional campus for both units (Figure 1). Withdrawal rates for accelerated Pharmacology students at the city campus continued to mirror the low withdrawal rates of continuing Pharmacology students (Figure 2) as well as accelerated students in the design-specific Bioscience unit.

Trial strategy to enhance the accelerated student experience

In semester 2 in 2012, following discussions with a student support professional and other nursing academics, a further strategy involving the formation of learning communities was devised. A collaborative formative assessment activity was planned to allow the students to work together in learning communities.

Establishing learning communities

Methods: During the “O week” workshop students were asked to form learning communities of four to six students to assist and support each other in both educational and social university activities, during their first semester. They were asked to respond to 13 questions relating to their prior learning experiences and personal characteristics e.g. “I last studied more than 5 years ago” or “I am an international student”. They then introduced themselves to other students attending the workshop with the intention of forming a group that shared the same characteristics; they exchanged contact details. A Bioscience peer learning leader discussed how they might benefit from peer learning communities.

Students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire at the end of the “O week” workshop as well as in week 10 of semester to reflect on aspects of the intervention including the learning community activity.

Results: The students responded well to the activity, interacting with one another and exchanging contact details, however they did not form learning communities. Ninety eight percent of students that attended the “O week” workshop, found the learning community activity to be “valuable and informative”. Three students commented that meeting other students was helpful. There were only 16 student responses to the end of semester questionnaire; three of these students commented that they enjoyed meeting their peers in the learning community activity but found it difficult to maintain contact.

Formative assessment activity

Methods: In the first week of semester the students were invited to a two hour collaborative formative assessment activity in a computer laboratory, to complete the online quizzes from the community website. They were notified about the activity at the workshop and via a notice on the community website. They worked together in groups of up to three at a computer, to complete the quizzes with the support of three nursing academics.

Students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire in week 10 of semester to reflect on aspects of the intervention including the formative assessment activity.

Results: Thirteen students attended the formative assessment activity. Only four of the students who attended the activity responded to the end of semester questionnaire. They all commented that it was a useful exercise as it allowed them to meet and work with their peers as well as reinforce some of their knowledge. Those who did not attend the activity stated that they had completed the online quizzes themselves or did not have the time or did not see the need to attend the activity.

Discussion

During the three years of the employment of the intervention, it is possible that increased engagement with staff at the regional campus due to the small class sizes, may have accounted for the improved retention rates. However this same intervention was successfully employed at the city campus despite the greater diversity of student backgrounds, larger number of accelerated students and the resulting reduced opportunity for interaction between staff and individual students. The maintenance of improved retention rates at both campuses over the period of study indicates the intervention has continued to be successful in supporting accelerated nursing students at QUT. Although the number of accelerated students at the regional campus is small, the retention of low SES students is a key QUT priority (Blueprint 3 2011-2016).

It might appear that the learning community activity was not successful in that the students did not form communities but rather introduced themselves to a large number of their peers attending the workshop. There are a number of possible reasons as to why they did not form learning communities including the need to have more time to get to know one another and not appreciating the value of such communities. However, comments made by the students suggested that they did appreciate the social connections that were made during this activity.

The attendance at the collaborative formative activity and response rates to the evaluation questionnaire were low. As a consequence, it is difficult to gain a clear picture of the overall enhancement of the student's experience. However, this activity allowed for social interaction, thus would have helped to enhance the social dimension of learning and allowed students to form a relationship with some of their peers and academic staff.

Both the learning community activity and the formative activity were evaluated positively by some of the accelerated students and would appear to have enhanced the quality of their early university experience.

This trial strategy will be further developed to maintain or improve the first year experience of accelerated nurses at QUT. Key future considerations that may help cement the formation of learning communities will include (i) more input from student support professionals, (ii) the introduction of additional formal activities during the workshop and (iii) improved linkage to existing peer learning communities.

Questions

How can we be more successful in the formation and persistence of learning communities?

References

Blueprint 3 2011-2016. (2011). Retrieved from

http://cms.qut.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/71113/qut-blueprint-2011.pdf

DiBartolo, M.C., & Selomridge, L.A. (2008). A review of intervention studies to promote NCLEX-RN success of baccalaureate students. *Computers, Informatics, Nursing*, 26(5), 78S-83S.

Polkinghorne, A., & Doggrell, S.A. (2012). A successful strategy for supporting low socioeconomic and accelerated students studying Biosciences in their first year of study.

Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers12/Papers/2F.pdf

Schaffer, S., Doggrell, S. A., & Dallemagne, C. (2012). Transferring a successful strategy for supporting accelerated nursing students from a small to a large cohort. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers12/Papers/7F.pdf

Tinto, V. (2003). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on student success. *Higher Education Monograph Series, 2003-1*. Higher education program, Syracuse University.

Yorke, M., & Thomas, L. (2003). Improving the retention of students from lower socioeconomic groups. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 25, 63-74.