

Undergraduate Nursing Studies: The First-Year Experience

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Abstract

The transfer of nursing education into the tertiary section in Australia aimed to address a number of issues for nursing, the most significant of which was to enhance the status of the profession. A side effect of the establishment of university-based nursing programs is the increased flexibility that makes studies in nursing an option for students who may otherwise not have had this opportunity. Such accessibility is not without problems as many students enter tertiary nursing programs after a prolonged period of absence from a scholarly environment. Those who do enrol directly from other forms of study are often overwhelmed by the specific requirements of nursing programs. In order to promote student succession and reduce attrition, universities have established a number of mechanisms to support students as they transition to the tertiary environment. This article reports on a survey of 112 nursing students enrolled in their first year of study at a regional university in Australia. Findings are presented under the major areas of questions, these being, *issues faced in adapting to the role of a university student in the first year of study, services or support mechanisms accessed to assist in transition to the role of university student, and services lacking that would have assisted in the transition to the role of university student*. These findings are then discussed in the context of existing knowledge of the first-year experience of university students.

Keywords: baccalaureate nursing programs; first-year student experience; pre-service nursing education; undergraduate nursing education.

Over recent decades, tertiary education in Australia has become increasingly more accessible than was previously the case. The transfer of nursing education into the university sector has raised the status of the profession while providing opportunities for individuals to secure a future in nursing that may otherwise have been out of reach. In particular, a large proportion of mature-aged students are now embarking on a career in nursing and fulfilling a

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goal that had previously seemed unobtainable. The transition to tertiary study, whether directly from secondary schooling or after a lengthy break from study, can be a daunting and often overwhelming experience. In order to develop strategies to address the needs of these students, it is necessary to understand the issues that are faced and the adequacy of existing mechanisms to facilitate a supportive environment. This article reports on a survey by a regional Australian university that aimed to identify the needs of beginning nursing students and develop strategies to reduce attrition and promote success in their undergraduate studies.

Background

The transition to study can be complex and stressful for many students (Fisher & Hood 1987; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Pitkethly & Prosser 2001), and nursing students are not immune to these challenges (Bittman et al., 2004; Mehta, Robinson, & Hillegrass, 2008; Norman, Buerhaus, Donelan, McCloskey, & Dittus, 2005; Timmins & Kaliszer, 2002). A successful transition to the first year of study increases student satisfaction with their program (Burnett, 2006; Krause, 2005) and is an important factor in academic and career attrition (Bittman et al., 2004; Burnett, 2006).

An Australian study on the experiences of first-year students identified financial concerns, heavy workload, motivation to study and feeling uncomfortable in group discussions as key challenges (James et al., 2010). Comparisons of data from 2009 and 2004 showed students were getting better at managing their commitments (James et al., 2010). In 2009, students were spending less time and fewer days on campus, and fewer had made close friends. Increased use of Information and Communication Technologies was seen as a positive for students, but reduced the interaction between students and staff. Similar findings were reported in the United Kingdom (Yorke & Longden, 2008); these, along with poor choice of program, teaching quality and inadequate academic progress, were factors that contributed to course withdrawal.

Few studies have explored the experiences of health science students' first year of tertiary study. Thalluri and King (2009) found similar experiences in relation to academic life, social life and teaching and learning environments for first-year nursing (both internal and external) and health science (nursing and medical radiation) students. The experience of external nursing students was consistently different, with significant gaps between expectations and perceptions for academic support and ability to balance study, work and personal commitments. For first-year oral hygiene students in South Africa, the transition to tertiary study raised issues of a much more fundamental nature: language (terminology and vocabulary, as well as English being a second language) and academic development (including the ability to write essays in sufficient depth and with appropriate phrasing, strategies for learning and independent learning) (McMillan, 2005).

For many first-year nursing students, learning to balance the demands of education, work, home and social life can be challenging (Andrew, McGuinness, Reid, & Corcoran, 2009; Bittman et al., 2004; Higginson, 2006; Mehta et al., 2008). For instance, Dzurec, Allechin and Engler (2007) report that some students express concern about making the transition to study. For some students, embarking on nursing education induced fear and caused anxiety (Higginson, 2006). A small sample of first-year nursing students ($n = 5$) described sources of stress that are common to all students, including exams and financial worries, but many stressors were specific to nursing education, for example, patient death, bodily fluids/clinical procedures, role conflict (if previously employed as an auxiliary nurse

prior to embarking on preregistration nurse training), and socialisation conflict (Higginson, 2006). Despite recognising the importance of science subjects in becoming a nurse, students across three universities reported they were fearful of learning science (Mehta et al., 2008).

The profile of nursing students is also changing to include older, educationally unprepared students (Bittman et al., 2004), a significant phenomena as mature students felt the conflict of balancing education and home life more often than their younger counterparts (Christensson, Vaez, Dickman, & Runeson, 2011). In particular, family commitments, financial and childcare concerns were found to be the main impacting factors on study (Montgomery, Tansey, & Roe, 2009). Mature students reported feeling disadvantaged in relation to the maths and science components of the course (Stewart, Mort, & McVeigh, 2001; Mehta et al., 2008), but were more likely to self-refer for learning support than younger counterparts who entered the course through traditional avenues (Stewart et al., 2001). Family support and support from other off-campus sources were seen as important for maintaining motivation and contributed to positive learning experiences (Stewart et al., 2001). As such, mature students require a strategic approach in enabling their successful transition to study, a factor that Montgomery et al. (2009) suggest should encourage tertiary institutions to support mature-age students through the facilitation of tailored part-time study programs and bursaries.

The complexity of undergraduate nursing programs, coupled with the diversity of this study group, establishes a unique context for students embarking on these studies. The study described in this article sought to explore the experiences of beginning nursing students in adapting to their first year of study.

Study Design

This study employed an online survey to gather data from the 1703 students enrolled and active in the Bachelor of Nursing program. Following approval from the university ethics committee, an invitation to participate was sent via email to all students currently enrolled in the nursing program with a link to an externally hosted web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire was a simple design, reliant on face and content validity assessment by a team of academics overseeing a first-year student project. The tool comprised three questions:

- What issues did you face in adapting to the role of a university student in your first year of study?
- What services or support mechanisms did you access to assist in your transition to the role of university student?
- What services do you believe were lacking that would have assisted you in your transition to the role of university student?

A total of 121 students responded ($n = 121$), representing a response rate of approximately 7% of the total student cohort. This figure is significantly less than the minimum 26% common with online surveys (Hamilton, 2009). Numerous factors contribute to response rates in online surveys (Fan & Yan, 2010), including lack of familiarity with computers and the internet. As discussed, poor computer literacy was identified in this particular cohort, a factor that may have contributed to the low response rate.

On the completion of data collection, a thematic analysis was undertaken to identify major concepts evident in the respondents' comments.

Findings

Major themes identified in the analysis of data are discussed in the contexts of the questions posed in the survey to identify:

- issues faced in adapting to the role of a university student in the first year of study
- services or support mechanisms accessed to assist in transition to the role of university student
- services lacking that would have assisted in the transition to the role of university student.

Issues faced in adapting to the role of a university student in the first year of study

The strongest theme in participant responses to this question concerned issues with basic student skills and adjusting to the student role, including ‘the initial shock of study’, ‘the actual task of studying’, ‘juggling study commitments and meeting deadline’”, and ‘how to understand what was expected of me as a student’.

The information provided was so vast and in many different areas that it really was quite difficult to collate/understand it all. It took many hours to work it out, and I was still left with many questions after orientation. As I have never formally studied before, I had to make quite a few life changes and sacrifices. It also took me quite a while to commence study and I feel a lack of confidence as to whether I am studying enough / taking the information on board/am I going to pass etc?

Participants varied in their identification of factors exacerbating their adaptation to the student role, including capability, scaffolding by the university and personal history:

...questioning whether I was ‘smart’ enough to do this...

Universities assume that everyone knows what being a student means—they don't.

...adjusting to time management and the process of study and essay writing after having had a 5-year break between high school and university.

Related to student skills, participants also reported difficulty with navigating the university’s websites. These difficulties ranged from participants’ relative unease with basic computer and internet functions, to participants’ challenges with finding relevant information online. Additional issues aligned with the theme of gaining basic student skills included time management, adjusting to a realistic course load, and issues related to being a distance education student—including feeling isolated and perceived differences in how distance and face-to-face students are treated.

Another strong theme concerned participants’ development of work, school, and family life balance. Many of these responses characterised participants as struggling with ‘getting the family used to my study routine’, ‘strain on family time’, and ‘juggling full-time shift work and studying externally’. Several participants specified issues related to childcare. One subtheme within the overall topic of work–school–family balance was related to finances. Some participants reported issues with reduced income due to newly limited time for employment as well as the need to adjust to increased expenses related to their schooling.

Approximately 10% of participants had no issues to report, with some of these participants reporting that prior university experience had helped their current adaptation to university life.

Services or support mechanisms accessed to assist in transition to the role of university student

Responses to this question had the lowest word count among the three questions and were often simple lists of services with little justification or further description. Participant responses to this question were primarily clustered around interpersonal interaction, rather than static information reified in resource webpages and other publications. Participants listed the Academic Learning Centre (ALC) and the Student Services Department (SSD) as two principal points of contact.

Was very behind in the first month of uni, was concerned and my mother suggested I contact the counsellor/student helper person, she helped me ALOT[sic]. And gave me direction with the Moodle site. I got more assistance from ALC [Academic Learning Centre].

The ALC offers both general information and one-on-one support in the fundamental aspects of student life, including academic writing, maths, and computer skills:

...the [ALC] was amazing—helped me through a lot of essays.

I accessed the [ALC], they have been wonderful throughout the whole of my study.

Another common point of personal contact was the Orientation Week, which is provided by the SSD:

On-site orientation was the best thing that I did as I met other students who I keep in touch with and I had a full understanding of what to do, where to start, and who to speak to if I needed assistance. Being told in O week that you will only fail if you don't ask is so true. Everyone at [the university] has been helpful, although sometimes difficult to contact directly.

Participants also listed academic staff (lecturers), library staff, student counsellors, and students' mentors as important and useful resources.

It is important to note, however, that participants also turned to non-administrative resources for support. One strong resource listed was other students. Participants described turning to students in their classes, in online forums and discussion groups, and to 'former students' for ideas and for support. Another strong resource was family and friends:

I was unaware there were any [support services]. No one in my direct family has an education above grade 11. My partner is helping me a lot as he is currently studying.

Support from friends mainly, to help juggle children.

Services lacking that would have assisted in the transition to the role of university student

The strongest theme in the participant responses to this question described their challenges with gaining information—about the student role, about the basics of their academic program, and the available resources.

...I did struggle with finding information to begin with on what was required etc. It was more of a case of knowing the right questions to ask and knowing what exactly you needed to know. Which for someone who hasn't embarked on uni was difficult to know what I needed to ask.

To help their initial adaptation to the university environment, participants requested 'a hard copy information pack' or a 'welcome pack' that was 'all together, basic and clear on where to find everything!' This information pack would include 'a fact sheet that says, here are all the numbers, web addresses etc., this is who you call for what...'. These participant

comments reflect an overarching challenge with gaining initial access to university life: ‘Just knowing who to ask and what to ask’.

Participants also wanted training in basic computer skills, in course websites (including registration) and in Moodle™ (the university’s learning management system [LMS]) prior to the start of actual coursework, with one participant suggesting that LMS training is a mandatory undertaking. Many of these participants wanted this training to occur in a face-to-face setting, although one participant wanted a ‘quick start guide type thing for Moodle’ as well.

As a mature student (as perhaps many flex students are), just the use of the computer system to find what was even needed for studies. I could never work out where anything was, e.g. how to enrol in res school and the library is really complicated when using online databases. Had I started my degree on line, I would have given it in. I started by attending [another] uni... then changed over as it did not fit with being a single parent of 4 children.

In terms of communication and feedback, participants wanted increased interaction with lecturers, whether framed as ‘the ability to become personal with lecturers’, ‘support from lecturers’, or ‘more opportunities for engagement for distance education students’. Responses in this theme included those wanting assistance with academic matters as well as those who simply wanted to communicate with lecturers who were ‘approachable’.

One inconsistency in the data across the three questions was student awareness of the actual services available to them. On the one hand, participants suggest that information about services is difficult to find: ‘It’s not so much the lack of services but the lack of knowledge about them’. On the other hand, participants suggested that: ‘all services were good and readily available’. While the current dataset makes further exploration of this inconsistency difficult, it is useful to acknowledge that students can engage the available information resources in varying ways.

For this question, almost 20% of the participants reported that there were no services lacking for them, with answers ranging from ‘can’t say yet’ to ‘nil’ to ‘None. [The university] has a tremendous amount of services to help’.

Discussion

The decision to attend university is complex and requires many layers of adaptation to secure success. Students enrolled in nursing programs have varied and diverse social backgrounds. Many are women aged between 25 and 37 years, married with young families, low socioeconomic status and first in family at university (Australian Government, 2011). In our study, admission to university for students in the nursing program was reported as often challenging, bringing disruption to family life, instilling self-doubt in being able to achieve and consequently reflected in students’ interpretation and evaluation of their studies. Participants described a myriad of disruptions resulting in a constant juggling of home, family, social, fiscal and academic issues. Coping with feelings of failure or a diminishing lack of self-confidence was a common catch cry from participants. These feelings of inadequacy or discomfort with the new challenges of study and assessment are in line with the findings of earlier studies (James et al., 2010). In addition, trying to juggle competing demands of study and home life induced in many students’ feelings of psychological distress (Dzurec et al., 2007; Christensson et al., 2011).

Participants predominantly expressed concerns in relation to lack of preparedness and lack of skills to adjust to the role of a university student. Issues of computer literacy, time management and feeling isolated as a distance education student were commonly identified. In concert with studies of Thalluri and King (2009), our study found differences in the experiences of students studying at a distance, with loneliness and isolation as contributing factors to students' early exit. Becoming and being a successful student requires constant and appropriate information and support, tailored to meet individual needs. For some participants, basic computer skills were essential in helping them fashion a route to becoming successful. Others, however, revealed that recovering relevant resources was almost impossible and the systems within the university proved difficult to navigate or find the relevant information. Their perceived loneliness and isolation impacted their abilities to seek help and assistance. Many identified the realisation of what they *do not* know was an added challenge.

Participants highlighted the need to communicate with approachable academics and it was clear from our research that students will choose to persist with study if they have a strong connection to their learning journey and lecturers most often facilitate this connection. McMillan (2005) found similar outcomes in their study with students of oral hygiene; especially those with English as a second language. For some, on-site orientation was essential in connecting to the university environment. Smedley and Morey (2010) suggest that student satisfaction with their learning environment can be increased where there is ongoing student involvement and the student feels part of the community of practice. Students in our study spoke highly of two systems within the university that assisted them in this venture. They also rated highly those specific individuals who were a valuable resource and helped them in their quest to success. For some, family and friends were invaluable, while others spoke mainly of academics, clinicians, peers, mentors and organisational support personnel who rallied to assist them when they were experiencing difficulties.

Andrew et al., (2009) identified that maintaining sustainable relationships with support staff and networks results in students being able to achieve better performance outcomes and study successes. Participants identified that more opportunities were required for students in terms of support, interaction and engagement; especially for those studying in the distance education mode. A strong resource cited by participants was other students and the interactions and learning that occurs through online forums and discussion groups. Social mediums are well documented as pivotal to learning where students can synthesis knowledge, construct meaning and make connections within a supportive environment.

Poor experiences for nursing students of academic studies and within the clinical environment in their first year of study can and does impact on satisfaction and program retention rates and dissatisfaction is likely to remain with the student throughout their candidature (Baykal, Sokmen, Korkmaz, & Akgun, 2005). The need for a well-integrated support system is highlighted as a key element for a successful first year; with universities, clinicians and key stakeholders working together to provide protected time for mentoring, student-friendly leadership and to ensure realistic expectations for those involved with first-year nursing students (Andrew et al., 2009). Complex processes are required to ensure that universities can effectively meet the needs of students in a constantly changing and evolving environment and greater collaboration of all stakeholders is required to promote a positive learning experience for students (Henderson, Beattie, Boyde, Storrie, & Lloyd, 2006).

Conclusion

The issues faced by students beginning a program of tertiary study are varied and complex. Nursing students in particular face additional challenges as a result of the requirement to participate in clinical placements. Mature-age students that make up a significant proportion of the nursing cohort face unique issues as they attempt to adapt to the demands of study while juggling existing work and family commitments. The availability of distance education offerings that are often attractive to this group of students often adds to the anxiety of the beginning student where isolation and information deficits can arise from this mode of delivery. Possessing an understanding of the issues and needs of beginning nursing students is the first step in developing strategies to ensure a quality, effective learning experience.

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