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Karen Francis
University of Tasmania

Kathleen Tori
University of Tasmania

Ha Dinh
University of Tasmania

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**Strategies to support the growth and evolution of nursing and midwifery education in
Tasmania**

Karen Francis,* Kathleen Tori,* Ha Dinh*

* School of Nursing, University of Tasmania

Abstract

There is a prediction of significant nursing workforce shortfalls across Australia. Tasmania, as an island state of Australia, is more sensitive to such a shortage due to the existing challenges associated with pre-service and postgraduate nurse education, training, recruitment and retention. This paper describes strategies adopted by the School of Nursing (SoN), University of Tasmania to ensure the preparation and sustainability of the registered nurse workforce that is pivotal for state-wide healthcare. Due to lower levels of educational attainment amongst Tasmanian school leavers, the SoN has developed alternative pathway programs that offer entry for students who do not meet standardised entry. Staged progression to pedagogically sound online teaching platforms, pre-requisite limitations and uncoupling subject contents are strategies that have been incorporated in new undergraduate curriculum. The SoN's postgraduate program includes a suite of 24 specialisations including a post-registration midwifery specialisation and students have the flexible option to exit the program at a graduate certificate, graduate diploma or finish at a master's level. Partnerships with local industry, nursing associations, healthcare consumers, other health disciplines and students ensure that the SoN is responsive to sector needs and regulatory authority requirements to graduate qualified registered nurses serving in highly-demanding healthcare environments.

I INTRODUCTION

The education of future generations of nurses is a strategic investment of the Australian government to secure the health and wellbeing of all Australians. Nurses are the largest group of health professionals in Australia and are employed in a broad range of practice contexts that are inclusive of primary health, acute, aged and palliative care, policy, research and education (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2019). In Tasmania, an island state, nurses are broadly distributed similar to the mainland, however, the concentration of this workforce is in the major centres namely Hobart, the capital city in the south, Launceston in the north, and to a lesser extent Burnie in the north-west of the state. University of Tasmania (UTAS) is the primary provider of pre and post registered nurse education in Tasmania. The School of Nursing (SoN), UTAS offers an undergraduate bachelor level nursing program that leads to licensure as a registered nurse (RN) by the nursing regulatory authority, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA). The SoN is the largest provider of post graduate nursing specialisations to master's level in Australia. In addition, the SoN offers registered midwives a specialisation option and is planning to offer a Master of Nurse Practitioner in the near future. Higher degree research programs are also a feature of the SoN education program profile. Establishing and maintaining partnerships with health, aged care and other key stakeholders is central to the governance of these programs and to ensuring alignment to service needs. Workforce projections have flagged that there will be shortages of nurses within Tasmania that require collaborative planning between government, industry and the SoN if this crisis is to be averted (Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). This paper discusses the challenges that are faced by Tasmania in meeting the health needs of the population and details the role of the SoN in securing the existing and future nursing workforce capability and capacity.

II TASMANIA'S HEALTH PROFILE

Tasmania is a small island located on the south-eastern end of the Australian mainland. The population of Tasmania is currently 524,170 and is expected to grow to 650,000 by 2050 (Population Australia, 2020). The population is characterised by an equal gender distribution (51% female); 4% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 13% are of a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Inclusive of rural localities, 33% of Tasmanians live in the most disadvantaged areas of the state (Department of Health, 2019). Currently there are 120,000 Tasmanians who live in poverty, the highest rate of poverty in Australia (TasCOSS, 2020). The health of Tasmanians is influenced by socioeconomic disadvantage, health literacy, age, ethnicity and place of residence (Department of Health, 2013; Ferguson, 2015). Tasmania's population, like the rest of Australia, is ageing due to low fertility rates and increasing longevity (COTA Tas, 2017). A public health report for Tasmanians has stated that males are expected to live to 79 years of age and females to 83 years (Department of Health, 2019). These populations characteristically have high rates of smoking, obesity and alcohol consumption while physical exercise and the consumption of fruit and vegetables is inadequate. The ageing of the Tasmanian population is anticipated to realise an increased burden of chronic disease. In 2014-2015, 56% of Tasmanians aged 15 years and over reported having three or more chronic health conditions (Department of Health, 2019). The most common self-reported chronic conditions in this survey were long-term mental health problems (21%), cardiovascular disease (7.7%), diabetes mellitus (5.3%), and COPD (3.5%) (Department of Health, 2019). In 2016, two-thirds of all deaths in Tasmania (3054 of 4595 deaths) were related to various cancers, cardiovascular diseases and respiratory diseases (Department of Health, 2019).

III THE TASMANIAN NURSING AND MIDWIFERY WORKFORCE

In 2019, there were 8,892 nurses at various scope of practice employed in Tasmania; of this 81.4% were RNs (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2019). The average age of RNs is 44.1 years, they work 32.5 hours per week and 88.7% identify as female (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2019). Similar to other states, RNs in Tasmania are employed in a broad range

of settings and within these contexts of practice, RN roles vary depending on their experience, expertise, workplace culture and resourcing (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2019). Nursing and midwifery workforce planning is a key concern and focus of Government strategy across all states and territories in Australia (Health Workforce Australia, 2014). A health workforce report signalled that by 2025 Tasmania would experience a significant nursing shortage (Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). The expected nursing shortage was attributed to ageing, high attrition rates, part-time and casual employment, and recruitment challenges particularly to rural and remote areas (Mather et al., 2020).

IV NURSING EDUCATION INNOVATIONS AT UTAS

A *Pre-service and undergraduate nursing education*

UTAS is the major tertiary education provider for Tasmanians. The SoN plays a leading role in the preparation and sustainability of the RN workforce that is pivotal for state-wide healthcare. The Bachelor of Nursing (BN) is a three-year equivalent degree that leads to registration as a generalist nurse. Unlike other Australian universities, UTAS offers this degree in three different formats, varying from a two- to four-year pathway duration, while curriculum is identical for all versions of the BN. Entry criteria for the two-year program, however, is higher level than for the three- or four-year programs, reflecting the challenges associated with the concentrated teaching sessions and reduced non-teaching periods that feature in this program. Streamlining the BN (two-year program) enhances the pipeline of graduates that has and will continue to address nursing workforce shortages (Health Workforce Australia, 2014).

Recruitment of undergraduate students in Tasmania is a consistent challenge, particularly, in the north-west of the state that is socio-economically disadvantaged across all health and education parameters, including lower levels of educational attainment of all age sectors (Cranston et al., 2014). Therefore, the conceptualisation of innovative pathway programs that offer alternate entry for students who do not meet standardised entry criteria is essential for undergraduate curricula such as the BN (Australian Nursing & Midwifery Accreditation Council, 2017). The adoption of a more flexible educational approach, staged progression to pedagogically sound online teaching platforms, multifaceted entry pathways, pre-requisite limitations and uncoupling subject contents are strategies that have been incorporated into new curriculum development. The purported changes to the more traditional course offerings facilitate students' successful completion within the scheduled timeframes and ensure workplace applicability.

A NMBA accreditation has been obtained for the new BN curriculum. It is underpinned by a primary health care framework that reflects the refocussing of global, national and the Tasmanian governments' commitment to preventative health care. The curriculum is future focussed and inclusive of content such as higher-level management, leadership and budgeting knowledge and skills, enhanced clinical reasoning and practical skills including physical and mental health assessment that industry partners highlighted were not well developed in current student cohorts. Students who are theoretically and clinically prepared and possess the resilience and flexibility to learn and adapt to multiple clinical environments will have the capability and capacity to meet service needs.

The SoN is committed to quality learning and teaching that is achieved through the adoption of innovative technologies that enhance the flexibility and delivery of a student focused curriculum and is supported by high quality simulation activities which are widely employed to improve clinical skills (Hardenberg, Rana & Tori, 2019; Cant & Cooper, 2017). Ensuring that the student experience is at the forefront of governance and development at UTAS, nursing curricula is informed by internal review processes and broad representation of external stakeholders, industry partners including public and private health services, non-government organisations and specialist professional nursing affiliations. All accredited programs align with the RN, Midwifery and Nurse Practitioner Standards for practice as mandated by the NMBA (2016). Additionally, the SoN's learning and teaching research and scholarships inform curriculum development and the broader global knowledge base.

B Postgraduate nursing education

The SoN at UTAS offers the largest and most comprehensive suite of postgraduate nursing specialisations in Australia. Currently, 24 specialisations are offered that reflect current and projected future nursing workforce requirements (School of Nursing University of Tasmania, 2020). The majority of the specialisations are endorsed by the respective nursing specialist colleges who work with the SoN to ensure that content is contemporary and reflective of the realities of practice. An early collaboration between the SoN and St Vincent's Private Hospital, Sydney, has demonstrated that the relationships between industry partners and the SoN is crucial to the success of the post graduate suite (Walker, 2005). A recent addition to our suite has been a Graduate Certificate/Diploma in Clinical Midwifery for registered midwives. Consultation with midwives, employers and Government revealed there was a great need for advanced practice initiatives for midwives particularly related to caring for sick babies that was not available (Bryant, 2009). The SoN was able to respond quickly to this need that has resulted in student enrolments immediately after the programs became available. Registered nurses in Tasmania and Australia, more broadly, are able to enter at the graduate certificate level, choosing either a generic or specialisation study pattern. Students have the option to exit following completion of the graduate certificate, or they can choose to continue studying to the graduate diploma level and then exit, or finish at master's level. The SoN's partnerships with local and rural health care organisations facilitate clinical nurses being supported by their employment agencies organisations to undertake postgraduate studies in areas of specialisation that interest them and where workforce development is required. Completion of postgraduate studies provide opportunities for RNs to advance careers in areas of chosen practice (Shalala et al., 2011). Ongoing sustainability of the Master of Nursing is contingent on quality, content relevance and flexibility of delivery.

C Short courses initiatives

The SoN is committed to providing targeted, dynamic, contemporary and affordable programs. Most recently the SoN developed a number of non-award short courses following feedback from industry and the Office of the Chief Nurse and Midwife, Tasmania. These initiatives included series titled 'Midwives in Conversation' and 'Enrolled Nurse Masterclass'. They were delivered on all three campuses in Tasmania and on the Sydney campus, with participants attending supported by their employment agencies. The success of these programs is indicative of the strength of the collaboration between the SoN and stakeholders, the SoN's credibility, ability to respond in a timely manner and the commitment of the academic and professional staff who, in consultation with stakeholders, develop, implement and revise programs to meet workforce needs.

V COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO SECURE NURSING AND MIDWIFERY WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY

Collaborations and partnerships support the SoN to develop and deliver nursing and midwifery programs that meet immediate and future needs. The SoN has established and is committed to maintaining collaborative partnerships with stakeholders that include but are not limited to local industry, nursing colleges and associations, healthcare consumers, other health and social care disciplines and students. Ongoing regular dialogue affirms common agendas that realise successful recruitment of nursing graduates and access of RNs to specialist and higher degree nursing programs, often supported financially by employers and UTAS, improve workforce capability, capacity and workforce sustainability (Health Workforce Australia, 2014). Working together ensures that the SoN and its partners are able to share ideas, be proactive and responsive, support career advancement of nurses, and promote innovative practice and the development of new models of care that ultimately realise improved health outcomes (Health Workforce Australia, 2014). These relationships ensure that the SoN appreciates and is responsive to sector needs and regulatory authority requirements. Further, interprofessional collaborations that support and enhance innovative educational experiences are central to realisation of common agendas shared between the SoN and its collaborative partners. Diversity

of engagement with stakeholders contributes to curricula reform that supports the preparedness of nursing graduates for practice.

To achieve the desired levels of stakeholder participation, consultative engagement must be iterative and dynamic to facilitate responsiveness as unexpected challenges arise. For example, in the current environment, the impact of COVID-19 has influenced undergraduate nursing student ability to attend professional clinical practice that is mandated by the regulatory authority. Discussions with industry stakeholders led to new options for students to enter practice environments as clinical areas moved from high-risk to low-risk workplaces, ensuring both patient and student safety.

VI CONCLUSION

A consistent nursing workforce in Tasmania is essential for the population to have equitable and affordable access to quality health care. The strategies that the SoN is developing in undergraduate and postgraduate nursing and midwifery curriculum are responsive to sector needs and regulatory authority requirements. The ability to be agile, responsive and proactive ensures nursing education at the SoN, UTAS continues to meet health service demands with both generalist and specialist prepared RNs who have the capability and capacity to work in highly demanding health care environments.

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