

The Vital Bridge Transforming Postgraduate Nurse Education And Employability To Employment

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Abstract

Today's universities are constantly looking for a competitive edge in delivering a postgraduate nurse curriculum with a positive outcome of future employability and employment. In this respect, Monash University Malaysia is no different since market differentiation is important for the survival of Private Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia. Currently, some Malaysian public and private universities do offer specific postgraduate courses in advanced clinical skills nurse practice which have been accredited by Malaysia Qualifications Agency and recognized by both Ministry of Higher Education as well as Ministry of Health. In addition to that, the Nurses Board Malaysia, also consider the postgraduate courses that are currently offered to be too generic with very little application of theory to practice in the clinical healthcare settings. In view of the gap that exists in the present postgraduate courses, this paper would critically examine the preliminary market information gathered on the requirements of higher educational needs of nurses in Malaysia. The future development of an appropriate higher education course, "the vital bridge", is in the planning stage. It is expected to be both vigor and relevant to today's Malaysian nurses' employability and employment.

Keywords: Postgraduate nurse education, marketing, employability, employment, Malaysia

Introduction

“Knowing is not enough; one must apply,
Willing is not enough; one must do”

Goethe

Up to date from a global perspective, the nurses' profession continues to be regarded as an oppressed one even though there are nurses in some developed countries who are earning higher salaries with higher status than others. In spite of progress made, nurses continue to struggle with issues of power and status [1] (Some factors associated with an oppressed group are perception of nursing as women's work, the image and stereotypes of nursing and the traditional structures that serve to maintain the status quo [2]. Previous international study conducted in the 1980s had reported a strong correlation between *nurse* and *feminine* [3]. The findings of this study suggested that in the majority of countries studied, nurses were seen as weak, powerless, and little. Roberts [4] supported her assertion that nurses were an oppressed group and her fivestage model (2000) provided a useful paradigm to explore the status of nurses. Birks *et. al.*, [2] Malaysian study applied Robert's model to their nurse respondents. Their findings suggested that most Malaysian nurses were located in the first stage of Robert's (2000) model [5], that of *unexamined acceptance*; the Malaysian nurses were ignorant of their oppressed status. The characteristics of this stage were firstly, a presence of negative view of nursing and

secondly an unquestioning acceptance of the role of the nurse, the power of the system, and the dominance of physicians. Even though Robert's model had described the means by which nurses could act within and overcome a state of oppression through the reconstruction of their professional identity but this concept has yet to make an impact on the current Malaysian nurses' profession.

Hence Malaysian nurses continue to struggle with these elements that are obstacle to the profession achieving its full potential.

The future of Malaysian nurses leading change and contributing towards quality health care services is based on the premise that nurses should achieve higher education and training through an improved education system that promotes seamless academic progress [6] The IOM report further states that nurses should be educated with physicians and other health professionals throughout their careers [6]. Education is the key to empowerment of self and others and through education, nurse acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary prerequisites for overcoming oppression. Des Jardin [7] had argued that political activity was essential if nurses wished to take control over the future of the profession. Development of a new form of leadership that unites nurses and presents a powerful front to both politicians and public alike was considered an essential foundation for political effectiveness [4, 8].

Currently 80% of nurses in Malaysia hold a diploma qualification [9] while the remainder professional nurses have a basic degree, Masters or doctorate. In order for the Malaysian nurses to secure recognition of their significant role in the provision of quality health care, there is a need for postgraduate courses. Presently, some Malaysian public and private universities do offer specific postgraduate courses in advanced clinical skills nurse practice which have been accredited by Malaysian Qualification Agency and recognized by both Ministry of Higher Education as well as Ministry of Health. However, the Nurses Board Malaysia has considered these postgraduate courses to be too generic with very little application of theory to practice in the clinical healthcare settings.

In identifying and developing employability skills that are pertinent in current competitive job market, Yasmin *et. al.*, [10] had observed that the definition of employability skills were related to the skills that were not job specific but were skills which cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry level to chief executive officer. Non-technical skills were referred to as employability skills which included basic skills such as oral communication as well as higher order skills e.g. decision making and affective skills, problem solving, learning skills and strategies. Traits such as interpersonal skills (cooperation, team work) dependability and responsibility, self-discipline and self- management positive attitude and ability to work without supervision were some of the traits described by Cotton [11]. He also found that employers value generic employability skills over specific technical skills and had expressed concern regarding the deficiency of graduates lacking the required employability skills.

Education in Malaysia has been described as a business entity with a competitive market [9]. Today's universities are constantly looking for a competitive edge in delivering a postgraduate nurse curriculum with a positive outcome of future employability and employment. In this respect, Monash University Malaysia is no different since market differentiation is important for the survival of Private Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia. In view of the gap that exists in the present postgraduate courses, this working paper intends to critically examine the preliminary market information gathered on the requirements of higher educational needs of nurses from nurses in Malaysia.

Nurses Forum

In view of offering the Master of Nursing, Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences academic and professional staffs conducted a Forum in Nursing on 27 November 2013. The objective of this forum was

to gather preliminary market information on the requirements of the training and educational needs of nurses in Malaysia. The member hospitals of the Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia (APHM) were used as database for the invitation. From the list, hospitals within the Federal Territory and Selangor were identified and invited including representatives from the Ministry of Health and Director of Nursing Board Malaysia. A total of 27 private hospitals nurse educators and clinicians were invited, of which 24 participants from 14 private hospitals responded to the invitation to attend the forum. The participants were divided into five groups consisting of either four or five persons at each table. Two nurse educators; a Professor in Mental Health Nursing and Professor in Palliative Care Nursing from School of Nursing and Midwifery Monash University Australia presented various Master courses that were offered by School of Nursing and Midwifery and then they proceeded to facilitate the forum. Each group were given questions on topics or themes to discuss, namely; graduate attributes, manpower requirement, curriculum, career pathways, skills requirement, governance, delivery method, essentials areas, staffing issues and way forward during the round table discussion. The group members were given instructions to discuss the topics within their group and then present their collective views. The information presented was documented.

Themes

Theme 1: Graduate Attributes

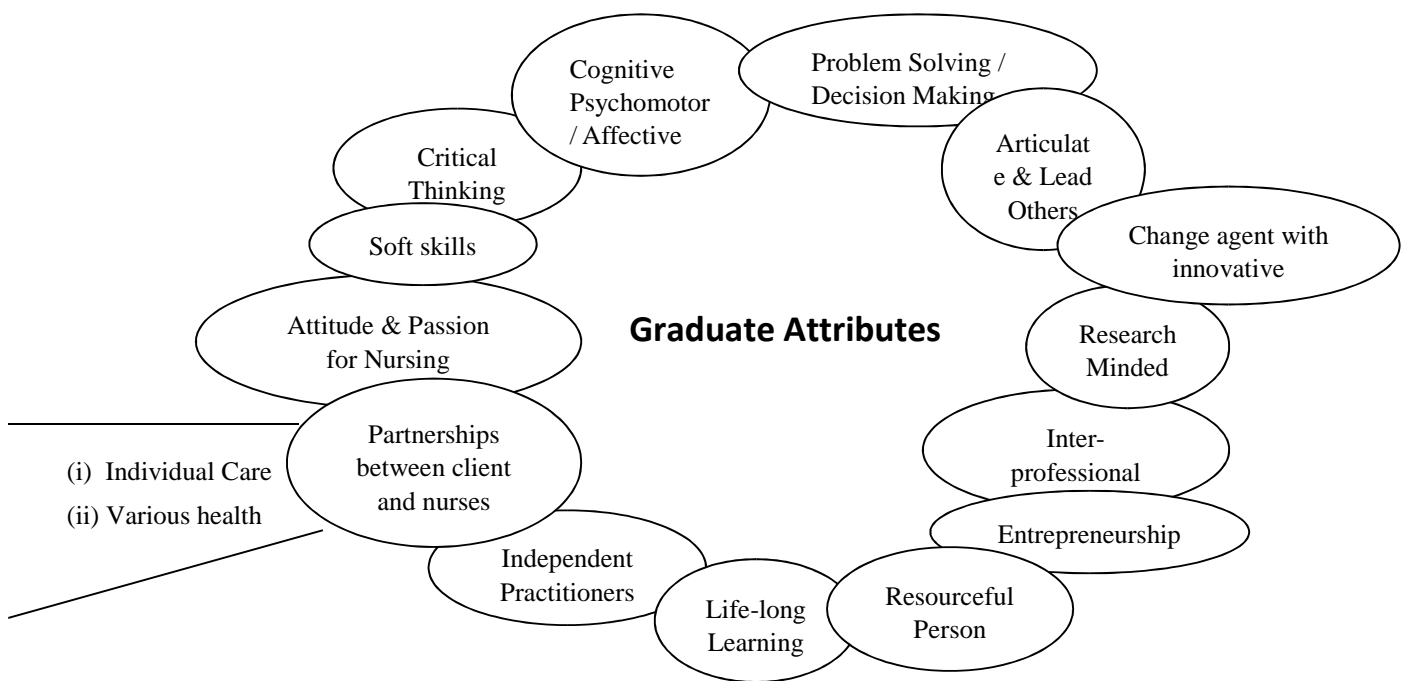


Figure 1: Graduate attributes which were considered pertinent by participants.

The group members suggested all of the above mentioned attributes of graduates that would influence the development of a new form of leadership to unite nurses and present a powerful front to both politicians and public alike. They discussed the importance of political activity if nurses wished to take control over the future of their profession.

Theme 2: Manpower requirement

During the group discussion a significant ‘lacunae’ or loophole was observed. It appeared that there was a relative shortage of registered nurses who were involved in their own research or collaborative based research. They also highlighted that due to mobility challenges which prevailed among senior nurses who were not seen proactively travelling to other countries or other health sectors to gain new knowledge and skills. This working culture amongst the senior nurses inevitably creates conflict and affected the junior nurses who wished to ensure life-long learning and a sense of purpose. This also limits the growth and development of health care services due to the lack of many nurses in senior positions to propose and implement the relevant development of quality nursing care services. Such limitations especially in developing nations in turn distances nurses from the opportunities of assuming leadership roles or contemplating career progression into academia or research. From a career audit perspective, quantity is seen trumping quality. Given the globalization taking place, training specializing in nursing leadership has become paramount to ensure marketability of the nursing graduates.

Theme 3: Curriculum of a nursing leadership course or training program

The participants’ view on the curriculum was that a nursing leadership course or training program needs to be incorporated into the curriculum. This could also increase the employability value of the nursing graduates by incorporating research skills, evidence based nursing, human resource management, finance management, risk and quality management, governance, organizational behavior, and clinical decision making. These units within the curriculum would inevitably increase the nurses’ ability to adapt and progress through industries. It would also inculcate the motivation for lifelong learning, empowerment to be leaders and knowledge sharing. This program would be delivered according to Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) requirements and Nurses Board Malaysia (NBM) guidelines.

Theme 4: Career Pathways

Career Pathways are aplenty provided relevant awareness are created on research management, services, role development and entrepreneurship from the outset of the nursing education. For example



Theme 5: Professional Development

It was considered pertinent that nurses were equipped with clinical specialties, administration, education, quality / risk research skills besides encouraging mobility throughout their nursing career as it would enrich them with indepth knowledge through cross cultural exposure both theoretically and in practice leading on to research

probabilities. Such exposure would also build their confidence in developing multiple skills across the diverse and evolving health service.

Theme 6: Method of Knowledge Dissemination

The method of knowledge dissemination would have to be geared towards competency based curriculum as opposed to purely content based. Using the Generation Y, the IT-savvy generation as a benchmark, the curriculum would need to be technologically inclined to ensure the younger generation remains motivated and engaged to complete the course. Incorporating multi-disciplinary work will expose students to the vast areas of health care as well as the research strengths creating a broader perspective of their career avenues. This would be in line with the objective of incorporating the life-long learning belief. As an added feature to maintain the quality of health practitioners as well as ensure the systems and processes are well in line with MQA, clinical specialties will be assessed by qualified persons. Competitive scholarships would have to be created in order to attract both local and foreign students into the country. This would not only spur the economy but dilute the cultural barriers in nursing practice thereon increasing mobility.

Theme 7: Niche Content Areas

Given the growing changes in the global demographics, lifestyle and health needs, the current niche areas would be gerontology, public health, mental health, and palliative care specifically in the preventive care, health and prevention and non-communicable diseases which would be incorporated into the curriculum starting from basic skills right up to clinical specialties.

Theme 8: Employment Concerns from Employer and Employee Perspectives

Employer's Perspective

Given the quantity of nurses graduating each year, stiff competition dictates potential employers towards scrutinizing the quality of each nurse graduate, screening them from point of entry and identifying if they are 'out of the box' thinkers as well as identify if they are functional nurses by observing their cognitive and meta cognitive skills specifically how they utilize their ability to problem solve and adapt accordingly. This mindset appears prevalent in both public and private sector employers.

Employee's Perspective

By acknowledging the stiff competition, graduates would always be concerned about the remuneration packages offered as well as incentives, the value of nursing work and respect in terms of recognition, opportunities junior staff would be exposed to for career progression purposes and if employers would be in support of lifelong learning.

Theme 9: The way forward with nursing

Nurses globally would have to come together in a united voice sharing the benefits and joys of being a nurse. This in the long run will hopefully eradicate the preconceived notion that nurses are merely the support systems of medical doctors. Enhancing the empowerment value would increase the respect nurses would gain worldwide as equals with the medical fraternity in the health industry thereon increasing community engagement and student mobility. Policies making bodies would also engage opinion of nurses to create better suited governance.

Such an proactive move forward would open floodgates to networking, nursing autonomy signing collaborative memorandum of understandings (MoU's) with clinical partners in the private as well as public sector and even internationally. Research based opportunities too will increase in the health care sector as a whole guaranteeing career progression for graduate nurses making the nursing program tremendously attractive to the younger generations.

Discussion

Within the rapid globalization and close competition mushrooming all over the world to develop a knowledge based society, the education sector has noted to no longer be a blue ocean from a student's perspective. In Malaysia, sustainability of education institutes has now been subjected to market differentiation addressing the graduate's employability prospects both locally and internationally as well as Quality assurance while instilling the concept of life-long learning.

Following the recent blueprint developed by the Ministry of Education, the National Education Blueprint (NEB) [12], this differentiation is pivotal to retaining the cultivated Intellectual Property best known as human talent thereon spurring the economy, and inevitably achieving Malaysia's vision of attaining a developed nation status by 2020. The long standing challenge Malaysia has faced is the requirement of the industry and the talent produced by the Malaysian Higher Education Institutions have often been mismatched prompting many graduates to leave the country and seek employment abroad. Of many questions posed in regards to curriculum in general, the critical questions of essence to this working paper would be:

- I. "How can the learning experiences of domestic and international students be improved so that they are better prepared for the global workplace?"
- II. "What is the career information wished to be incorporated into the program structure?"

These questions are based on the aim of developing "internationally recognized professionals, capable of engaging in professional practice in a variety of contexts both within and beyond their country of origin or domicile" [13].

In acknowledgement of this challenge, critical questions and current demands of the health industry, the nursing course curriculum would now have to be a competency-based curriculum [12] with Nursing Board Malaysia Guidelines on Standards & Criteria for approval /accreditation of nursing programmes [14] as opposed to merely being a content-centered curriculum. It would encompass soft skills such as creativity, innovation, professional ethics, team-working, leadership and entrepreneurship as well as respect for organizational cultural diversity [12].

Given the growing globalization, such 'cultural intelligence' is an imperative which would have to be inculcated on day one onwards. According to Blasco (2009) cited by Mackrell [13] 'cultural intelligence' consists of a combination of 1) *knowledge* of culture and its effect on manifest behaviour; 2) *mindfulness* or sensibility to cultural signals; and 3) *behavioural skills* from a combination of knowledge and mindfulness. This

Endeavor also projects Malaysia as a multicultural brand in itself and well blended with its foreign ties as well as its vision. Other soft skills e.g. communication and team working could be incorporated through a standalone project, through campus life, formal and informal activities at faculty level and through industrial training to name a few. These skills from the employer's perspective are considered adaptable and 'transferable' workforce skills [10].

The nursing curriculum would still advocate the hard skills (e.g. a good degree qualification and nursing skills) reflected through virtual classroom, e-learning, blended learning, and have its research based components as

the research based components would be pivotal in building future researchers [15]. Reflective practice would also be part of the curriculum as it is viewed as a compulsory competence by the nursing licensing boards [16]. Such a practice would also reflect incorporation of critical thinking which is paramount as it would improve the graduate's problem solving skills and ability to deal with vast scenarios at hand. As a measure to constantly develop the student's cognitive skill, the Watson–Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA) [17] can be used as a measure to observe the critical thinking judgments and logical reasoning derived by testing skills of argument, drawing inferences, interpreting, deducting, recognizing assumptions, evaluating conclusions and assessing reasoning strengths. Peer Review and industry collaboration would be the additional benchmarks used to enhance the curricula development and evaluation besides the assessments set by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) namely SETARA, MyQUEST and MyRA as well as the Codes of Practice for Program Accreditation (COPPA) and Codes of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA) [12]. This potential is possible given Malaysia's high level of fluidity in globalizing the higher education market. [12].

Conclusion

This working paper concluded that a tailor made postgraduate course, “the vital bridge” was considered to be of utter most importance to the Malaysian nurses. A curriculum which would groom the Malaysian nurse, to move from a subservient role in the healthcare settings to one of partnership and leadership, would require tremendous amount of planning. In order to remove the shackles of oppression and address the gender inequalities, as well as be equipped with relevant knowledge, skills and attitude, the Monash University postgraduate nursing course, meeting the MQA and NBM guidelines, is expected to be both vigor and relevant to today's Malaysian nurses' employability employment and career development.

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