

# Reflections of nursing students, lecturers and clinical supervisors in the Western Cape on large classes

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## Abstract

Nursing education in the Western Cape responded to the South African higher education transformation agenda by establishing a Common Teaching Platform (CTP) for the delivery of the undergraduate nursing programme. Three universities in the region have collaborated since 2005 in the delivery of this programme. One of the universities was identified as the enrolling institution. During this period, the province experienced a shortage of nursing personnel. In response to this shortage and to transformation in the country, there was an increase in the enrolment target for the undergraduate programme offered by the three collaborating universities. Five years after the establishment of the CTP and the increased student intake, there was a need to explore the experiences of the lecturers, clinical supervisors and students regarding teaching and learning in large classes. In this article, the experiences of nursing students, clinical supervisors, and lecturers are shared and suggestions from the target groups are presented.

**Keywords:** Bachelor of Nursing, large classes, lecturers, programme delivery, students, undergraduate

## INTRODUCTION

The enrolment target for the undergraduate nursing programme was increased in response to the general nursing shortage and rationalisation of academic programmes in South Africa. Teaching of the undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing programme in the Western Cape Province is offered under the Common Teaching Platform (CTP) model of collaboration between three universities and one university of technology

in the region. One of the universities was identified as the enrolling institution and it was envisaged that the partner institutions would collaborate in terms of their expertise and resources (Daniels and Khanyile 2013, 16). The university of technology unofficially withdrew from the arrangement.

Many changes were brought about in the programme to ensure that the teaching and learning process was not negatively affected by the increase in class sizes. An assessment of the effect of increased student enrolment on the delivery of the programme offered within the context of the CTP was needed.

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of lecturers, clinical supervisors and student nurses in the undergraduate nursing programme, in order to inform programme improvement strategies.

## **GLOBAL AND NATIONAL DEMANDS AND CHALLENGES IN ENROLMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Globally, higher education has been forced to respond to the demands placed on the sector by two imperatives, namely: globalisation and the massification of education. Over the years, there has been a global debate about class size and its impact on student learning at higher education institutions (HEIs). In countries such as Australia, Ireland, Canada, Europe and North America, HEIs have been increasingly faced with challenges in teaching large classes, particularly at first-year level, in disciplines such as the Sciences, Business, and Arts (AUTC 2003, 14). In the South African context, the student population has nearly doubled over 17 years from 473 000 in 1993 to some 893 024 in 2010, according to the provisional Department of Higher Education and Training figures (Bandiera, Larcinese and Rasul 2010). These are general student enrolment statistics with an apparent lack of literature pertaining to nursing education enrolment.

A team of academic staff from different disciplines at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, conducted a project on teaching large classes that aimed at identifying best teaching practices for large classes to enhance students' learning experience through a triangulation methodology. The project identified that teaching large classes impacted student performance; teaching and assessment of students; and co-ordinating and resourcing large student numbers (AUTC 2003, 14).

The literature, although limited, focuses on student participation and performance in large classes. Kerr (2011, 7–8) identified negative aspects with regard to large class sizes. The majority of students reported that these were: a lack of discipline during the class; a lack of opportunity for asking questions or receiving guidance from the facilitator; a lack of anonymity among students; physical limitations of learning space; and poor ventilation. Similarly, Cuseo (2007, 1) reported that lecturers find classes of more than 100 students difficult to manage. Large classes are often noisy and students take longer to settle before the class can commence. Toth and Montagna (2002, 254) found mixed results in three studies they conducted. The results of two studies indicated that positive increases in outcomes were found where smaller

class sizes were implemented, while the third study revealed better outcomes with a larger class size. Kokkelenberg, Dillon and Christy (2008, 222) found that class size negatively affected grades and that the average grade point declined rapidly as class size increased up to class sizes of 20, and more gradually for larger class sizes.

## **TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS IN LARGE-SIZE CLASSES**

Mulryan-Kyne (2010, 3) emphasised the negative aspects of being a student in a large class, since interactions and exchanges between students and teachers are too anonymous and passive, with high absenteeism being tolerated or not noticed among students in large classes. According to Mulryan-Kyne, teachers felt that it is difficult to relate to students and to respond to the large number of demands being made on them by students.

Thomas et al (2011, 5) conducted a cross-sectional survey with 32 academics in Malaysia and found that teaching large numbers of students was more positive for them, since it created a sense of awareness of their teaching styles that enabled them to adapt to the different learning styles of their students. In a qualitative study conducted in Australia, student diversity in large classes showed that it provided an opportunity for exploring multiple perspectives of course content and could be used as a teaching tool. Teachers reported feeling motivated by the increased energy of large classes and that they had an opportunity to positively influence the educational pathways of large student classes (Thomas et al 2011, 5).

According to Mulryan-Kyne (2010, 176), however, there are negative aspects to teaching large classes, since lecturers have to change their teaching approach and this change, along with adapting teaching approaches in large classes, is challenging and difficult. The author further highlights that lecturers who teach large classes feel that due to other academic pressures, such as the need to publish, they are resorting to traditional teaching and assessment methods of the lecture and written examinations. Kerr (2011, 9), on the other hand, reports that lecturers need to keep abreast of recent advances in pedagogical approaches and new technologies to improve the large class experience. Change in this context requires a departure from tradition and is likely to be more demanding on staff time.

Teaching large classes presents challenges in relation to meeting the programme outcomes. This is similar to the findings of Eta, Atanga, Atshili and D'Cruz (2011, 3) who conducted a study in Cameroon and found that students were dissatisfied with meeting their objectives. In the mentioned study, students' level of preparedness for practice was assessed by nurses as being lower than average and, therefore, supervising large numbers of students was seen as a challenge.

Large class sizes not only limit teaching methods, but assessment methods are similarly restricted. In a survey conducted in 2001 on behalf of the University of Queensland, lecturers indicated that assessing large classes led to excessive marking loads; insufficient feedback and lack of prompt feedback to students. These lecturers also indicated that monitoring cheating and plagiarism was problematic; maintaining

quality and consistency of marking was difficult; and there was a lack of higher order thinking when examining students with certain assessment tools (AUTC 2003, 15). In a multi-method study conducted by Herbert, Chalmers, Hannam, Terry and Lipp (2001, 8) teachers reported that there was a limited range of assessment strategies available; therefore, assessment led to over-reliance on end of semester examinations when compared to continuous assessment. This practice seemed to be disadvantageous to the student, which meant feedback to the student was superficial and formative assessments were reduced in number.

### **COORDINATING AND RESOURCING LARGE STUDENT CLASSES**

Large numbers of students leads to increased administration and management for lecturers. Many lecturers note that large classes require greater investment of time and resources for up-front class preparation and they have to be much more organised and structured with the view to teaching a large class (Kerr 2011, 9). However, co-ordination of classes is not the only challenge, since lecturers from Australian universities indicated that a significant administrative burden was placed upon them by the volume of student enquiries and interactions, as well as assessment loads involved in large classes. Communication with a large number of students was also found challenging by lecturers and was compounded by the addition of numerous teaching and support personnel. Lecturers suggested that training and/or professional development was necessary.

Kerr (2011, 10) identifies the availability of appropriate physical space, teaching and assessments, and conducive learning environments as challenges for large class teaching. According to Herbert et al (2001, 6), there is an increased demand for learning resources when teaching large classes, (especially computers); laboratories are overcrowded; and there is competition for limited library texts. These factors lead to poor performance of students in large classes.

Kerr (2011, 15) found that the culture within the university values research more than innovation in teaching; while a lack of professional development support provided by the institutions leads to a lack of experts who are able to adequately and appropriately assess teaching strategies that will enhance the teaching of large classes.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual design was used to explore the experiences of lecturers, clinical supervisors and students regarding teaching and learning in an undergraduate nursing programme at the school of nursing. Qualitative research approaches provide more in-depth views of the phenomenon being studied. Maree (2011, 259) states that the qualitative approach is a process of inquiry that researchers use to develop a complex and holistic picture of the views of participants about the phenomenon. Lecturers, clinical supervisors and students across the four

year levels of the nursing programme were sampled through stratified purposive sampling for participation in individual, semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

Data collection took place from July 2010 to July 2012. Focus group discussions were conducted at the university with nursing students from each of the four year levels of the programme. A total of 81 registered nursing students, 18 lecturers, and six clinical supervisors on the payroll of the HEI that offers the undergraduate nursing degree constituted the total sample for the study. Each focus group consisted of between seven and 12 male and female students and lasted approximately one hour. Lecturers from the three collaborating institutions took part in 45-minute semi-structured interviews, and clinical supervisors participated in two one-hour focus group discussions. The consented - to audio recordings of the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed inductively, as described by Creswell (2009, 185), and culminated in themes that reflected the participants' positive and negative experiences.

## **RIGOR**

Internal content validity was ensured through the use of purposive sampling. The interview schedules were carefully constructed to ensure that they were clear and that they met the objectives of the study. Notes were taken and audio recordings were made of the semi-structured and focus group interviews to ensure credibility, which relates to ensuring that the subject was accurately identified and described. Saturation of data collection was reached when no new information was obtained from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The recordings of the interviews and the transcripts were returned to participants and the supervisors for verification and validation of the information. To confirm what the researcher heard during the interviews, the researcher listened to the audio recordings and read the raw texts before analysing the data. Reflexivity required the researchers to become aware of their contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process. Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006, 506) assert that reflexivity requires the researchers to acknowledge the challenge of remaining outside of the subject matter while conducting research.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethics related to research were addressed by acquiring ethical approval for the study from the enrolling institution and by informed consent based on the principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. *Ethical clearance* and project registration were granted by the University of the Western Cape Research Committee

(Registration No. 06/4/5). The head of the nursing school granted permission for the study to be conducted.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were analysed according to the process described by Thomas (2003, 2). The voice recordings were listened to for sense-making of what was discussed during the interviews and focus group discussions before they were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read for the researchers to become conversant with the content. The transcripts were coded and units of text were analysed to form categories which were then refined to form themes.

The following section presents the findings and discussion of the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results revealed that there were both positive and negative experiences as shared by the nursing students, lecturers and clinical supervisors who were involved in the nursing programme.

### **Students' experiences of programme administration and communication**

The programme administration led to new ways of thinking and addressing problems in relation to communication with students. The large number of students in the classroom increased administration responsibilities for lecturers, which required them to think innovatively about how to manage those responsibilities. Students were divided into smaller, more manageable groups of approximately 60 students with a dedicated lecturer per group. While that assisted with the management of class size, other challenges arose, including inconsistency in the offering of modules in terms of the breadth and depth, and marking of student assessments. Because of the large number of students in one year level, the capturing of marks on the marks administration system (MAS) was found to be time consuming and tedious, which left room for human error – as was reported by one student: 'I had 85% for my CA [continuous assessment] mark and I wrote very well and I got a D. I phoned the lecturer and she said they are going to sort it out when the schools are opened. When the school opened I got a lower mark.'

In regard to feedback to students, one student referred to inconsistency in the management of student feedback after an assessment 'because we're in different groups ... one lecturer of that group does it this way and the other one doesn't. So, there's no correlation between the lecturers with regard to handing it [feedback] out. The one hands it out and the other doesn't hand it out to the class.'

Another dissatisfaction of students about large classes was that students

experienced difficulty in building interpersonal relationships with lecturers. The large class size impacted negatively on the lecturer's opportunities to get to know students and on students to form relationships with peers. One student mentioned feelings of isolation: 'lecturers seemed to be distant and have a cold attitude'. Consequently, they assumed a more passive role, since students mentioned they were 'less likely to participate in class activities ... easily distracted and fail to take adequate responsibility for their own learning'.

### **Students' experiences of group work**

Group work as a case-based learning strategy was experienced negatively by students because the quality of some group presentations was perceived by students as poor. Students verbalised that they preferred to work on their own:

You sit for an hour and you can't pay attention because the presentation is not giving you any information at all ... so it is a complete waste of my time to come in the morning ... and there is an unequal contribution ... so, you need to carry these other students ... and that is so unfair that I have to invest my time ... when I can do the work on my own.

This is affirmed by the finding of Kerr (2011, 8) who reported that students experience activities requiring group work as negative and would rather value those approaches which are orientated towards examination preparation and ensure positive grades.

A large class of 60 students was divided into six to seven small groups, which was sometimes confusing for students, as reported: 'in our class people found themselves not on the register, not in the groups that they supposed to be in ...' and another said: 'And you end up spending most of your time up and down, trying to get to classes, to go to where you are supposed to be, to get into the right group.'

### **Lecturers' experiences of group work**

It was also reported that one lecturer found it challenging to facilitate group interaction in six to seven groups. As a result, active learning by all students within groups was not evident. Groups seemed difficult to manage, since students would neither attend group meetings, nor would they participate in the preparation of group work. That created a challenge when group work was assessed, since group work was solely dependent on peer assessments. Since group work had to be presented, lecturers reported that they had limited time to preview the group's presentation to ensure that it was of a good quality.

### **Lecturers' experiences of students' behaviour and academic preparedness**

Large numbers in the classroom were also perceived as providing greater distractions and disruptive behaviour, such as many students having on the side conversations, arriving late for class, or leaving early.

The effect of group work was experienced as negative by students and perceived as such by lecturers as well. Group presentation preparations seemed difficult to manage; some were perceived by students to be of a poor quality. Some lecturers did not rectify this situation and allowed the session to be concluded without rectifying the errors/misperceptions. That further influenced the students' learning.

Lecturers experienced frustrations that resulted from the *ill-preparedness of some students for class sessions*, since they were more used to the traditional method of teaching. One of the lecturers stated:

Changing from the normal original type of teaching ... a more case-based [approach] ... wasn't a problem for us lecturers ... I think for our students, it was a bit of a problem ... the type of students we have in our classes [referring to them being under prepared for tertiary education] ... They are more used to ... just receiving information.

And another one said '... students still prefer just coming to class and being spoon fed all the information ... not all students participate ... or do well in working on their own ... They struggle ...'.

According to Cooper and Robinson (2000, 20), reduced student engagement in learning is due to decreased motivation to learn, to attend classes, and to take responsibility for learning that ultimately impacts on students' success and academic achievement. Lecturers concurred with the students' reports, since they too reported becoming frustrated by students being ill-prepared for class sessions.

Some lecturers were of the opinion that many students preferred a passive role in learning and expected the lecturers to simply provide them with the information. The lecturers commented that implementing innovative teaching strategies sometimes resulted in negative student evaluations, because students often perceived that a lecturer who employed more active, learner-centred approaches was not 'doing his/her job'. Kerr (2011, 10) reported similar sentiments experienced by facilitators. Similarly, the implementation of the case-based teaching and learning approach at this teaching institution was criticised by students who accused lecturers of 'not doing the job that they were paid for'.

### **Lecturers' experiences of infrastructure**

Lecturers experienced frustrations with some of the infrastructure available for teaching and learning: '... sometimes you struggle to find necessary resources, like overhead projectors, um ... there is no air con [air conditioner] in the facilities. It's hot in summer and cold during winter and that has impacted on the students' functioning in the classroom.'

The lack of consultation rooms at the University of the Western Cape for CTP partner universities was a hindrance for the students and a frustration for the lecturers as well. Provision had to be made for consultation rooms where the students could meet the lecturers from the partner universities. This presented a challenge, since there was no dedicated space where such consultations could be conducted due to



insufficient office space at the university. One of the lecturers said: ‘... in terms of office space ... I know that we have employed more lecturers over the years ... and many of them still don’t have offices or they have offices away from the nursing department ...[it] does create problems’.

In addition to frustrations with infrastructure, the lecturers from partner institutions reported that they received inadequate assistance from some of the offering university staff members: ‘We struggled every year to get class lists ... decent venues, equipment ... the classrooms are appalling ... and not conducive to any kind of teaching’; ‘... we don’t have an office where they [students] can come and see us ...’. A related challenge was that there was not enough time in a week for these consultations because the facilitators were only available on campus once a week for a particular group of students.

Another challenge experienced by the lecturers related to reduced learning spaces at the university. The increased number of students resulted in inadequate and insufficient space at the computer laboratories/learning centres and clinical skills laboratories. Online assessments were sometimes disrupted due to system problems, such as internet breakdown, and resulted in the postponement of assessments or lecturers resorting to assessing through a different medium. Due to the limited number of computers, students were allotted limited time to access the service. Inadequacy of physical spaces is similar to what is experienced by other HEIs that are experiencing an increased enrolment of students (Carbone and Greenberg 1998, 313; Kerr 2011, 6).

In conjunction with classroom teaching and learning, clinical practice is considered an important part of nursing education and is one means of increasing students’ professional competence, including independence and self-directedness (Papp, Markkanen and Von Bonsdorff 2003, 267). The clinical supervisor is, therefore, regarded as a link between the HEI and its clinical environment, and participates in the development of the students’ clinical skills. The clinical supervisor also supports the students in the clinical environment with the integration and application of theory in practice. Moreover, it is imperative that lecturing and clinical staff work as a harmonious team in order to implement and support effective clinical teaching and learning through professional working relationships.

### **Clinical supervisors’ experiences of their availability to students**

Clinical supervisors are exclusively allocated to a certain number of nursing students as per the students’ academic timetables. The increase in class sizes creates a challenge as this translates into an increase in the student/clinical supervisor ratio. Clinical supervisors are responsible for the daily supervision of bed-side nursing and they support the students in practical nursing skills. It is vitally important to effectively and productively utilise clinical time in light of the notion that the quality of nursing education depends largely on the quality of the clinical experience planned in the nursing curriculum (D’Souza, Venkatesaperumal, Radhakrishnan and Balachandran 2013, 25–26).

To promote engagement in the clinical course, the clinical supervisors are not only available and accessible to students for the discussion of clinical assessments, but also provide an opportunity to interact with students on a personal level. Showing students a willingness to informally discuss a broad range of clinical nursing topics will assist them with growing both intellectually and personally. At the same time, this can also heighten students' desire to engage with their clinical environment. One clinical supervisor remarked: 'We are available for students. That was positive.' Another respondent reacted positively in this regard: '... for me, as a clinical supervisor, that one-on-one time with the student is positive'. Löfmark et al (2012, 167) allude to the fact that the lack of student-supervisor relationships is obstructive for learning, whereas feeling part of the team is experienced as an opportunity to learn. This confirms the need for a positive relationship between the student and the supervisor to promote successful clinical supervision. This is only achievable with a manageable number of students and a realistic student/clinical supervisor ratio.

### **Clinical supervisors' experiences of the integration of theory and practice**

The value of the role which clinical supervisors play in clinical teaching and learning at the nursing education institution cannot be underestimated. To bridge the gap between theory and practice, they are involved in the classroom during the facilitation of contact sessions with students. Having clinical supervisors involved as facilitators helps students to form a link between information from nursing science, basic sciences (eg, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, physics, pharmacology) and clinical practice. The clinical competencies which are taught during all four year levels include communication, assessment, and care. These competencies facilitate the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes/values, which are needed for the nurse to function effectively in the clinical environment. The following responses were mentioned by some of those interviewed: '... incorporating your theory with your practice ...' and '... theory that is inculcated in the classroom runs parallel to the practica that we do with the students in the skills lab and in the hospital setting'.

Learning in the clinical placement is supported by academic assignments based on the outcomes of the module. Hall-Lord et al (2013, 509) indicate that assignments should be formulated in such a way that they stimulate the students' active learning, motivate them to search for experience and knowledge, and help them to reflect upon their experiences in comparison with research findings. One of the clinical supervisors noted: '... a positive aspect that the curriculum is based on is that the theory and the practical runs concurrently'. Such vital contributions by the clinical supervisors are hampered when there are too many students in a class and where the clinical supervisor has a large number of students to supervise in the clinical environment.

## **Clinical supervisors' experiences of the quality of nursing graduates**

Clinical supervisors raised a concern about the quality of nursing graduates who are produced at the end of the four-year Bachelor of Nursing programme. It is acknowledged that an insufficient number of clinical supervisors appointed to facilitate the large student numbers negatively impacts on the quality of the graduate produced. This, mainly because the clinical supervisor does not have sufficient one-on-one contact with each student during their clinical placement. A response from one clinical supervisor was:

You ended up... just rushing to ensure that their skills have been met in terms of assessment ... but if you've got so much [many] students you don't attend to things...: 'I've seen you, I've seen you, I've seen you or I've assessed you, I've assessed you' and then you move. So, for me that is how it affects us – these large numbers of students...

## **Clinical supervisors' experiences of the inadequate clinical learning opportunities for students during clinical placement**

Clinical supervisors felt that there are not enough opportunities for students to learn during their clinical placement, due to the large numbers of students placed at the health facilities. This is exacerbated by the fact that students from different nursing institutions use the same facilities for clinical practice. One of the clinical supervisors' responses was '... one also needs to look at learning opportunities for the students, because we are not the only school that takes in large numbers of students; but colleges also take in 350 first-year students and we take in 340 students as well. These students work parallel to each other in the ward setting. The quickest one will be able to grab the learning opportunity; whereas the slow ones miss that learning opportunity.'

## **Clinical supervisors' experiences of the inadequate learning resources at the HEI**

Clinical supervisors expressed that when the HEIs started to increase their student numbers, it led to inadequate resources for learning at the clinical skills laboratories. The response of one clinical supervisor was: 'I think when the school was adopting this new curriculum the school was not really ready in terms of resources' and '... you'll find that the skills lab that we have does not accommodate all the students because they're too much [many]'.

Another clinical supervisor's response was: 'Skills lab X is not even fully equipped ... it's almost like the skills lab is contradictory to the curriculum in a way... So, how can you take a student there and expect them to learn? '

It is evident from these statements that the increased number of students resulted in insufficient learning space at the HEI.

## CONCLUSION

Class sizes have led directly to new thinking of an effective teaching strategy that includes the case-based method and more clinical supervisors in the skills laboratory. However, Kerr (2011, 17) advises that courses geared toward promoting critical thinking and advanced problem solving are best taught in a smaller classroom environment, since students' motivation and attitude toward learning are inclined to be more negatively affected by larger classes. This is because students do not feel as satisfied with the classroom experience, which suggests that some learning opportunities may have been lost.

Feedback to the students' enquiries, specifically directly after assessments, presents a challenge. The AUTC report that, in their context, courses with large student numbers employ their own administrators to handle student enquiries. However, assessment matters and all other communication with students still remain the responsibility of teaching staff (AUTC 2003, 40).

The situation in the Western Cape required an increase in class sizes that placed a burden on the lecturers and clinical supervisors. Large group teaching has been criticised before, since it results in one-way communication and makes it difficult for teachers to engender the students' enthusiasm and interest for the subject (Holmquist, Anderson, Jansson and Faldt 2002, 1). Like in the current study, a previous project conducted by the AUTC found that it was difficult for lecturers to personalise lectures; to engage and maintain attention; and to create interaction among students (AUTC 2003, 13).

The case-based approach was therefore adopted as the teaching and learning method for large classes at the school of nursing in the Western Cape. This approach is different from the intensive staff reliance during the lecturing method of instruction (Cuseo 2007, 1). The case-based method aims at combating problems in relation to reduced active student involvement in the learning process; reduced frequency of lecturer interaction with and feedback to students; reduced depth of student thinking inside the classroom; reduced breadth and depth of course objectives, course assignments, and course-related learning strategies used by students outside the classroom; lower levels of academic achievement (learning) and academic performance (grades); reduced general course satisfaction with the learning experience; and lower student ratings (evaluations) of course instruction (Cuseo 2007, 2).

The study indicates that the increased student numbers at the University of the Western Cape have both positive and negative effects on the delivery of the academic programme as experienced by the lecturers, clinical supervisors and students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends, firstly, that resources must be committed by the HEI when decisions are made to increase student intake. Resourcing must be relative to the increase in the number of students in the programme. Secondly, careful planning of teaching and learning must take place to ensure that, despite large class sizes, the students have a positive learning experience.

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