"Wrong way – go back": preventing educational pathways from VET into higher education from becoming dead ends.

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that Enrolled Nurses enrolling in the Bachelor of Nursing at Murdoch University through a "pathway" program face particular challenges and a require transition program specifically designed to meet their needs. Credit for their VET qualifications allows the ENs to enter at the second year, but in doing so they bypass the first year transition program. We began with a scoping questionnaire: writing assignments and using ICT emerged as the principal areas of concern; however childcare and finding sufficient time for study were also significant. Following the scoping study, we crafted a transition program focussing on relevant academic skills, and encouraged the formation of study groups to foster mutual support and encouragement. This study suggests that universities and TAFEs need to collaborate more closely to ensure that "pathway" programs do not become dead ends leaving students demoralised. University staff need to acknowledge the diversity of experience, as well as the knowledge and skills that the ENs bring to their studies as a consequence of their VET qualifications; the VET staff need to recognise that an EN certificate is often the first stage in their students' learning journey and design programs with this in mind.

Introduction

On average, 16% of commencing Australian university students did not complete their first year of study in 2010, the last year for which complete data is available. They failed, they withdrew or they simply dropped out without explanation (DEEWR, 2011). Averages are misleading: the non-completion figure ranges from 6.21% at one of Australia's most elite universities to 34% at one that has a long tradition of offering places to students who might not obtain a place elsewhere – students who are disadvantaged by accident of their birth or circumstances. Universities are generally aware of the need to provide their first year students with some type of transition program to support them through the first year on campus; some have developed programs that reach well into the second or third year of a course. The growth of alternate entry pathways into university, which are a key element in achieving the Australian Government's plan to widen participation in the higher education sector in order to meet the objective of increasing the proportion of people with high-level skills, has led to a recognition that disadvantaged students need additional support (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012). Nevertheless, students who follow articulation pathways from VET into the second year of a degree may not be receiving the support they require.

This paper describes a transition program specifically designed to meet the needs of Enrolled Nurses (ENs) who enrol in the second year of the Bachelor of Nursing with Advanced Standing. What appears to be an advantage – reducing the length of the course by one year – may in fact be a disservice since they bypass the normal first year orientation and transition programs. The literature indicates that many of these students are more vulnerable to failure than students entering directly into the Bachelor of Nursing as they may lack the academic skills necessary for successful university study and are likely to be more vulnerable to external pressures that impair their capacity to learn (Bolen & Kenny, 2009; Cubit & Leeson, 2009; Drury, Francis & Chapman, 2009; Hutchinson, Mitchell & St John, 2011).

Changes to nurse education

Traditionally, Australian nurses have been divided into two levels based on their education and role within the health care system. Until 1984, all nurses were trained in a hospital-based apprenticeship system that had not changed significantly since formal nurse training was developed in the late nineteenth century. This method was replaced by an academic model that made nurse education into a university course. Initially members of the higher level of the nursing profession, known as Registered Nurses (RN), were required to complete an undergraduate diploma, but in 1992 this was upgraded to a bachelor's degree (Kenny & Duckett, 2005). Since 2010 the lower level of nurses has been referred to as Enrolled Nurses (EN) in all Australian states and territories. ENs complete an Advanced Diploma or Diploma in Nursing or a Certificate IV in Nursing in the VET sector in either a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) facility or an Institute of Technology (Cubit & Leeson, 2009). They practise under the direction and supervision of an RN in a role that is usually seen as complementary to the RNs' work.

The global shortage of qualified RNs has been recognised as problematic since the early 2000s. Attrition rates among RNs vary across states and territories as well as within regions and sectors; reliable data is difficult to obtain, but the overall pattern is clear. Nurses are leaving the profession and those who remain are aging (Holland, Allen & Cooper, 2012). One strategy is the need to increase the number of new recruits and encourage ENs to upgrade their qualifications.

With few exceptions, Australian ENs, who wish to upgrade to full registration as an RN must complete a Bachelor of Nursing degree. There is no tradition of offering tailored "conversion courses" as there is in the UK (Kenny & Duckett, 2005) and they are still rare (Cubit & Leeson, 2009), however most university nursing schools offer some level of academic credit to ENs on the basis of their existing qualifications.

EN conversion to RN is under-researched in Australia; however it seems that many ENs are not happy in their role. Kenny & Duckett (2005) cited disillusionment with their role as a major factor in the decision to upgrade to RN status. The ENs appear to be caught between "push down" factors that undermine their skills and "push up" that make it hard for them to find employment, particularly in regional and rural areas. Employment of comparatively unskilled Personal Care Assistants (PCAs) is putting downward pressure on ENs, with reports of them being asked to work for lower PCA wages or to spend large amounts of their shift completing unskilled tasks such as cleaning, rather than the patient care for which they have trained. Faced with limited budgets, rural and regional hospitals and clinics will often opt to employ a small number of RNs, supported by a team of PCAs, rather than ENs who are regarded as being of less value.

At the same time, there is no denying that many ENs choose to upgrade their qualifications for positive reasons including better employment opportunities, higher pay levels and inherent interest in the role of an RN. Many ENs undertake further training because they want to become more involved in what are seen to be the more interesting, or more exciting aspects of patient care (Hoodless & Bourke, 2009)

Murdoch University

Like many universities, Murdoch has created an alternate entry pathway into the Bachelor of Nursing. Practising ENs and those ENs who are currently registered but not practising, who have a TAFE Diploma, Advanced Diploma or have completed hospital-based training course are eligible for admission to the Bachelor of Nursing. Recently trained ENs who have units in their diplomas that map onto the unit outcomes for first year nursing units receive one year's Advanced Standing allowing them to begin their degree in the second year of the course. Students who have not completed a TAFE diploma receive *pro rata* credit and are required to complete the Indigenous nursing unit. The number of ENs applying to upgrade their qualifications is small, but demand is increasing. Moreover, as the Peel Campus is small and self-contained, students in need of help are immediately noticeable.

We were alerted to the difficulties than many of the ENs were experiencing when they began asking the First Year Advisor for help with a range of issues normally covered during the first year students transition program. Murdoch University has a network School-based advisors who provide assistance to all students in their first two semesters. The First Year Advisors run a number of transition programs in each school, but also offer one-on-one help to students and refer them to support services where appropriate. Requests for help led to the realisation that these second year nursing students were in fact, first year students and were experiencing many of the same challenges in adjusting to university study.

Drawing on our previous experience of designing orientation and transition programs for first year students; the First Year Advisor arranged a one day seminar for the ENs. Sessions included an introduction to the relevant staff members, library orientation, using LMS and Turnitin, academic writing and an overview of the first assignment in the core unit.

Methodology

Participants

Twenty ENs who enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing with Advanced Standing in Semester 2 2012 and Semester 1 2013 were invited to attend the orientation seminar. Thirteen ENs participated, amounting to 65% of the cohort. A further two ENs who enrolled in Semester 1 2012 asked to attend when they heard about the seminar. By definition, all the participants are mature age students: their ages ranged from mid-twenties to late forties. Five participants had completed their EN qualification more than fifteen years previously, but the majority (6) had completed their diploma within the last two years.

All but one of the 15 participating ENs were female. Five were part time students. Thirteen had children, but the age of the children ranged from 7-34 with the majority being adults or young adults and therefore independent.

Twelve participants were already working in the healthcare sector. Their specialisations were varied and included, aged care, oncology, rehabilitation, mental health, surgery and

community care. Half the participants had worked in more than one area and one, who had been employed by the West Australian Community Health Services, had experience in almost every aspect of nursing that we identified.

Data collection

The seminar was used as an opportunity to distribute a scoping questionnaire that asked the participating ENs to identify those aspects of enrolling in the Bachelor of Nursing or returning to study which caused them concern or anxiety. The preliminary draft of the questionnaire was based on the issues raised by currently enrolled ENs in their first semester on campus. These included advice about reducing their load, assistance with academic skills, understanding the Learning Management System (LMS) and difficulties with computer based assessment tasks and Turnitin.

Later revisions of the questionnaire drew on the literature on nurse education and conversion courses (Bolen & Kenny, 2009; Cubit & Leeson, 2009; Hutchinson, Mitchell & St John, 2011; Hylton, 2005; Kenny & Duckett, 2005), on mature age students returning to study (Daugherty, 2012; Drury, Francis & Chapman, 2009) and on the transition from VET to university (Aird, Miller, van Megen, & Buys, 2010; Chapman, 2006; Davey & Jamieson, 2003). In particular, Dickson (2000) who cited six common factors that have a negative impact on the process:
1. The degree of theoretical knowledge expected in a university course as opposed to the applied knowledge required in a TAFE course,
2. Differences in teaching & learning styles,
3. Higher academic standards and stricter adherence to conventions combined with uncertainty about staff expectations,
4. Repetition of TAFE content,
5. Changed expectations of staff-students relationships,
6. Time management and role conflict.

The questionnaire included questions requiring categorical answers, Likert-scale questions and questions that allowed a free-text response. There were questions intended to collect demographic information about the ENs including gender, number of children, length of time since completion of their EN qualification and previous work experience. The Likert-scale questions and free-text response questions collected information about the students' experience of using ICT and their confidence; they also collected information about the students' perception of themselves as learners or students.

Interviews

The final page of the questionnaire included an invitation to participate in a follow-up interview; six students agreed. The interview questions were developed from the initial analysis of the questionnaire results and were then related back to the literature to augment our understanding of the issues emerging from the questionnaire results; for example, many of the participants expressed doubts about their ability to write essays, this led to a discussion about their secondary school experiences, reasons for choosing TAFE and their subsequent decision to upgrade their qualifications.

Findings and discussion

All 15 of the ENs attending the seminar completed the questionnaire. Using computer programs associated with learning or completing assignments emerged as the issue that provoked the greatest anxiety among the ENs. Like many universities, Murdoch relies on the web application LMS to deliver course information, lecture notes, readings and lecture recordings; within the next twelve months LMS will be replaced by Moodle, a similar, open source web application. Assignments are often submitted on line as well, and written assignments must be scanned by Turnitin, a plagiarism detection program, before they are submitted. As Table One indicates, all of the students were computer literate to some extent. Most were quite comfortable using email and common software programs such as Word and PowerPoint, which is often used in schools, but less comfortable using the data base and calculation program Excel.

Results were markedly different when the ENs were asked about their confidence using computer programs designed specifically for managing university study, LMS, Moodle, Turnitin and the online library databases.

	Not used %	Not confident %	Moderately confident %	Very confident %
Email	-	-	26 (4)	73 (11)
Word	-	13 (2)	26 (4)	60 (9)
PowerPoint	-	20 (3)	40 (6)	40 (6)
Excel	-	26 (4)	60 (9)	13 (2)
LMS	0.6 (1)	13 (2)	60 (9)	20 (3)
Moodle	40 (6)	20 (3)	33 (5)	0.6 (1)
Turnitin	0.6 (1)	33 (5)	40 (6)	13 (2)
Library databases	0.6 (1)	13 (2)	60 (9)	20 (3)
Using the internet for research	-	13 (2)	54 (8)	33 (5)

Table 1: Confidence using ICT (whole numbers in brackets)

Like most Australian universities, Murdoch also requires students to accept their offered place in a course and enrol online. The majority was comfortable doing this, with only one student describing themselves as completely lacking in confidence at their ability to manage the task. Enrolling in the course was regarded as more challenging and selecting classes more challenging again: three students had no confidence in their ability to do this correctly and one student did not attempt it without help from staff in the Student Centre or the First Year Advisor.

A minority of students expressed serious reservations about the ability to use ICT to access course materials and complete assignments, but those who described themselves as moderately confident also expressed a wish for more training and targeted support. They were able to find lecture readings and material for assignments, but at the same time admitted to high levels of anxiety that they were not using the programs correctly or that assignments submitted electronically might go awry.

Writing assignments emerged as the second area of serious concern, and the responses to this section of the questionnaire indicate it is a more serious problem. None of the 15 ENs

described their essay writing skills as excellent and only one described them as good. As Table 2 shows, few had confidence in their ability as writers in general.

	Poor %	Fair %	Good %	Excellent %
General writing skills, e.g. sentence structure, spelling,	13 (2)	60 (9)	26 (4)	-
Structuring essays	33 (5)	(8)	0.6 (1)	-
Using references/citations correctly	26 (4)	60 (9)	13 (2)	-

Table 2: Confidence in writing skills (whole numbers in brackets)

The focus of this paper is on the development of a program to support the ENs' transition to university; nevertheless it is worth noting that comments from the ENs closely reflect Dickson's (2006) factors. One EN student who administers medications competently on a regular basis was embarrassed by her results in maths. She knew she was able to calculate dosages correctly on the wards, but struggled to translate that knowledge into the abstract and felt like a failure when she scored less than 100%, another student complained that the lectures in one unit were almost "word for word" form the TAFE course and balancing family responsibilities with time for study continues to be a significant area of concern for many students. In this study, childcare did not emerge as a major issue for 75% (10) of the participants as their children were independent, however for those who do have dependent children it is a major factor in their decision to return to study and their capacity to succeed (Daugherty, 2012). Family income is also a major factor. Only 1 of the ENs indicated that she was not certain if she would work while studying, however she added that she was a single parent who had recently moved to the Mandurah region and had no support network in the area, suggesting that she would like to work if possible. Two of the ENs were unemployed, but actively looking for work. The remaining 12 were employed and intending to work between 5-20 hours per week; 5-10 hours per week was the most frequently cited figure, followed by 11-15 hours. Two ENs indicated that they intended to work more than 20 hours per week. Work, family responsibilities, new ways of learning and overlap of course content are all outside scope of the present study, but they merit further investigation and we hope to return to them in the future.

Implications and recommendations

Designing a transition program for ENs who have enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing requires careful planning. The majority of transition models are designed with school leavers in mind and they are not suited to the needs of students with considerable professional experience (Bolen & Kenny, 2009). Our challenge was to provide a positive and supportive environment that respected the ENs existing professional knowledge, lowered anxiety and encouraged persistence and which also encouraged the ENs to adopt a more open and critical way of thinking about the course content and themselves as learners.

Learning to think like an RN, not an EN is identified as the key issue in conversion courses in a numbers of studies (Boelen & Kenny, 2009; Cubit & Leeson, 2009; Drury, Francis & Chapman, 2009; Hylton, 2005; Kilstoff & Rochester, 2004). The ENs have a considerable body of professional experience and life skills on which they can draw, but they may find it difficult to adopt a more questioning approach to learning that is implicit in university education. This situation may be exacerbated in ENs whose experience of learning has been based on didactic teaching; typically these are older students or students from cultural backgrounds that regard the passive acceptance of knowledge as demonstrating respect for

the teacher's authority.   To overcome these challenges, we have designed a multi-faceted transition program that incorporates the following:

- academic skills workshops
- study groups
- access to a pastoral care advisor or mentor
- better awareness among the academic staff of the differences between approaches to learning and assessment in VET and university

Academic skills workshops

At present, Murdoch does not require the ENs to complete a bridging unit prior to commencing their studies in second year. As an alternative we recommend a series of academic skills units that would be available to all students and would include academic literacy, mathematics and scientific literacy. Lack of confidence in writing emerged from the data in this study as a major cause of concern or anxiety, and this finding is supported by similar studies of transition from VET to university (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Hylton, 2005; Watson, 2006). Mehta, Robinson and Hillege (2008) found generally high level of anxiety about studying science among student nurses, and as the second year curriculum requires students to master a substantial body of scientific theory, it is reasonable to assume that many of the ENs would also be anxious.

ICT represents a special case for inclusion in the transition program and should be understood as having two components. Responses from the questionnaire indicated that the ENs wanted tutorial help with the ICT programs or applications needed to function as a student – LMS, Moodle, Turnitin and the library catalogue and databases. However, Barnard, Nash and O'Brien (2005) argue that nurses to develop high levels of information literacy to synthesise and apply professional knowledge effectively:

> the development of information literacy not only facilitates engagement with effective decision-making, problem solving and research, but also enables nurses to take responsibility for their own continued learning in areas of professional or personal interest (p 507).

The transition program we envisage can only begin this process, but by improving students' confidence in using ICT, we are creating a solid foundation for further development in this area.

Study groups

The positive effects of developing a peer network on transition to university are long understood and well-documented (Archer, Cantwell and Bourke; 1999; Kantanis, 2000; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Rapley, Davidson, Nathan & Dhaliwal, 2008; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005); however, it is also understood that mature-age students require some additional support (Cullity, 2010; Kantanis, 2006; Lincoln & Tindle, 2000). Study groups can form the nucleus of a social network for mature age students who are vulnerable to isolation (Hylton, 2005). They are also an effective way of addressing the ENs anxiety about not knowing what was expected of them in assignments and fear of appearing ignorant or foolish in front of other students and their lecturers. However, care needs to be taken that these study groups do not further isolate the ENs from their peers; membership should be open to all

students; ideally the academic staff or student advisor will allocate a mix of students to each group and monitor its progress from time to time.

Access to a pastoral care advisor

At present, Murdoch University has a very effective university-wide network of first year advisors who are available to the entire first year cohort, regardless of their background, in addition to providing targeted support to individual students who show evidence of needing additional assistance. The ENs would benefit from the support of a similar advisor who could offer advice about the support services available at Murdoch, help them to revise their study goals, stay motivated and refer them to external agencies when necessary.

Better awareness

As articulation between VET and university becomes more common, staff in both sectors need to develop greater awareness of the similarities and differences between their understanding of the purpose of their particular aspect of education, its values, traditions and expectations in relation to epistemology and pedagogy/andragogy. Academic staff teaching the Bachelor of Nursing may need to revaluate their teaching and assessment practices to explain their expectations more clearly, to encourage the development of higher order thinking through scaffolded learning tasks and to foster independent learning.

This study suggests that universities need to continue to provide targeted support to ENs enrolling in the second year of the Bachelor of Nursing. They also need to be more assiduous in collecting data about attrition from students who withdraw form conversion courses and alternate entry pathway programs. As Rapley et al (2008) suggest that an analysis of exit interviews may provide valuable information about common factors that led to students leaving the course. We would add that unit co-ordinators and the student advisor or mentor should meet with all ENs who fail one or more units in an effort to determine the cause.

Findings from this study cannot be generalised owing to the very small sample size, but they have raised a number of questions that require further investigation. In the longer term, universities and TAFEs need to collaborate more closely to ensure that "pathway" programs do not become dead ends leaving students demoralised. University staff need to acknowledge the diversity of experience, as well as the knowledge and skills that the ENs bring to their studies as a consequence of their VET qualifications; the VET staff need to recognise that an EN certificate is often the first stage in their students' learning journey and consider modifying the design of some aspects of their programs with this in mind. Partnerships between providers that opened communication and encouraged the exchange of course content would strengthen articulation from the EN diploma into the Bachelor of Nursing at second stage without any disadvantage to learning (Pryor, 2012).

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