

The total learning environment and implications for rural student nurse retention

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Abstract

Background: Student cohorts are becoming more diverse and universities need to respond accordingly to meet their needs. Differences within cohorts are a priority area for research, in order to identify how universities can best tailor resources to deal with this diversity. Preventing attrition is a significant factor in planning to meet students needs. In the nursing arena, the attrition rate has widespread implications for the nursing workforce, which is experiencing major shortages especially in rural areas.

Method and Results: Themes emerging from a review of the literature include the identification of the first year of university as the most difficult. The literature identifies school leavers and mature aged students as having particular problems, as do students from rural areas, and first generation university students. Mature aged women have more issues associated with the

pressures of balancing family, part time work and study and may identify with more than one of these categories. Research supports the claim that students from rural and geographically isolated areas and, particularly, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, are more at risk of failure and attrition (Bambrick 2002, Lawrence 2002, Howells 2003).

Conclusions: A review of literature on this subject has shown that in order to improve the retention of students from diverse groups, universities must ask students what they perceive to be their needs, and then offer appropriate support (Lawrence 2002). Universities need to get to know their own students. What may be suitable for one cohort and one university may differ from what is suitable for others.

Keywords: rural, university students, nurse education, student learning needs, diversity of student population.

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Introduction

Anecdotal evidence from rural nursing students sparked interest in undertaking research into rural cohorts of undergraduate nursing students and their learning needs. Student cohorts at the researchers' home campus comprise a diverse group that reflects many characteristics of those cited in the literature as being disadvantaged, and differing from the 'traditional' university student cohort (Horner 2000, Lawrence 2002). The pedagogy behind the teaching at the Dubbo campus of Charles Sturt University (CSU) is based on supporting students' learning via interactive technology, thus reducing face-to-face contact with staff. Yet anecdotal evidence from these students reinforces the need for students to have more face-to-face teaching; in other words, a more traditional approach to learning in a university setting. Providing the additional support identified by these student cohorts as desirable may lead to a decrease in attrition rates. Research supports the view that students should be asked first hand to describe their needs and how these needs can be met (Tinto 1993, Lawrence 2002, Howells 2003). Such issues confront faculty at many universities.

A review of the literature was conducted through a search of nursing-specific data bases, including Cinahl, Informit, Ebscohost and Psycinfo, and education databases from 2000-2007. Literature regarding higher education discusses the difficulties experienced by the increasingly diverse student population (Lawrence 2002, Durey et al 2003). This is particularly true of first year students, mature aged students, women, and first generation students. Research

supports the claim that students from rural and geographically isolated areas and, particularly, socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, are more at risk of failure and attrition (Tinto 1993, Ballantyne 2000, McInnis 2001, Howells 2003). Rural first generation university students often have to move house or travel long distances to attend learning sessions (Durey et al 2003). This factor can impinge on the student's ability to concentrate due to fatigue and lead to increased financial hardship associated with petrol and car maintenance related to travelling. The distance factor may also increase these students' sense of isolation and impede their integration into the university culture (Gum 2007).

Rural first generation university students

One of the means of increasing access for rural people has been the growth of regional university campuses and learning centres. The establishment of these campuses and learning sites is often influenced by political pressure, and can prove to be financially and pedagogically challenging (Bambrick 2002). These centres provide an opportunity for students who would not otherwise have access to a university in their home area; students who Bambrick (2002: 2) describes as 'perhaps being educationally disadvantaged'. A National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), funded study entitled 'Towards Excellence in Diversity' (1995) also found that 'a clear trend is the lack of progress of socioeconomically disadvantaged and people from rural and geographically isolated areas' (Lawrence 2002: 1).

Smaller and newer campuses are likely to have a greater number of 'at risk' learners. These include school leavers on the lower end of the tertiary ranking scale, who then struggle academically to cope at university; mature aged students with financial pressures and/or family pressures; women returning to the workforce; Indigenous Australians, and 'second chance learners where the first chance was hardly a chance at all' (Bambrick 2002: 4). However, on the positive side for the smaller and newer campuses are the smaller class sizes and greater accessibility. While staff may be less experienced, this can be an advantage, as they may have a high level of enthusiasm and greater degree of empathy for the student role and student problems. It has been observed that students on the smaller and newer campuses often perform comparatively better than their counterparts on the main campuses and that non-metropolitan campuses offer a more supportive community in which the student can undergo personal development (Bambrick 2002). Smaller regional university campuses can offer a supportive community that assists students to overcome the challenges presented by enrolment at a larger metropolitan university campus or learning site.

Diversity of student population

University student cohorts have changed from the 'traditional' 'bachelor boys' and 'spinster girls' (Kevern & Webb 2003). This is more evident at a rural campus where the student cohort encompasses first generation, mature aged women, and rural and remote students. The changing demographics of

nursing students results in a wide range of abilities and attributes (Taylor & Galligan 2002). This creates a problem, as within student groups there are differing levels of 'preparedness'.

Whatever the challenges, there are students in these rural regional centres who want to learn and to succeed. The learning experience may be very different from their metropolitan counterparts due to class sizes, life experiences and the diversity of the cohort (Hinton & Tickner 2000). These learners are identified as typically the first member of their family to go to university. They are often of relatively low socio-economic status, from farming families where there is a shortage of readily accessible money as it is tied up in the property/business, or where there is a reluctance to encourage young people to leave the area, or from rural communities where job opportunities are limited (Bambrick 2000).

Universities need to accept and embrace the change from traditional to diverse student cohorts. These cohorts reflect changes in society, especially in rural areas. Universities often lack understanding of their students' needs. This can impact on course structure, curriculum content, strategies employed for teaching and learning, as well as student support services (Horner 2001).

Mature aged women students

Mature aged students and women seem to be synonymous in the literature reviewed. At rural campuses the proportion of students in this cohort is increasing. Yet these women usually maintain their multiple roles, including family and student roles. Many of these

women are mothers with numerous family responsibilities. This situation can lead to competing expectations from their maternal and student roles (Gigliotti 2004, Tindle & Lincoln 2000, Kevern & Webb 2003). If they are able to cope with the multiple responsibilities and roles, as well as interact effectively at university, their self concept is positive. If the reverse occurs they may experience self doubt and question their right and ability to be enrolled in higher education (Rennie & Glass 2001).

Personal motivation to increase their knowledge, self esteem and improve their position in paid employment act as motivators for mature-aged female students to enrol in these courses (Kevern & Webb 2003). Nursing has traditionally been viewed as a vocation and this cohort has been a large component of the nursing workforce. The family role has been recognised as one reason for the attrition rates of these women when studying and in achieving academic success (Gigliotti 2004). Family responsibilities impact on this cohort's ability to engage in the extra-curricular activities associated with universities, such as social and leisure activities. The women may feel marginalised, and identify one of the reasons as lack of time due to the competing pressures of family demands and education. This can place pressure on marriages as well, and some partners can feel threatened and refuse to support these women. Others provide both assistance and stability to support their partners. Single parent, mature aged women are further disadvantaged as they have to cope alone (Kevern & Webb 2003). Moreover, the rich life experiences of this cohort are often not

recognised. These women have a lot to offer the younger students, and this should be encouraged. Universities need to recognise the multiple commitments of this cohort and adjust the system accordingly, by providing child care, flexibility in timetabling and the use of appropriate teaching and assessment strategies (Kevern & Webb 2003).

Rural students

Student enrolments in higher education in rural areas are increasing. Rural and remote areas are defined as areas outside major metropolitan regions with a population of less than 100 000 (Nugent et al 2004). In 2001, 19.1% of Australian university students came from rural areas (Durey, McNamara & Larson 2002). In response to the shortage of nurses the government has initiated programs to address recruitment and retention (Nugent et al 2004, Hegney & McCarthy 2000). The intake of students into university undergraduate courses has increased as a result of funding being made available by the government for more HECS-funded places.

Evidence suggests that students who attend rural campuses and/or have clinical placements in rural settings are likely to accept registered nurse positions in these areas (Nugent et al 2004, Hegney & McCarthy 2000, Edwards et al 2004, Neill & Taylor 2002, Courtney et al 2002, Bushy & Leipert 2005). Recommendations arising from the National Rural Health Conference 2001, focussed on recruitment, retention, education, training and support. The recommendations include utilising scholarships for undergraduates in rural areas, and funding for placements and accommodation. HECS exemptions

for students in selected areas are recommended but the paper gives no details or examples of these areas (Australian 6th National Rural Health Conference Recommendations 2001).

The need for education to be of high quality, flexible, local, and culturally and socially acceptable has to be recognised by universities (Durey et al 2003).

Universities need to work with their communities to reduce barriers faced by rural students. Staff need to be aware of, and understand, the differences within student cohorts, and how these relate to the university culture (Australian 6th National Rural Health Conference 2001).

Universities need to know their cohort

Student satisfaction has been a focus of interest in the literature for the past two decades, as it represents a significant educational outcome (Lee et al 2000). Student satisfaction is related to course first preference of students at university and is closely linked to retention (Lawrence 2002, Tinto 1993). The factors that determine satisfaction with university are complex and vary with each individual and each course and campus. This supports the argument that the examination of local factors is justified in light of the increasing emphasis being placed on student satisfaction as an outcome, and its relationship to student retention and success. Such studies may be useful to inform orientation and enrolment processes to increase knowledge for prospective students. The response of some universities to the increasing diversity of students has been based on little more than guesswork, because the students' perspective of their

university experience is so poorly understood (McInnis 2003). Students are astute education consumers and as such are able to provide valuable feedback on teaching approaches and course organisation. Arguments suggest under-utilisation of this feedback in opportunities to improve the university experience for the student (Thompson 2002).

The ability to relate what is learnt to the real world is an important aspect of learning. Traditionally, the experience that the student brings to the university setting has been ignored (Howells 2003). If this is the case then reduced retention may be the outcome of this lack of attention. In order for higher quality learning to take place the task must be meaningful for the student, that is, it must relate to the personal experiences or world of the student. Students often withdraw from courses because they cannot see the link between the expectations of the course or the university and the real world (Emmitt et al 2002).

While research has been undertaken into problems relating to the progression and retention of tertiary students, a gap exists in the area of examining why non-traditional students withdraw from university (Elliot 2002). An understanding of the reasons for this and provision of resources to address these issues could lead to an increase in retention rates. A gap also exists in the literature in relation to knowledge about those students who have successfully overcome difficulties in university education. There is a need to ask how these students managed and what services they utilised to support them (Dancer & Fiebig 2000).

Student Friendly Environment

There is a link between the feeling of fitting into university, and academic success and retention of students in courses. When a student decides to attend a university, the accepted or inherent rules, norms and culture need to be explained to them, so the student can derive maximum benefit from the experience. Academic and social integration into the institution are the principle factors determining achievement and retention of students (Emmitt et al 2001, Lake 1999).

Students may be discontented with university in the first year because of a lack of welcoming of new students, an absence of enthusiasm in academic staff, poor quality teaching, confusion regarding information relating to subject, course and assessment methods, and an inadequate social integration in the first few weeks (Emmitt et al 2001). It can be argued that each student's self-conception as a learner should be the starting point of programs to enhance adaptation to university. The experience of the first few weeks at university has a major bearing on the attrition rate and on the performance of the student in the first year (Tinto 1993, McInnis 2000, McInnis & James 1995, Pitkethy & Prosser 2001). Programs aimed at helping students in the period of transition to university must be student-centred and address students' needs at an early stage. They need to focus on the path to academic success and the wellbeing of the individual student (Howells 2003, Tinto 1993).

A study conducted at Deakin University in Warrnambool revealed success at university was correlated with the capacity to identify with the university,

academic preparedness, and attendance at classes, sufficient financial resources and state of health. Those students who were first generation university students and/or had a disadvantaged socioeconomic background tended not to have attended lectures or accessed the library regularly, and thus were less likely to succeed. This research claimed that students who felt 'connected' to the university, their campus and their faculty, had greater academic success (Emmitt et al 2001, McInnis 2003).

Universities need to know their cohorts and undertake research before introducing programs to assist students to deal with their problems, and not simply assume the students' reasons for withdrawing from a course (Hinton & Tickner 2000, Catterall et al 2003). It is not appropriate to generalise across universities and indeed across courses in a university as to the causes of attrition (Catterall et al 2003). Seventy-five percent of students' needs were reportedly not met by orientation programs and methods to increase academic success. Students' decisions to access support services were based on perceived need and the relevance of the service to their study. This finding suggests that an evaluation of the support services is necessary to improve delivery, as this would reflect the perceived needs and learning experiences of the students rather than the ideas of the student support/academic staff (Cameron & Tesoriero 2003). The university experience is complex, especially when students are first generation students who lack a family background of university study and when they require paid employment to support themselves in their study. These

students face additional obstacles in the transition to university (Emmitt et al 2002, Kantanis 2002, Lawrence 2002).

There is an increased emphasis on the need for universities to get to know their student cohort. The financial constraints and the need to retain students have driven research into the student experience at university. Universities must identify the learning needs of their students and this will in turn lead to universities 'doing it better'.

Services for Students

Higher education institutions have a 'sink or swim' attitude (Lawrence 2002). The mindset of some universities, that students who are not successful or have difficulties in their academic achievements are not intellectually able or are not 'prepared' for university, provides evidence of this. This can then impact on attrition and retention rates. There is a need for a students to adapt quickly to a new environment that involves different ways of learning, different methods of teaching, the use of computers, on-line communication and access to resources, discipline and academic jargon, academic writing and referencing. During this process, students must be able to access services that will assist them to adapt to this new learning environment (Lawrence 2002). These include academic support services such as the library, study skills, academic writing tutors, lecturers and handbooks, as well as services to enhance personal coping skills. These services must be equipped to provide assistance to the diverse needs of students (Lawrence 2002, Horner 2000, Durey, McNamara & Larson 2000).

Universities do not always canvas the views of students to assess their needs in planning resources to help them. Universities are often conservative and therefore 'unwilling' to examine their policies and attitudes in order to improve the chances of success of their increasingly diverse student populations (Lawrence 2002, Horner 2000). This deficiency should be addressed and universities must acknowledge the diversity of student cohorts and the resulting shift in learning needs and the forms of support required to complete their chosen course.

Funding

One of the main areas of focus of the research has been to attempt to examine how services and programs can best be adapted to assist students in their adjustment to university (Lawrence 2002). As noted above, the shortage of nurses has prompted government studies into the issues of retention and recruitment for nursing students (Hegney et al. 2002, Hegney & McCarthy 2000). This also applies to the provision of additional places for nursing students, especially in rural areas (Nugent et al 2004).

Over the past few decades the Australian government has provided funding to increase access to higher education for rural nursing students by means of scholarships for clinical placements, and for enrolment in higher education in rural areas. There is a need for rural and remote university campuses, and for these campuses to increase the number of places available. Government initiatives have been implemented to attract students to rural areas by

provision of financial support (Nugent et al 2004, Lee et al 2000).

University funding has in recent times been linked to successful completion of students in courses (DETYA 1999). This emphasis has seen a shift in pedagogy to focus on student learning and support of students in this learning. It is therefore essential that there be recognition of how best to offer this support and so reduce attrition. McInnis (2003) urges the carrying out of research within institutions into the student experience.

Quality of teaching

Higher education institutions tend to prioritise research over teaching. There is increasing pressure on academics to publish (Hinton & Tickner 2000). However, the influence of economic rationalism has caused a focus on quality in higher education institutions. Quality improvement plans are creating pressure within universities to commit to meeting their students' needs. Universities need both to attract students to their campuses and to retain them, as funding is linked to course completion rates (Ballantyne 2000). There is recognition that academic/learning skills programs should be integrated throughout the course, and a need for teachers to improve their teaching (Woodward 2000).

This can lead to discussions regarding who is best equipped to teach these students, especially first year students where attrition rates are highest (Horner 2001, Lee et al 2000). Teaching staff for first year need to be the most capable teachers and have expertise in their subject areas to improve the probability of success of the students (Lee et al

2000). Universities need to examine the relative importance of teaching and research in their institutions and acknowledge that they are of equal value.

Conclusion

A review of the literature has revealed several themes that have been explored briefly in this paper. The literature suggests that the diversity of student populations has a significant impact on the learning environment, and on the services required to meet students' learning needs. In the rural setting, students are often from socioeconomic and geographically disadvantaged backgrounds. These student cohorts include a large proportion of rural first generation students and mature age women. Emphasis has been placed on universities needing to know their cohort, as this features strongly in the literature and reinforces the fact that each cohort of students is unique to that particular course, campus and university. The factors identified in this paper impact on course development and delivery of the content to students. Increasing emphasis is also being placed on student satisfaction and retention rates. There is now a recognised need for universities to focus on the students' perspective regarding services required, and to foster a feeling of welcoming and 'fitting in' to the university community.

The way forward is for universities to recognise changes in student cohorts and to respond appropriately. Support services need to relate to the diversity of the students. This may have further advantages and benefit rural communities, as higher retention rates correlate with greater numbers of graduates accepting registered nurse

positions in rural areas. This review has led the authors to undertake a pilot research project focussing on a rural university campus to assess the learning needs and satisfaction of undergraduate nursing students.

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