Beyond the hospital walls: Developing partnerships and building capacity with community services

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Work integrated learning opportunities in hospitals for undergraduate nursing students are in demand and shortfalls are common. Given that healthcare systems are reorientating toward the World Health Organisations goal of ‘Health for All’ with the focus on primary health care (Mitshali, 2005), it is vital that healthcare professionals are adequately trained and prepared to work in environments that are vastly different to hospital-based settings.

A significant capacity building exercise involved organising community organisations to provide placements for 472 first year nursing students. This paper reports on this capacity building process and the survey data from students, tutors and community host organisations about their learning, experiences and reflections from these placements.

Forty organisations (85%) provided feedback with over 90% agreeing students developed their communication skills, 80% saw development in conversation skills and 97% agreed that students learnt about community services and how they helped people to live well within the community. Over 55% of student respondents agreed they developed their observation skills, communication skills (64%) and increased their understanding of the role of community services (68%).

Significant learning about capacity building with non-traditional placement partners is now integrated into pre-placement information to support and sustain these new valuable community partnerships.

Keywords: Capacity building, work integrated learning, non-traditional placements, nursing, community partnerships, communication skills, graduate qualities, primary health care

INTRODUCTION

Work integrated learning opportunities in hospitals for undergraduate nursing students are in demand and shortfalls are common in Australia. There has been increasing nursing student enrolments which has resulted in the need to find suitable work integrated learning (WIL), or professional experience placement (PEP) opportunities and to broaden the scope of these placements (Barnett et al. 2008, Peters, Halcomb and Mclnnes 2013). Given that healthcare systems are re-orientating toward the World Health Organisations goal of ‘Health for All’ with the focus on primary health care, it is vital that healthcare professionals are adequately trained and prepared to work in environments that are vastly different to hospital based settings (Mitshali, 2005). This has been recognised internationally, where there has been a shift from acute care settings to community placement settings (Dietrich Leurer et al. 2011, Gurling 2011, Kirkman, Harwood & Hofwegen 2005.).

In Australia, nursing student placements have turned towards rural settings for more WIL/PEP (Barnett et al. 2008, Smith, Emmett & Woods 2008, Kent-Wilkinson et al. 2010). However, there are still major shortfalls in WIL/PEP opportunities and more lateral thinking has been required, particularly around non-traditional community-based settings. A significant capacity building exercise involving the sourcing and development of new relationships with community organisations to provide placements for 472 first year nursing students was undertaken. This paper reports on this process and survey data from students, tutors and community host organisations about their learning, experiences and reflections from these placements.

BACKGROUND/LITERATURE

In acute hospital settings undergraduate nursing students are competing for WIL placements with other disciplines such as medicine, midwifery, allied health and non-tertiary nursing courses (enrolled nurses, nurse assistants and personal carers) to develop their skills and practice. This in turn affects the quality of undergraduate student learning that results from large numbers of health professional students, a lack of physical space, fewer mentors and increased staff workloads which can impact on morale and acceptance of students on placements (Betony, 2012, Murray & Williamson 2008). Additionally, graduate nurses often struggle with or feel unprepared for working in community settings given their limited exposure to the wide range of situations that occur and which are vastly different to the acute clinical setting (Walsh 2008, Kendall-Rayner
With healthcare being provided more in community settings there is a high priority to provide a diverse range of placements outside the acute hospital sector (Cummins et al. 2010). As nurses are being employed more in community settings it is important that undergraduate nursing students gain a better understanding of healthcare from a more holistic perspective. Healthcare is more than looking after people who are unwell and can occur anywhere, not just in traditional hospital or acute settings (Anderson 2009). Community healthcare placements can broaden nursing students’ skills and knowledge as well as develop their understanding of health and health care concepts (Kenyon & Peckover, 2009).

Non-traditional community-based WIL/PEP opportunities for nursing students have been explored in the United Kingdom and Canada who have similar undergraduate nursing education and placement concerns as Australia (Baglin & Rugg, 2010, Betony, 2012, Dietrich Leurer et al. 2011). Undergraduate nursing curricula are turning more attention to these types of WIL/PEPs to help address the shortfall in availability of acute care placements and reduce the pressure on acute care placement capacity.

Nevertheless, there is some debate in the literature on appropriate community WIL/PEPs. It has been contended that some community placement staff may be inadequately prepared for student placements which impacts on the students’ learning (Kenyon & Peckover, 2009). Conversely, other placements, for example those which have a one-on-one relationship between the learner and the experienced provider, can provide valuable learning for the student (Kenyon & Peckover, 2009). Further benefits cited in the literature regarding community WIL/PEPs identify that nurses show more empathy to their patients, have enhanced motivation, develop their professional identities, develop more confidence and competence, give students a broader perspective on healthcare contexts and are provided with opportunities for inter-professional team work (Anderson 2009, Baglin & Rugg, 2010, Kendall-Rayner 2010). Also, students learn to establish a rapport with health consumers and staff quickly and develop the necessary skills for effective communication and conflict resolution (Baglin & Rugg, 2010). To achieve these types of benefits, good quality community WIL/PEPs are required to develop competent and confident nurses (Murphy, et al. 2012).

There is little published information on community WIL/PEPs in the nursing curriculum, particularly in Australia (Anderson 2009, Cummins et al. 2010, Peters, Halcomb & McInnes 2013, Murphy et al. 2012). Hence, with the introduction of non-traditional WIL/PEP in the nursing curricula to address placement shortages, it is timely to investigate student and facilitator experiences to identify benefits and challenges associated with the different placement settings. This paper specifically aims to provide insights which may assist other providers of undergraduate nursing WIL/PEP curricula.

METHODOLOGY

The School of Nursing and Midwifery at Flinders University commenced a new Bachelor of Nursing (BN) in 2013 and added the use of non-traditional community placements to the work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for the commencing first year, first semester students. Given some community organisations do not employ registered nurses and did not understand the learning opportunities for students of nursing a significant capacity building exercise was planned. A broad range of personnel from the university involved in WIL/PEPs, community relationships and external stakeholder interactions from across the University were interviewed about “What factors they thought would be most important for the development of successful community placements for our students”.

All first year students, topic tutors and staff from the community organisations were emailed a link to an online questionnaire about their learning experiences on the community placements. A sample of convenience was also used to select students’ comments from online blogs, discussion forums and placement reflections as further sources of data about the community placements. Simple quantitative data analysis was conducted on the closed ended questions and thematic analysis was undertaken on the open-ended questionnaire responses and the students’ online blogs, discussion forums and placement reflections.

FINDINGS

The most important factors identified for the success of this capacity building process was to recognise what’s in it for the community organisation, be clear about any potential issues for the community organisation, develop a personal relationship with key personnel in each organisation, meet staff at the community organisation and
maintain regular phone and email contact in the lead-up to the placements. In light of the extensive work involved in sourcing, developing and maintaining these new WIL/PEP relationships, it was important to explore and analyse the issues associated with the community placements from the perspectives of the students, tutors and community organisations.

There were 45 different community organisations emailed a link to the online questionnaire with 40 completed from placement hosts, some of whom may have been different individuals at the same community organisation. Key findings included:

- 90% said the placement provided students with an opportunity to develop their communication skills.
- 97% agreed that students learnt about community services and how they helped people to live well within the community.
- 80% agreed that the placements assisted students to develop their conversation skills.
- 67% believed that the placements improved the students’ ability to work collaboratively.

Interestingly, while 45% of community respondents agreed that students added to their workload, 60% agreed that the students also contributed to the work to be done:

I have only positive memories of the work done by the students and the feelings displayed towards them by our groups. An excellent program!

However, as is common among large student cohorts, not all students present in the same manner as identified by this community partner:

Each of the 3 students was very different in their engagement and interest with their placement. Also their pre-knowledge was quite varied.

An important piece of feedback for the development of the new community partnerships was the positive feedback about the information and support provided by Flinders University to the community organisation around the placements.

An unexpected outcome from the placements was that 7 students have continued their relationship with the community organisation as a volunteer. This outcome provides an ongoing benefit for the host organisations and offers ongoing learning opportunities for the student.

The entire first year cohort of students (472) were emailed a link to the online survey and there were 78 (16.5%) responses. The key findings were:

- 68% of the student respondents said that the community placements helped them understand the role of community services.
- 55% of the student respondents said the placements helped them develop their observation skills.
- 64% of student respondents agreed that the placements helped them develop their communication skills.

One open ended response from a student that encapsulated her learning was:
I observed on several occasions today body language, communication skills, physical appearances and communication skills from both the children and also teenagers. I then also realised that these observations are a critical part of being a student studying a nursing degree.

A male student provided a perspective provided by one of the people using the community organisation:

She asked me about my progress in my studies and said something to me that I will remember throughout my nursing career. “Always remember, when you are with a patient for however long it may be, give them your time because many patients including myself are lonely and just want someone to talk to. Even if you are not interested, pretend you are because that’s all we want”.

One of the seven students to become an ongoing volunteer at the community organisation stated in their open-ended responses “… going by my experiences, the placement was great. I am now a volunteer.”

Further acknowledgment of the cross-generational experiences and learning for the students was a nomination in conjunction with one community organisation for a local intergenerational award. The School of Nursing and Midwifery in conjunction with the community organisation received a certificate or merit for the WIL community placements.

The topic teaching team were also sent the online questionnaire. All eight tutors (100%) responded to the online survey with positive responses about their confidence to support students on community placements despite 3 (37.5%) saying they did not receive sufficient information about the placements and did not think the students were well prepared for the community placement. Tutors were split about the community placement providing opportunities for the students to learn to work collaboratively despite all tutors saying they have worked in community or primary health care settings. It is clear that more direct involvement with the casual tutors about the community placements and the variety of placements needs to be built in to the topic organisation.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey presented in this paper is based upon an Australian experience of non-traditional community setting placements which may be applicable to other settings in Australia and internationally. Having such placements available for undergraduate nursing students is necessary to further their education and prepare them adequately for a variety of graduate roles on completion of the Bachelor of nursing degree.

Significant learnings from this study include the acknowledgement of the needs of the community partner, regular communication from the University and recognition of agreed mutual benefits. This study has identified the importance of detailed preparation for tutors and students in the teaching and preparation for community placements as well as improved organisation and communication with industry partners.

REFERENCES


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