

Curriculum and Pedagogic bases for integrating practice experiences within higher education

Case study #3: Integrating student nurses' clinical placement (University of Newcastle)

Program focus

Commencing in the second semester of their first year of study, student nurses within the Bachelor of Nursing at Newcastle University engage in clinical placements in each of subsequent five semesters across their three year program. The placements in the first two years are of eight days' duration, and in the third year comprised two of one month's duration. Ideally, longer placements are best, however curriculum and pedagogic practices have been adopted to maximise and integrate the learning from these placements.

How practice or workplace experiences are provided

Students are allocated to placements on a year-round basis and these comprise four days a week for two weeks, on morning shifts for first and second year students and on any shifts for third-year students. Placements are found for about 1900 nursing students across three campuses (Ourimbah, Callaghan and Port Macquarie) in the program at hospitals and nursing facilities from Wahroonga in the south to Port Macquarie in the north and west to Tamworth. During their placements, the students are supported by a registered nurse who acts as a mentor and in the first two years also with a clinical facilitator who has care for eight students at a time.

How those experiences are integrated into the course curriculum

Before each clinical placement, students participate in a week-long program within the clinical studies laboratory in which they develop procedural capacities (core skills) of the kind that are likely required in their upcoming placements. Also, students are provided with advice about how they might engage with staff and activities within their allotted ward. At the end of the day, during their placements, students engage in de-briefs with peers, and with a clinical facilitator, and in sharing experiences with student nurses working in different kinds of wards. As each of the clinical placements is embedded within a taught course, there is the opportunity for reflections, sharing of experiences and comparisons of practice within this course. After the first placement, which is held to be a powerful experience, some students decide that they are unsuited to work as nurses. In these circumstances, they are provided with counselling and support.

Particular curriculum practices

The sequencing of students' experiences progresses is structured across their placements with first-year students engaging in general medical and surgical wards, second year students doing the same but also having mental health and aged care experiences, and in the third year engaging in community health, indigenous health and critical care nursing. Yet, securing adequate and appropriate clinical placements for such a large number of students can be a challenging undertaking.

Particular pedagogic practices

The experiences in the clinical studies laboratory are peer assessed to develop students' critical clinical faculties, as well as being guided and assessed by clinical educators. The debriefings and reflections after each day's placement offers the prospect of understanding nursing and how it is enacted in different circumstances, and developing students' sense of self as nurses. The quality of clinical placements is seen as being central to how students engage with not only that placement experiences, but also their nursing studies, and the process of becoming a nurse.

Any evidence

The program is well supported by its partner hospitals, and students report that their experiences are often quite effective in assisting them understand nursing work, what they know and need to know, and the diverse qualities of nursing situations.

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