



Supporting student success through academic connectedness and professional belonging

Lyn Ebert
Tracy Levett-Jones
Vicki Holliday
Donovan Jones
Pamela van Der Riet



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA



centre of
excellence
for equity
in higher
education

This project was funded by a seed grant from the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE).

Project description:

This study aimed to explore the student experience of two health disciplines in UON - nursing and midwifery - which have a higher than average number of low SES and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. This study examined the participants' sense of connectedness to the academic environment and learning activities, as well as the development of a sense of 'professional belongingness' within different models of clinical placement and linked academic support. Connectedness in the context of health care education is understood to mean having a social and professional relationship between the clinical and academic environments with their colleagues, clinicians and academics.

The study objectives aimed to increase student retention rates and success through identification of:

- Clinical placement models that best support a sense of professional belonging
- Academic practices that best support student learning in the clinical environment
- Academic practices that best support student success in the academic environment

Key findings:

There appears to be very little connectedness between the participants' academic learning and clinical environments.

- Students prefer to learn with and from those with whom they had formed human connections and relationships;
- Educators - who can include midwifery and nursing students as contributing members of the health care team - can enhance professional socialisation and confidence in the clinical learning environments; and
- To ensure students sense of connectedness with educators and peers, universities should rethink the current trend to increase online learning. Therefore, while the value of online modes of learning is not dismissed, the findings of this study suggest that online approaches should be used as an adjunct to, rather than a replacement for, face-to-face learning experiences for midwifery and nursing students.

Implications for the future:

In order to develop a sense of connectedness, there needs to be a significant increase in face-to-face on campus learning opportunities; however, this assertion challenges current trends in higher education towards increased online learning. Participants also described the importance of being supported by mentors who included them as contributing members of the team and challenged and supported them to learn in the clinical environment.

In order to enhance midwifery and nursing students' sense of connectedness universities should re-examine the balance between online and face-to-face learning experiences and refocus on linking the academic and clinical learning contexts to improve students' experiences. In 2016, the midwifery curriculum at UON will implement 'link lecturers' to connect students with their academics while on clinical placement. This model will be evaluated to explore the outcomes for student experience.