

Registered Nurse and Midwife Education in Australia

Preamble

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC) leads a national approach with state and territory nursing and midwifery regulatory authorities (NMRAs) in evolving national standards for regulation of the nursing and midwifery professions that are flexible, effective and responsive to the health care requirements of the Australian population. The standards are developed in relation to the current regulatory and legislative environments that govern healthcare in Australia.

The purpose of regulation is the protection of the public. To this end, the ANMC safeguards the interests of the community by promoting high standards of nursing and midwifery practice through the development and maintenance of competency standards and the development of position statements and guidelines.

ANMC position statements provide the nursing and midwifery professions with a national regulatory perspective which may assist the development of nursing, midwifery and health care policy.

Introduction

The education of registered nurses and midwives in universities* aims to achieve optimal levels of quality care provision and patient safety; ensuring that registered nurses and midwives have a strong, detailed base of knowledge and set of skills before assuming direct responsibility for patient care. Together with the development of their clinical skills, higher education for registered nurses and midwives is necessary to equip them with the necessary skills in critical thinking and the assessment and application of research to safely make nursing and midwifery assessments and carry out nursing and midwifery interventions. Nursing and midwifery roles are professional roles that cover a broad range of skills and expertise. Critical thinking is a necessary nursing and midwifery skill. The ANMC national competency standards indicate the need for registered nurses and midwives to be able to think critically about patient care and to have the skills to contribute to the evidence-based practice framework through research and to apply research to their practice.¹

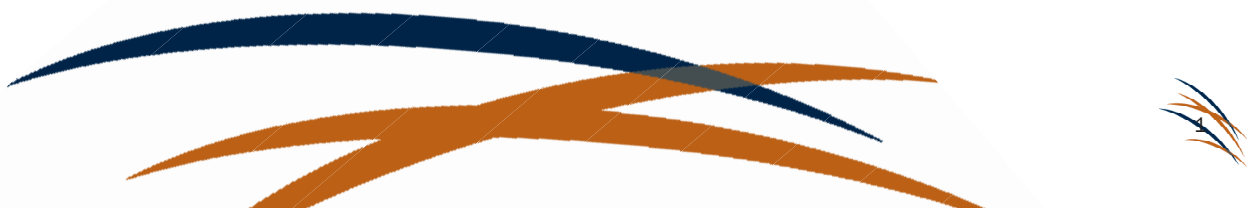
Universities, which have a tradition of fostering critical thinking and engendering a research culture, are the appropriate contexts for the education of registered nurses and midwives. In addition to making autonomous decisions where required about patient care, registered nurses and midwives are required to contribute to multi-disciplinary healthcare teams together with medical and allied health professionals who are also educated in universities. Patient safety and the maintenance of high-quality care provision dictates that registered nurses and midwives continue to receive a professional education and to be prepared to fulfil the ongoing professional demands that will be made of them upon graduation. This may involve expanding their practice through post-graduate research or in emerging extended roles such as that of the nurse practitioner.

Universities have the necessary institutional depth to produce bodies of research and to foster research skills in their students: universities must be able to undertake research that leads to the generation of new knowledge and demonstrate a sustained scholarship culture that informs teaching and learning.² They have 'traditions of rigorous scholarship, research-led teaching, .. capacity to recruit staff at the highest professional levels, and .. regular mechanisms for expert quality assurance'.³ They are in the best position to deliver important elements of the bachelor degree program as defined by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), including the 'development of academic skills and attributes necessary to undertake research' and 'a foundation for self-directed and lifelong learning'.⁴

The decision to make the minimum level of qualification for registered nurses a 'university-based bachelor degree' was confirmed in the National Review of Nursing Education: Our Duty of Care Report 2002 (Recommendation 22):

To ensure that registered nurses are appropriately prepared for their professional roles, the minimum level of qualification for entry to practise as a registered nurse should remain a university-based bachelor degree, with a minimum length equivalent to six full-time semesters.⁵

This recommendation was reconfirmed in the National Nursing and Education Taskforce (N³ET) Final Report in 2006, where it was noted by the Health Ministers to be current practice and to require no further action,⁶ and confirmed as Australian Government policy again in a letter to the Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery in May 2007.⁷



The education of registered nurses to practise in Australia has been conducted in the university sector since the late 1980s, and since 2002 there has been a 3-year university-based Bachelor of Midwifery degree offered in some states and territories. The move away from a hospital-based on-the-job training model to a university-based education was and remains consistent with international efforts to promote the quality and level of education for registered nurses.⁸ In addition, the establishment of the bachelor degree as the minimum qualification for registered nurses brings national consistency to nursing education in Australia. This remains an important step towards developing the uniform national standards for the health professions advocated in the 2005 Australian Government Productivity Commission Report, and which is the goal of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) planned health workforce reforms.⁹ Recent moves to undermine both the quality and the national consistency of registered nurse education, and by implication midwifery education in Australia have included discussion of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector offering Bachelor of Nursing qualifications.

Position

ANMC recognises the right of the public to receive nursing and midwifery care of the highest professional standards and confirms this by:

- Supporting the necessity for nationally consistent nursing and midwifery education;
- Acknowledging the need for registered nurses and midwives to be appropriately educated to assume research responsibilities and to exercise critical-thinking skills;
- Acknowledging the need for registered nurses and midwives to be appropriately prepared to undertake self-directed and lifelong learning; and
- Recognising the need for the minimum level qualification for entry to practice for registered nurses and midwives to be a university-based bachelor degree.

*'universities' in this document means those institutions which meet the requirements of protocols A and D of the *National Protocols for Higher Education Processes (2006)*, are established by an Australian legislative instrument, as defined in Part 3 of the *National Protocols*, and may include those institutions that operate with a 'university college' title or with a specialised university title, where they meet these protocols.¹⁰

References

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