Bachelor of Nursing courses leading to division 1 registration

Discussion paper response

August 2008
Question 1:

If the type of educational institution (i.e. university or other higher education providers) providing a course leading to registration as a division 1 nurse results in any differences in the level of education and competence that can be expected of a registered nurse graduating from the institution.

Level of education
Recent criticism directed towards the conduct of Bachelor of Nursing courses outside higher education institutions designated as ‘universities’ has asserted the concept that these courses would be a different ‘level’ of degree. The inference from the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) and the Royal College of Nursing Australia (RCNA) is that a degree conducted outside the university environment would be sub-standard, less rigorous and lead to poor graduate outcomes. These claims are not grounded in any evidence and demonstrate a lack of understanding of the context of higher education in Australia.

As the Nurses’ Board discussion paper clearly outlines, higher education in Australia occurs within both self-accrediting and non self-accrediting institutions. Ensuring the integrity of any degree program both nationally and internationally is extremely important as it facilitates transferability and recognition of qualifications across institutions and borders. This is vitally important among today’s global professional communities.

To facilitate a unified and quality controlled approach to post-compulsory education the Australian Quality Framework (AQF) was established in January 1995 and fully implemented by 2000.

The AQF was developed through the collaboration of State, Territory and Commonwealth Education and Training Ministers and the AQF Advisory Board was appointed to protect the AQF qualifications guidelines and to promote and monitor national implementation of the Framework.

Any institution offering bachelor degree programs must be accredited with the Commonwealth government and registered with the relevant state government as a ‘higher education provider’ and degrees must meet all AQF requirements.

‘Levels’ of education qualifications offered across education sectors in Australia are outlined within this framework and include:
• Senior Secondary Certificate of Education
• Certificates I, II, III, and IV
• Diploma and Advanced Diploma
• Associate Degree
• Bachelor Degree
• Vocational Graduate Certificate and Diploma
• Graduate Certificate and Diploma
• Masters Degree
• Doctoral Degree

Within the AQF there is only one level of Bachelor Degree and it is judged against a standard set of guidelines. The concept that there can be varied levels of bachelor degrees is therefore not supported under this nationally agreed education framework and to continue this line of argument is therefore a vote of 'no confidence' in the integrity and stringency of the AQF guidelines and the bodies that accredit higher education courses in Australia.

Regardless of the institution, all bachelor degrees under the AQF must satisfy a number of standard characteristics including:

- the acquisition of a systematic and coherent body of knowledge, the underlying principles and concepts, and the associated communication and problem-solving skills;
- development of the academic skills and attributes necessary to undertake research, comprehend and evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources;
- development of the ability to review, consolidate, extend and apply the knowledge and techniques learnt, including in a professional context;
- a foundation for self-directed and lifelong learning; and
- interpersonal and teamwork skills appropriate to employment and/or further study.

A course leading to this qualification also usually involves major studies in which a significant literature is available. Course content is taken to a significant depth and progressively developed to a high level which provides a basis for postgraduate study and professional careers."

(AQF Website)
Holmesglen is an example of a quality non-university higher education provider. In general, graduates of Holmesglen’s degree programs are characterised as having developed a range of core educational and vocational outcomes consistent with the outcomes of bachelor degree level programs specified in the AQF. A student satisfactorily completing a Holmesglen degree will have:

- acquired a systematic and coherent body of knowledge and its underlying principles and concepts, and the associated communication and problem-solving skills;
- developed the ability to review, consolidate, extend and apply the knowledge and techniques learnt, including in a professional context;
- developed the academic skills and attributes necessary to undertake research, comprehend and evaluate new information, concepts and evidence from a range of sources;
- a foundation for self-directed learning, lifelong learning and scholarship;
- interpersonal and teamwork skills appropriate to employment and further study;
- relevant work-related knowledge and skills at graduate entry or professional level;
- well-developed knowledge management skills including research (knowledge acquisition), critical reasoning (knowledge evaluation), creative problem solving (knowledge application) and original and innovative thinking (knowledge creation);
- ethical and professional values;
- an ability to integrate theory and practice and apply knowledge and skills broadly in the discipline area or in a professional context; and
- core employment related skills of decision making, communication, problem solving and using information and communication technologies.

Rigor

It could be argued that there is a higher level of consistency and rigor in the quality review among those organisations that must have degree programs accredited by an external independent body. Conversely, the level of rigor and consistent application of the AQF standards in self-accrediting organisations depends heavily on the level of expertise, resources and management support appointed to these processes. There is evidence that quality processes within some universities are not always as robust as they should be, the most recent example being the criticisms leveled through the media at Southern Cross University in northern NSW following an external audit of quality processes by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).
Graduate competence
One of the key objectives of the AQF is in ensuring “nationally consistent recognition of outcomes”. In other words, under the AQF, graduate outcomes should be consistent across all Bachelor of Nursing programs regardless of the institution in which it is delivered.

There is no evidence in the literature to suggest that the level of competence of graduates from Bachelor of Nursing programs within non-university higher education organisations in Australia is less than the level of competence of graduates from university-based Bachelor of Nursing programs. Avondale College in New South Wales, for example, is a non-university higher education provider who has been offering nursing programs since 1982. Avondale was awarded a five star rating in the Good Universities Guide in 2006 for the seventh consecutive year for the quality of educational experience offered. Importantly they have also received five star ratings for positive graduate outcomes and the rate of employment of their graduates. The marketplace is a good litmus test of quality and these results speak for themselves in terms of the quality of graduates produced by this non-university nursing degree program.

In addition, Bachelor of Nursing programs are subject to scrutiny and accreditation by state registering authorities. In Victoria the Nurses’ Board Standards for Course Accreditation clearly state the need for any proposed Bachelor of Nursing to demonstrate professional graduate outcomes based on the ANMC National Competency Standards for Registered Nurses and to articulate the methods by which this will be achieved and assessed. Education providers who recommend students to the NBV for registration must do so only on the belief that graduates have clearly demonstrated that they have met the ANMC Standards.

Existing workforce implications
Those that argue that graduates from other than university-based nursing degree programs are functioning at a lower (implied) level of competence to those with a university-based degree are questioning the integrity of the many registered nurses working within the health system across Australia who have qualifications ranging from hospital-based general and midwifery certificates to diplomas and advanced diplomas gained through colleges of advanced education or degrees obtained within polytechnic institutions in New Zealand.
At present some are advocating for changes to the existing legislation in preparation for national accreditation and registration, to render graduates from non-university bachelor degree programs ineligible for registration. I would suggest that this would have serious and broad-ranging implications for the existing workforce and any move in this direction would be a retrograde step in relation to government efforts to diversify higher education.

In addition, if authorities move to mandate a 'university-based' bachelor of nursing qualification as a prerequisite for working within the profession in Australia it would have a significant impact on free trade agreements that our country has entered into or is considering. It would also raise serious issues in relation to Australia’s competition policy if such a move were contemplated on the basis of anything other than quantitative evidence that supports the concept that no other higher education provider is fit and proper to provide professional education.

Reference

www.aqf.edu.au

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