

Questions for Discussion

Section 3.4 Connecting with other education and training sectors

15. To what extent should vocational education and training and higher education continue to have distinctive missions and how should these missions be defined?

Distinctive Missions

The vocational education and training (VET) and university sectors provide distinct levels of education preparation and while each has a role to play in providing education in compliance with the AQF they should not be blended. With regard to nursing education, the undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing program conducted in the universities prepares nurses who will be able to critically analyse care needs in any health and aged care setting, and provide clinical leadership. The VET sector prepares nurses in the enrolled nurse category who are legislated to work under supervision of a registered nurse in a complementary role. The distinctive missions of the educational preparation are that the registered nurse is educationally prepared in university to have skills and knowledge in overall assessment and determination of care needs based on evidence where as the enrolled nurse is prepared in the VET sector to undertake care determined and assigned by the clinical leader, the registered nurse.

Nursing Education Meeting Industry Demands

When nursing education transferred into the university sector back in the 1980's it was identified then that the current model of training was no longer effective or economically sustainable. This decision was made in collaboration with industry and the profession and was based on the imperative that changes in information technology, the growing complexity of patient care and the sophistication of an evolving health care system demanded a different level of expert skill and knowledge from nurses than that obtained from an apprentice-style level of program.

On a daily basis nurses are required to apply theory from the sciences and humanities, to inform their critical thinking and problem solving ability and ultimately to determine and deliver high quality patient care. Nurses provide 24 hour a day care and during that time are responsible for providing complex interventions, interpretation of results and the provision of care that is evidence based. The ability of nurses to work in the expanded role that society expects and demands is due to a university education. University education exposes nursing students to robust curriculum that supports research and inquiry and provides a depth and breadth of knowledge across a broad range of units.

Twenty years on it is unacceptable and inconceivable that undergraduate nursing programs would be provided anywhere other than in the self-accredited university environment. This being the conclusion 20 years ago, any movement to provide nursing education in any other arena would be damaging to the community, in terms of safety and quality of care, to professional standards and to the reputation of nursing education both nationally and internationally.

Professional Status

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has committed to national registration and accreditation for no less than 9 health disciplines including nursing and medicine which is a reflection of the professional status of nursing and the need to ensure that Australia is not regressive in allowing undergraduate nursing education to be provided in the VET sector. This is no more a consideration for nursing than it is for any of the other 9 health disciplines.

In the current workforce climate of skills shortages the ability of the VET sector to provide education as academically reputable and rigorous as the current university

based courses is highly questionable. Given the current pay disparity between the VET and university sectors, the VET sector will find it extremely challenging to attract high level educators to deliver nursing courses. Given that the VET sector does not embrace research with the same rigour or have the same capacity for intellectual inquiry as the university sector, the contribution of students to the body of nursing research would be reduced.

Addressing Workforce Shortages

There is a need to develop appropriate strategies to address nursing workforce shortages. However, stop-gap campaigns that aim to rapidly educate and deploy nurses into the workforce will not only undermine the professional status of nurses but will also undermine the broader needs of a health system seeking to make more effective use of its highly skilled and educated nurses to fill existing gaps in service provision. Downgrading the education of the registered nurse would be a counterproductive measure to the broader Federal Government health reform agenda that seeks to optimise the skills of health professionals within the health care system.

The nursing profession is committed to supporting a health reform agenda focused on safety and quality that seeks to expand the scope of practice of nurses. In line with evidence-based research, RCNA recognises this is only achievable through ensuring registered nurses, who comprise the majority of health care workforce, are educationally prepared in the self-accredited university sector.