

Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery (Australia and New Zealand)
Post Election Briefing Paper
October 2004

With the Government returned for a further term of office, the Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery today called for the Minister for Education to continue to provide support for nursing education. Dr Usher said “We saw little emphasis on nursing or nurse education in pre election campaigns from any party which is disappointing at a time when recruitment and retention of nurses is at an all time low. It is important for the future provision of adequately educated nurses that the nurse education system in this country receive the support it deserves from the Government”. The Council calls on the Government to address the issues identified pre election and outlined below.

Clinical funding

The Council was relieved by the announcement of the additional funds directed to Universities to support the provision of clinical placements for undergraduate nursing students. This funding, an important recommendation of the recent National Review of Nursing Education, is timely given the costs of providing quality clinical placements to nursing students. This burden on schools of nursing has resulted in high student-teacher ratios across schools, lack of funding for staff development, and relatively no funding for nursing research. However, whilst the release of the clinical funding was greeted with excitement by schools of nursing, we are concerned that the strategy may not have achieved the expected outcome. In fact, the release of the funds has probably made little if any difference for many schools of nursing, and only a small difference for others because of the policies of universities in their internal distribution of funds. As the clinical money is included in the new funding model from 2005, we recommend:

(1) that strategies are put in place to ensure schools of nursing actually receive the additional funding in the future.

Students enrolled in undergraduate nursing degrees are required to undertake up to 1,000 hours of clinical practice. In many cases these placements are undertaken away from the university and often at a significant distance from the student’s usual place of abode. The need to travel large distances and find accommodation in rural and regional settings is almost always at the student’s expense. Current funding models for nursing do not recognise this ‘hidden clinical cost’ borne by the students and we recommend:

(2) that DEST explore ways to provide support for students undertaking clinical practice requirements away from home.

The Council is attempting to work in partnership with the Chief Nurses to find a way to make clinical placement opportunities for nursing students more readily available.

Quality programs of clinical education are pivotal to the education of all health professionals but especially so for nurses who constitute over 60% of the current health workforce. One suggestion from a recent meeting with the Chief Nurses was the development of virtual clinical facilities that could be used to teach nursing students and thus reduce the burden on actual clinical facilities. Whilst we would be extremely concerned about a proposition that would reduce all clinical practice for nursing students to simulated experiences, we are keen to look for innovative ways to reduce the pressure on universities and hospitals. Therefore, we recommend:

(3) that the Government allocate funds to test the outcomes of a virtual clinical teaching laboratory for the preparation of nursing students using one of the established centres.

Allocated places

We are pleased that the current Government announced additional places in undergraduate nursing courses for 2005. It is important that sufficient new places be made available to meet the projected demand in the future nursing workforce. We believe that still further places are needed to ensure an adequate supply of registered nurses for the future (see for example the Preston Report).

Further, the distribution of the new places to rural and regional schools of nursing may have overlooked the potential for clinical placement opportunities in urban areas. We recommend:

(4) that a number of further places could be allocated to urban schools of nursing.

Research

Schools of nursing across Australia continue to struggle to meet the research outcomes expected of university academics. The reason for this problem is complex but related to the late entry of nursing to the world of academia coupled with the need for nurse academics to upgrade their qualifications to research levels. Given the importance of linking teaching to the outcomes of current research, and the recommendations of the recent Review of Nursing Education, we believe a number of strategies should be put in place to ensure an increase in nursing research capacity and improvement in the quality of the contribution nursing makes to outcomes-oriented research that provides the basis for better patient care. The Deans recommend:

(5) that leading nurse researchers be given membership of the key strategic bodies with policy making and funding distribution portfolios in order to assist with the development of nursing research capacity.

(6) Further, we request that additional funds be quarantined to support doctoral and post doctoral scholarships and fellowships for nursing higher degree research candidates.

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