



An exploration of undergraduate nursing assistant employment in aged care and its value to undergraduate nursing education



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ABSTRACT

Aims: To explore the types of nursing skills that are learnt through work as nursing assistants in aged care; and determine how these skills help to prepare novice nurses for new graduate practice as a Registered Nurse.

Background: Issues surrounding patient care currently plague the aged care sector in Australia. Undergraduate Assistants in Nursing are undergraduate nursing students who work in a variety of clinical settings, including aged care facilities. The employment of nursing students in aged care is not well explored.

Design: This paper presents the findings from an open-response question in the *Preparation for Clinical Practice* survey. The survey represented the first stage of a larger sequential mixed-methods study that explored how undergraduate Assistant in Nursing employment in aged care contributed to the preparation of new graduate Registered Nurses for clinical practice.

Setting: Data were predominantly collected online via an online survey platform. Social media and snowball sampling methods were utilised to distribute the survey nation-wide.

Participants: New graduate nurses (n = 108) who were previously employed as undergraduate Assistants in Nursing in an aged care facility during their Bachelor of Nursing program.

Methods: Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from the open-response question in the survey.

Findings: Three main themes were created: developing communication skills, prioritising patient care, and professional growth through immersion.

Conclusions: Undergraduate Assistant in Nursing employment in aged care prepared novice nurses for new graduate practice, developing higher-order nursing skills in communication, time management, understanding various aspects of care from the patient's unique experiences, and understanding the structure of the healthcare organisation.

1. Introduction

Globally, concerns surrounding the care provided in residential aged care facilities are similar to those present in Australia. Issues of patient care and safety are largely attributed to issues with skill mix and often relate to the role of health care assistants (HCA). HCA are a largely unregulated group of health care workers and provide the highest percentage of direct care to residents in aged care facilities (Shannon and McKenzie-Green, 2016; Stone and Harahan, 2010). The term healthcare assistant is a blanket term that refers to health care workers who perform auxiliary nursing roles, primarily providing assistance with activities of daily living such as feeding, bathing, and toileting (Burrow et al., 2017; Stone and Harahan, 2010). HCA are also referred to as nursing assistants, personal care workers, direct care workers,

assistants in nursing, and careers. A significant number of undergraduate nursing students seek employment as AINs, mainly to supplement clinical learning, gain paid employment while studying, and to increase the likelihood of obtaining a new graduate position upon graduation (Algosos et al., 2016; Salamonson et al., 2012).

Employment in residential aged care facilities is typically considered as a poor career choice with low wages, which deters novice nurses from entering the aged care workforce (Stone and Harahan, 2010). Additionally, ageist attitudes present a significant barrier to recruitment in the aged care sector (Algosos et al., 2016; Stone and Harahan, 2010). Ageist attitudes have influenced how aged care nursing is perceived within the nursing profession, particularly among novice nurses.

From an Australian perspective, the Bachelor of Nursing (BN)

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curriculum tends to focus on acute care, which inadvertently encourages nursing students to develop an appreciation for acute care nursing (Algoto et al., 2016). As a consequence, aged care nursing is often perceived by novice nurses as having little to contribute to their professional development and clinical learning (Algoto et al., 2016). Similarly, Gillespie (2013) found nursing students in Scotland did not value residential aged care clinical experiences as it did not align with their perceptions of nursing. Caring for patients with chronic illnesses was seen as unattractive in comparison to the technical image of acute care nursing. Thus to improve conditions and patient care in the aged care sector in the United States, a strategy has been to expose students to long-term older adult care during undergraduate nursing programs (Stone and Harahan, 2010).

2. Aim

To present findings from the open responses collected from a survey that explored the types of skills nursing students who work as undergraduate AINs in aged care learn; and whether these skills help to prepare novice nurses for new graduate (NG) practice as a RN.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

The survey was distributed as part of a larger mixed-methods study that aims to explore whether employment experience in the aged care sector as a nursing assistant, during the undergraduate nursing program, contributes to the preparation of novice nurses for new graduate (NG) nurse practice. The survey contained 50 scaled items (results reported in a previous paper, author's own (Algoto et al., 2018)) as well as an open response question that asked respondents to elaborate on why they thought undergraduate AIN employment in aged care was helpful or unhelpful in preparing them for NG clinical practice.

3.2. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Human Research and Ethics Committee prior to recruitment (ethics approval number H10915). An information sheet was distributed with the survey to provide further information about the study and contact details of the lead researcher. Further, the information sheet emphasised the voluntary nature of the study. Completion of the online survey implied the individual's consent to participate in the study.

3.3. Recruitment and data collection

Recruitment for the survey used purposive and snowball sampling methods, which involved the use of several popular social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. The study was also advertised through Australian nursing journals and podcasts to further promote the study and circulated among professional networks. Data were collected between March 2015 to May 2016, and in January to February 2017. The recruitment periods were staggered to coincide with annual NG intakes. The anonymous and online nature of the survey prevented rapport forming with the participants, which controlled for bias.

The inclusion criteria for the study required NG nurses to have been previously employed as an undergraduate AIN in the aged care sector and working in their new graduate year as Registered Nurse. A total of 110 participants who fulfilled the inclusion criteria completed the survey and 108 of these chose to complete the open response section of the survey. The number of completed surveys submitted from 2016 to 2017 is shown in Table 1.

The majority of survey participants were from New South Wales with the rest being spread across six states and Territories in Australia. 102 participants were female, and mainly worked in private sector

under casual employment.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis techniques guided by Grbich (2013) were used to identify common themes within the open survey responses and involved reading and re-reading the extracted data in consultation with co-authors. Themes within each open-response statement were read and re-read to become familiar with the data in order to identify theme (s) within each statement. Key words such as 'experience', 'confidence', 'communication' or 'communicating', 'time management' and 'consolidating' were used as a guide in identifying emerging themes related to perceived clinical and interpersonal skills that were learnt during undergraduate AIN employment. These key words were used to guide theme formation as they frequently appeared in participant responses. Common words and phrases were then grouped into categories until meaningful patterns became evident (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Grbich, 2013).

The first author collected and collated the narrative data from the open-response survey question for coding. Themes were discussed with the research team as they evolved throughout the data analysis process to ensure that the major themes accurately represented the data.

4. Findings

Thematic analysis of the open-response statements revealed three main themes. These were developing communication skills "*it made me far more comfortable in just communicating with patients and family*", prioritising patient care "*assisted in developing and improving my time management and prioritisation skills*", and professional growth through immersion "*to gain confidence and a proper understanding of the care they are providing to patients...*". Each theme will be discussed separately.

4.1. Theme 1: developing communication skills – "*It made me far more comfortable in just communicating with patients and family*"

Participants asserted that being an undergraduate AIN developed and improved communication skills. Survey participants expressed the importance of communication in order to provide effective care. This theme exemplifies the role of communication in healthcare collaboration and patient management. The ability to communicate effectively became a tool that novice nurses utilised to navigate the complicated relationships that exist within a healthcare environment from patients to patients' families, and with other healthcare professionals within the multidisciplinary team. Further, participants emphasised the value of effective communication in forming therapeutic relationships with patients. This was particularly so in situations where managing the patient was perceived as challenging, for example delivering care to patients with dementia. One participant described that experiences caring for older adults "*[m]ade me better at communicating with dementia patients*" (P92). Furthermore, participants also expressed that effective communication skills developed from caring for older adults. Effective communication skills help to establish a holistic understanding of an individual patient and provide appropriate and personalised care, as described by the quote below:

Immensely improves communication and interpersonal skills in relation to dealing with different personalities, cultural background, beliefs that as a nurse may have to deal with appropriately. It helps a lot in working effectively as a multidisciplinary team member. (P107)

Effective communication skills were found to be the cornerstone of patient management that helped nurses determine changes in their patients' condition. This is reflective of novice nurses improving clinical assessment skills through effective communication with patients and building therapeutic relationships. As stated by one participant:

Table 1
Number of surveys completed 2016–2017.

	Online surveys 2016	Online surveys 2017	Paper surveys 2016	Paper surveys 2017	Total number of surveys
Total	88	7	10	5	110

It provides necessary patient and family contact that would otherwise be limited in clinical placements. This means that when you come to your busy NG year, you already have the basics of communication and patient evaluation well ingrained into your personal practice. It also means that you learn early on, to work as part of a bigger team, and prioritise your time and attentions. I think without working as an AIN while I was finishing my [Bachelor of Nursing program], I would have struggled this NG year. (P49)

The development of effective communication skills allowed participants to engage in therapeutic relationships not only with residents, but also to “work so close and intimately with residents and their families” (P13). Therapeutic interactions with residents and their families also facilitated a greater understanding of the professional nurse, not just in relation to patient/resident needs, but also in terms of understanding career choice. This is highlighted by the following quote:

“Working as an undergraduate AIN enabled me to obtain and further my skills in complex clinical tasks as required, but working as an AIN also taught me basic nursing skills such as how to interact with people, meeting residents’ needs and it enabled me to realise that I was on the correct life path.” (P99)

Participants strongly indicated that effective communication skills developed from interactions with challenging patients. Patients with challenging behaviours were mostly identified as patients who were cognitively and/or developmentally impaired and/or experiencing mental health issues. Effective communication skills allowed them to confidently manage challenging behaviours. For example, a participant shared:

Mainly how it made me far more comfortable in just communicating with patients and family, and dealing with either cognitive issues as well as mental health. (P18)

A prominent association made by the participants denoted communication as a ‘basic’ skill that nurses needed to possess in order to effectively provide care for patients. Undergraduate AIN employment in aged care develops “confidence with the basics – ADLs (activities of daily living), [observations], communicating with patients.” (P9).

4.2. Theme 2: prioritising patient care – “Assisted in developing and improving my time management and prioritisation skills”

Participants identified that their time management improved during their employment as undergraduate AINs in aged care. The responses provided by participants identified a strong relationship between time management and the ability to prioritise the patient’s care requirements. Participants expressed that they were able to identify and prioritise their patient’s needs, which allowed them to effectively and efficiently provide care. For example:

“Working in aged care provided me with confidence in my nursing ability as I was regularly practicing basic nursing principles, e.g. attending to ADLs. I also had to learn to prioritise tasks and manage my time effectively. These skills all greatly assisted my transition to the new grad year as I knew I had those skills to back me up.” (P59)

Mastering the ability to assist patients with activities of daily living consolidated the capacity of novice nurses to prioritise patient care, which contributed to feeling confident in clinical practice. Another participant, who also felt that the ability to prioritise care contributes to

feeling confident and prepared for NG practice, echoed this perception:

“It made me confident in my ability to care for patients to some extent, which relieved any anxiety when starting as an RN. I believed I was one step ahead of many other nurses who had no prior experience in the field. I was also comfortable quickly building rapport with patients.” (P71)

As skills in time management improved, participants expressed that their practice became more efficient and that they were better able to prioritise patient care within the context of a healthcare team. For example, a participant asserted “[it] Assisted in developing and improving my time management skill and prioritisation skills” (P47). Similarly, another participant stated:

“I learned to effectively communicate with the MDT (multidisciplinary team) as well as patients, time management came easily to me and working under pressure with staffing issues as an AIN made life easier as an RN.” (P20)

Confidence in prioritising care translates into confidence in one’s ability to care for a person. One participant illustrates this:

“Working within a nursing home enables a student nurse to develop time management... within the nursing care industry. In addition, it equips a student nurse with confidence in caring for people who are often dependent on them for all their cares.” (P89)

Confidence with time management resulted in efficient patient care among NG nurses with previous experience as an undergraduate AIN. This created an opportunity for these NG to focus on the other skills that they needed to develop to fulfil the requirements of their new role as a RN.

“Exposure to basic nursing skills and time management improved my efficiency [in] my new graduate year, giving me more time to spend on developing other skills such as medication administration, complex dressings, admissions and discharging activities.” (P84)

Responses from the participants identified time management as a skill that was developed from undergraduate AIN employment in aged care. Competence in time management develops the novice nurse’s ability to identify the patient’s health care needs and prioritise these. Time management was also related to participants feeling confident in delegating certain tasks to other members of the healthcare team so that care is delivered efficiently.

4.3. Theme 3: professional growth through immersion – “To gain confidence and a proper understanding of the care they are providing patients and their families”

Gaining additional clinical experience was beneficial in that it exposed nursing students to situations that are confronting. Participants expressed that gaining additional clinical work experience was the primary benefit of undergraduate AIN employment in aged care as they “learn from experience” (P95) and that “[t]he things you learn in aged care from hands on experience, you can’t learn from a book” (P32).

Experience as an undergraduate AIN in aged care notably exposed them to the clinical setting. Exposure to the aged care setting resulted in familiarity with healthcare environments, the role and responsibilities of the RN within a healthcare team, aspects of patient care, and “the nitty-gritty of nursing” (P25). Exposure to the RN role allowed the participants to develop an understanding of expectations on RNs when caring for patients and was considered to be “[beneficial] for learning

[from] senior staff" (P5). It gave them "insight into what it is like to work in a health care setting" (P14). Participants indicated that they became aware of the differences between the AIN and the RN roles and the associated expectations. This helped them to mentally prepare for their future role as RNs and helped inform their practice during their transition phase.

"[Working as an AIN] gives you a better understanding of what being an RN will be like and gives you the opportunity to decide if this is the job for you. It also informs you on what skill level you [need] to be at to be an RN." (P83)

Another benefit of undergraduate AIN employment in aged care conveyed by participants was the frequent exposure to the clinical setting that "[c]omplements experience gained as part of [the undergraduate] program." (P15). They indicated that the time between clinical placement blocks at university were months apart and so learnt clinical skills were forgotten. Employment as an undergraduate AIN in aged care supplemented university-assigned clinical placements and increased the frequency of clinical exposure.

"I gained more frequent exposure to the hospital environment compared to clinical placement at university where you would wait at least 3 -4 months in between placements to be in a hospital again. As a result, you would forget a lot of things and feel like you were starting all over again." (P96)

Exposure to the clinical setting also created a sense of familiarity with patient care, routines, ward cultures, policies, and shift work. Being immersed in the clinical setting also exposed novice nurses to a myriad of learning opportunities that may not have otherwise occurred during clinical placement blocks as it "provides exposure to varying situations" (P63). Include content to lead on to the following quote.

"Every aspect [of] being an AIN provides extra learning opportunities that will assist me to become a better nurse." (P28)

This familiarity, in addition to that of being exposed to the RN role, is significant in the preparation of NG nurses for clinical work through creating realistic expectations of their level of practice, and of the RN role.

"...learning to trust your intuition about when a [patient] is deteriorating and learning to speak up/when to escalate a situation...the most frustrating aspects of nursing are very apparent in aged care environments (e.g. repetitive tasks, physically heavy tasks, depressed/confused/aggressive patient) but it is also one of the most important and rewarding areas. It is a good area to test your limits and find out how patient you are and how good your interpersonal skills are." (P74)

Clinical experience gained as an undergraduate AIN created a sense of familiarity with the healthcare environment and the opportunity to link theory with practice. These elements created an understanding of patient care and the meaning of caring as a nurse.

"Gives hands on experience in clinical settings, ... Practice the theory in real life, which helped me to improve my skills and knowledge. Helped me to get oriented to the ward settings and how different every clinical area [is] in regards to patient care and management" (P67)

In addition to experience and exposure to clinical situations, time was also an important component of preparing NG nurses for practice. Time refers to time spent immersed in clinical practice; time spent interacting with patients, families, allied health, and other health professionals; and time to reflect on experiences was another important component of preparation for practice. Aged care settings provide more opportunities for patient interactions and an understanding of the role of the nurse in a person's experience of health and illness.

"Aged care is excellent experience in gaining basic nursing care skills and a great platform to launch your nursing career. It enables you to learn at

a more relaxed pace, in a supportive and time friendly environment." (P61)

"Skills in personal care, building therapeutic relationships, ADLs, manual handling, dealing with difficult behaviours and communicating with the elderly are all developed through aged care..." (P93)

Undergraduate AIN employment provided students the opportunity to have an immersive experience, as they were not seen as students, but rather as a valuable member of the team. This is highlighted by this quote from a participant who stated "... nursing culture looks at students differently than they do staff, so being a staff member can also prepare you for workplace culture as well" (P98). Immersion occurs through frequent exposure to, and familiarity with, nursing culture. Exposure to and familiarity with the care of patients as an undergraduate AIN creates a complex learning experience that emphasises learning beyond mastery of technical nursing skills. This phenomenon is summarised by one participant:

"Being an AIN helps you get a grip on the basics of nursing and submerses you into the nursing role without the massive responsibility shock that you can feel as a new grad. I found it helped with my confidence... and learning the essentials to patient care... [Working as an AIN] ... was great for exposing me to all the different alterations in health, and allowed me to learn and adapt to the hospital environment. I feel that this prepared me to know the right questions to ask and things to consider as a new grad, beyond what I learned as a student on placement..." (P98)

5. Discussion

Preparation for NG practice through undergraduate AIN employment occurred through mastering fundamental nursing skills of communication and time-management and built confidence in clinical practice and caring. Mastering fundamental nursing skills developed novice nurses' confidence in their ability to provide holistic, patient-centred care and contributed to a feeling of preparedness for NG practice.

Effective communication was evident through participants' responses, particularly in relation to managing difficult behaviours. Brown and Crookes (2016) described nursing as a complex set of skills involving an array of humanistic skills such as effective communication that formed the foundation of professional behaviour and maintaining the dignity of a person. In their study, which attempted to identify the necessary skills of a new graduate RN, Brown and Crookes (2016) found that humanistic skills were a large percentage of the top thirty skills expected of new graduate RNs, with communication skills the highest ranked skill.

Communication is a significant skill in nursing as it builds therapeutic and interpersonal relationships (Blevins and Millen, 2016; Imai et al., 2017). Doing so helps the nurse develop an understanding of the human experience of health and illness within a healthcare context, which can encourage compassionate care (Blevins and Millen, 2016; Brown and Crookes, 2016).

While communication is considered a fundamental nursing skill, the nature of communicating within a healthcare setting and in building both professional and interpersonal relationships, is complex. Findings from this study describe the development of therapeutic communication skills through interactions with older adults and other healthcare professionals. The balance of verbal and non-verbal communication affects how a nurse relates with colleagues, patients/clients and their families, by combining an appropriate combination of spoken words, eye contact, facial expressions, posture and touch, and with cultural competence (Blevins and Millen, 2016).

In a study by Bennett et al. (2016), approximately 63% of conversations within a residential aged care facility occurred between the resident and AINs, which resonates with findings from this study that undergraduate AIN employment in aged care is valuable in developing

communication skills among novice nurses. Developing effective communication skills in the aged care environment facilitates immersive interactions with patients that help the nurse to understand patient/resident experiences of health and illness in a holistic perspective (including family) (Nordby, 2017). Subsequently, the novice nurse develops the ability to identify and prioritise the patient's care needs. Communication is of significance in the care of the elderly as poor communication between staff and residents can often lead to residents becoming socially isolated (Runci et al., 2015).

Caring for older adults poses several challenges to communication that the nurse must overcome to deliver quality patient care. Common examples of barriers to communication among older adults include functional deficits such as hearing loss and cognitive impairment, aphasia, and, in increasingly multicultural societies, language barriers (Bennett et al., 2016; Runci et al., 2015). Undergraduate AIN employment in aged care exposes novice nurses to such challenges in communication so that they are able to develop strategies to overcome them. By overcoming barriers to communication, the nurse is able to develop rapport with the resident, help maintain the residents' sense of identity and independence, and protect them from social isolation (Bennett et al., 2016).

Findings from this study map a journey of professional development at a novice level and illustrate how newly graduated nurses build confidence in preparation for transition into graduate RN practice. Confidence and competence require time to build, and participants' responses described the development of confidence in relation to mastering fundamental nursing skills. In contrast to aged care settings, acute care settings that are attractive to undergraduate nursing students are not necessarily conducive to developing fundamental principles of communication, time management, planning and prioritisation of care. Acute care settings that are generally encountered and sought by NG nurses in their first year of practice, demand that nurses have effective time management skills as patients' needs require prompt resolutions. The effects of inadequate time management are particularly evident in the acute setting as delays can have direct and significant impact on patient safety (Blevins and Millen, 2016). Therefore, aged care settings can be an ideal learning environment for undergraduate nursing students to prepare them for clinical practice.

Undergraduate AIN work experience in aged care creates an immersive clinical learning experience that helps to prepare novice nurses for transitioning into NG practice. Immersion occurs through exposure to the care environment and the role of nurses in caring for individuals experiencing the effects of ageing. Developing familiarity with the care environment that emerges from interactions with residents and other health care professionals also contributes to an immersive learning experience in preparation for transitioning into NG practice. Immersion in the aged care setting as an undergraduate AIN not only increases time in the clinical setting, but also provides novice nurses with experience in different clinical situations. Experience is the vehicle that transforms theory into understanding as novice nurses interact with real patient situations, and apply their skills and knowledge to real clinical situations (Ewertsson et al., 2017). When considered through the framework of andragogy, experience is the catalyst for transformation, which relies on reality shock and dilemmas to initiate change (Knowles et al., 2011). In relation to novice nurses, this change refers to

the process of becoming a professional nurse.

6. Conclusion

Undergraduate AIN employment in aged care prepares novice nurses for new graduate practice in terms of developing interpersonal and abstract nursing skills in relation to communication, prioritising patient care and professional growth through immersion that develops an understanding of various aspect of care from the patient's unique experiences and to the structures that governs a healthcare organisation. Consolidation of and competence in understanding the fundamentals of nursing care leads to confidence in autonomous practice, which facilitates the novice nurse feeling prepared for future clinical practice as a RN.

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