



Desperately seeking consistency: Student nurses' experiences and expectations of academic supervision



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ABSTRACT

Background: Academic supervision - the support available to students when writing assignments - is a fundamental element in the provision of support within nurse education. Not only can it underpin high levels of academic achievement, but it also has a role in enhancing the retention of students. Despite its importance, there is little investigation of undergraduate academic supervision within the nursing literature.

Objectives: To explore students' experiences and expectations of academic supervision as part of an undergraduate programme of nurse education.

Design: A qualitative approach to explore student perceptions.

Setting: The research was undertaken at a Higher Education Institution in the United Kingdom. The institution offers undergraduate nurse education programmes to approximately 800 students.

Participants: Eight pre-registration nursing students from a Bachelor of Science programme participated in a focus group interview. All were in the first semester of their final year.

Methods: Data were collected using focus group interviewing, based around a semistructured question framework. The focus groups explored students' expectations and previous experiences of academic supervision. The focus group was recorded, responses were transcribed and thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key findings.

Results: Three themes were identified from the data: relationship with supervisor, variation between supervisors, and the link between supervision and marking. Overall, students identified frustration with variability in the provision of academic supervision.

Conclusions: Effective academic supervision depends on a strong relationship between student and supervisor - something that can be difficult to achieve if supervision is only for a short period of time. Equally, students crave a consistent approach to supervision, in terms of both the amount and content of feedback. Students are able to identify and articulate a clear link between effective supervision and academic achievement.

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1. Introduction

The retention of student nurses is a key priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Though estimates of attrition rates vary widely, it is thought that over one-quarter of student nurses fail to complete their programme of study, resulting in financial wastage for nurse education commissioners and a potential impact on students who may have invested time and money into their unsuccessful studies (Wray et al., 2012).

The causes of attrition from nursing programmes are manifold. Some inherent student characteristics such as male gender (McLaughlin et al., 2010) and lower (or non-standard) academic entry qualifications (Prymachuk et al., 2009, Dante et al., 2013), are thought to be associated

with higher levels of attrition. However, issues related to the provision of nurse education, such as financial difficulties (Andrew et al., 2008) or experiences on clinical placement (Crombie et al., 2013), are also important factors.

Failure of the theoretical components of pre-registration nursing programmes has also been identified as an important component of attrition (Hunt et al., 2012). Consequently, the support given to students throughout their programme of study by academic staff is an important area when exploring reasons for – and approaches to reducing – student attrition. This study focuses specifically on the support available to students when writing assignments – termed 'academic supervision'. Specifically, this paper reports on a qualitative exploration examining undergraduate student nurses' perception of academic supervision practices within a University delivering an undergraduate degree in nursing in the United Kingdom (UK).

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2. Background and Literature Review

Over the last thirty years, nurse education in the UK has moved away from apprenticeship based training, and into the dual environments of practice and formal academia (DOH, 2006). One manifestation of this transition was the move to all-graduate programmes in 2011 (NMC, 2010). With this move to traditional higher education has come a change in the way the theoretical components of nurse education are studied for, and accredited, from those of the early 1990s (UKCC, 1986). In particular, the move of nurse education into the Higher Education sector and, more recently, the move to an all-graduate profession, have raised the importance of academic achievement.

Students undertaking academic programmes of study to qualify as a Registered Nurse within Higher Education in the UK are partly judged on their success through academic achievement of written assessment (Gopee and Deane, 2013). However, there appears to be little work that has explored the role of academic supervision within programmes of nurse education or social sciences at undergraduate level (Todd et al., 2006; Gopee and Deane, 2013). There is however, readily available literature regarding research supervision and supervision at postgraduate level (Hemer, 2012; McCallin and Nayar, 2012; Severinsson, 2015).

Identifying the optimum approach to providing academic supervision offers challenges to HEIs and individual lecturers (Amundson and McAlpine, 2009; Dowie, 2008; Peelo, 2011). Although Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) identify supervision as a sophisticated, high-level teaching process in which learning is central, Fry et al. (2011) suggest that a subtly different set of skills are required for supervision than for teaching. How these skills are best learned or honed however, is not apparent from the literature, although an 'on the job' approach is alluded to by some (Blass et al., 2012; Peelo, 2011). This is supported by Halse (2011) who explored how academics, through the process of supervision, had to develop basic knowledge and skills not learned within their own research training.

If there is no established, evidence-based guidance and training to support the development of academic supervision skills, there is a risk that this will impact on the quality of support given to students. Turner (2015) recognises this risk and suggests that further investigation of structures for academic supervision is warranted.

While academic staff play a key role, the student as supervisee also serves an important role within the supervision dyad. The relationship between academic supervisor and supervisee is often complex and subject to a range of power dynamics (Hemer, 2012; Askew et al., 2016). Therefore, it is beneficial to understand whether students receiving academic supervision have a view upon their expectations of the academic relationship and the support received from their supervisors. Alongside this, identifying how the student's perceptions diverge or converge with those of the supervisor's view is an important topic for consideration.

Some HEIs have basic guidelines for students and academics alike and there is occasionally some work in the literature to guide undergraduate supervision (Rowley, 2000; Bowman and Addyman, 2014). However, the operationalization of these guidelines can often be inconsistent, leading to a lack of clarity and uncertainty for students and lecturers alike (Grant, 2005). In addition, although guidance may be available for supervisor and supervisee, this may not be explicit for those with little experience as a supervisor. (Todd et al., 2006).

Cahill et al. (2014) suggest that good academic and pastoral support is integral to the student receiving a good learning experience. When academic support is offered however, some thought must be given to the relationship in which that support is delivered. Grant and Graham (1999) explored this relationship by "acknowledging it is an unequal power-filled pedagogical relationship" and suggested this is one in where both student and supervisor have the capacity to act to bring change. Mackinnon (2004) reflected on academic supervision and added definition by describing academic supervision as a relationship between people filled with complexity. If these relationships work, then they are likely to result in successful academic results;

relationships that are less successful are less positive and could adversely influence success rates (De Valero, 2001; Gurr, 2001).

The research literature therefore highlights the importance of academic supervision in supporting students to successfully complete programmes of study. However, there is less information available on the actual experience of supervision from the perspective of students. This study aimed to fill that gap in the evidence base.

3. Methodology

The aim of this work was to explore students' perceptions of academic supervision as a basis for future work towards developing a robust academic supervision framework for undergraduate nursing students. With regard to the research compass model proposed for educational enquiry by Ringsted et al. (2011), this approach would fit as an explorative study to seek to describe phenomena. This study therefore utilised a descriptive qualitative design as suggested by Holloway and Wheeler (2013).

3.1. Ethics

Ethical agreement to proceed with the project was obtained through Faculty-level Research Governance and Ethics committees. The participants were assured that involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could decline or withdraw without the need to give a reason. All participants who volunteered were informed about the study's purpose, and were given assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. All data were stored securely with access limited to the lead researcher (LG) only.

3.2. Sample

Data were collected at a HEI in which pre-registration students undertake a three-year undergraduate programme of study leading to an honours degree in nursing. Only students undertaking Adult field nursing were included within this study. The rationale for only selecting adult field students was because of substantial differences in the way that academic supervision was provided to students in other fields. Final year student nurses were identified as the study sample group. This group was selected because they had sufficient experience of academic supervision practices to provide informed feedback.

A group of 25 students was selected from the final year cohort. From a list of all student identification numbers, 25 were chosen at random by a member of administrative staff not otherwise connected to the study. The only exclusion criterion was that the students could not be personal students of the lead researcher (LG) who is also a lecturer in the HEI. This exclusion criterion was put in place to reduce the possibility of either negative or positive bias. This work was also undertaken in a semester where the lead researcher was not providing any academic supervision to the selected student group.

The 25 students selected were approached and asked to participate. In total, a group of eight students expressed an interest in taking part. Information and consent forms were sent to all interested students to ensure they were fully apprised of the project with regard to anonymity and confidentiality within this work.

Of the eight students recruited, all attended the focus group. All participants were female. (compared to 91.4% of the final year cohort altogether). The age range of participants was 20–49 years and was representative of the cohort's mixture of younger and more mature entrants to the programme.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through a focus group based around semi-structured questions and lasting for approximately 1 h. This approach was selected as a tool to offer the opportunity 'to listen and learn from

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