ASCILITE 2023

People, Partnerships and Pedagogies

Partnering to enhance the postgraduate student experience

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The learning and teaching team at Edith Cowan University's School of Nursing and Midwifery has partnered with postgraduate students to enhance their experience and success. Targeted initiatives throughout the curricula, including online and multimodal learning activities and resources, were co-developed in response to anecdotal evidence that some commencing students in this diverse cohort were lacking essential digital and academic literacy skills. The team is improving learning opportunities for all students by leveraging online platforms and fostering constructive relationships between staff and students to enhance self-engagement and motivation. A self-evaluation has been developed and implemented for students to gain a clear understanding of their academic and digital literacies. It is also providing important data about students' preparedness for their studies. This paper will share early findings from the research project, including scalable approaches and strategies to promote agency and empower students and staff.

Keywords: partnerships, postgraduate, student success, retention, digital equity, pedagogy.

Introduction

Postgraduate (PG) cohorts are characteristically diverse, embracing international and mature age students and professionals returning to higher education part-time as well as recent graduates. Despite assumptions of PG students' academic skills and digital literacy, commencing students in this diverse cohort sometimes lack essential literacies. In the School of Nursing and Midwifery (SNM) at Edith Cowan University (ECU), learning and teaching staff have partnered with students and academic staff to enhance PG student experience and success. Student data and anecdotal evidence from academic and professional staff has shown that PG students require support in the development of their academic writing, communication and digital skills. Cook et al.'s (2021) national study on Australian PG student experiences and anticipated employability has highlighted that some aspects of the PG journey do not meet the needs of students, in addition to the significance of fostering a sense of belonging and preparedness among students. This study aims to improve PG student experiences and learning outcomes in the SNM by addressing the impact of digital inequity on students' academic readiness and co-creating targeted resources and support to develop digital and academic literacies.

Our context

ECU, the youngest university in Western Australia, has a strong reputation for improving equity student access, participation and success in higher education. With 31,000 students across 23 fields of study, it has a multicultural student population of around 7,000 international students from over 100 countries. ECU achieves 5-star ratings for teaching quality and student support, and currently holds the number one position in Australia for PG learning resources according to *The Good Universities Guide* 2024. A growing focus on the digital learning needs of students led to the Digital Literacy Framework which describes strategies and actions to enhance the skills of students and staff (ECU, 2019). Digital literacy encompasses using technologies responsibly and ethically to access, evaluate, and communicate information while discerning credible sources and ensuring safe digital engagement. The Framework aligns with the Curriculum Design Policy whereby courses provide technology-enhanced learning experiences to build learners' digital literacies. Furthermore, course learning outcomes include digital and academic literacies at each level of coursework. The SNM has the fifth largest nursing cohort in Australia with over 3,500 students who are predominantly mature age, female and balancing work and family commitments with study. September 2023 data shows 49% (n=317) of Learning Assessment Plans for PG students at ECU are held by SNM students with various types and levels of support provided. Digital inclusion, based on the principle that individuals should have the opportunity to fully utilise digital technologies (Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2023), is an important element of the curriculum design and consistent with our institution's ethos around inclusive learning and teaching. It is important given the range of technologies students use in contemporary learning and clinical environments and is compounded

by the diversity of the cohort returning to study postgraduate nursing and midwifery. By addressing these perspectives on digital inclusion and equity, the learning and teaching team are working with staff and students to create a learning environment where all students have opportunities to learn and engage with digital technologies confidently and ethically. Through this project we are exploring PG student experiences from 2019-2024 to codevelop an inclusive, student-centred and technology enhanced curriculum. More recently, the project also embodies a commitment to equip learners to respond to, and make ethical contributions in, a society pervaded by generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) since the open-access release of tools in late 2022.

Digitally inclusive curricula

Digital equity encompasses learners creating and sharing digital content as well as staff who are proficient in using and evaluating the digital tools and resources to enhance learning (Willems et al., 2019). Targeted initiatives throughout the curricula, including online and multimodal learning activities, align with these dimensions, also a key element of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) Standards for our PG nursing and midwifery courses. In accordance with Standard 3.4, the curriculum includes: "teaching and learning [that] reflects contemporary practices in nursing, health and education, and responds to emerging trends based on research, technology and other forms of evidence" (ANMAC, 2019, p.16). And, as per the Registered Nurse Standards for Practice, students must develop academic skills to think critically and analyse nursing practice and to communicate effectively (Nursing and Midwifery Board, 2018, Standards1-2). Digital and academic skills and knowledge development using learning technologies are embedded across the curriculum to transition students into the workplace. In order to successfully navigate AQF 8 level or higher qualifications a wide range of digital and academic skills are required over and above the application of clinical skills. In addition to learning disciplinary content (theoretical and clinical) in the first semester of the course, students need to quickly grasp a variety of learning technologies: navigating the LMS, using MS Teams, searching library databases, reading and interpreting Turnitin similarity reports and developing ePortfolios, before the first assessment. We use a range of technologies to enhance teaching and learning experiences, however it is clear students need support, and as illustrated by our ASCILITE poster presentation *Roadmap to success: The future academic wellbeing of our students is bright* (Maldon & Pedlow, 2021), our approach encompasses embedding technology across curricula, innovative online modules, and a suite of resources and programs. The objective is to promote student retention and success through digitally inclusive curricula and comprehensive support over the student lifecycle.

Partnerships to promote digital and academic literacy

Partnerships are a fundamental component of the co-creation of scalable approaches and strategies to promote agency and empower students to succeed in their PG nursing and midwifery studies. Since 2019, the Senior Learning Adviser and Senior Learning Designer have worked in close partnership to draw upon the expertise of teaching academics, professional staff and PG students to co-design a suite of resources to support students (Daza et al, 2021). Student performance data, as well as anecdotal evidence from academics, learning support staff and the library, indicated that students require support in the development of communication, academic literacy, critical thinking, and research skills. To date student support centred around face-to-face appointments, generic drop-ins, and assignment workshops. However, with data indicating a diverse cohort – including industry professionals returning to study and a projected 40% increase in international student enrolments in 2019 – more was needed to achieve an inclusive learning environment. A teaching and learning grant enabled us to co-design a contextualised resource to build academic preparedness and successful transition for a growing PG cohort. In 2019 we co-created the Postgraduate Research and Inquiry Skills Modules (PRISM), which cover essential academic skills and foundational research knowledge including reviewing the literature. PRISM is housed on a PG community site in the LMS and can be accessed by all PG students throughout their degree. It is also embedded in foundational units across nine courses for students transitioning into PG studies. Student feedback highlights the usefulness of the modules often beyond commencement of their PG studies: "very helpful especially for someone who hasn't studied for a few years and English as a second language"; "better delivery than if I had to read a chapter in a textbook"; "a valuable resource … I'm still using PRISM as I type – my go to survivor aid"; "very useful and I used the information to assist myself … especially towards the last assignment". Students were interested in further opportunities to practice their academic writing skills, including how to think critically, analytically and integrate evidence appropriately. Some also wanted to develop their language and communication skills as identified by Post Entry Language Assessment (PELA) results. So, in addition to embedding more learning activities and assignment skills resources in the curriculum, complementary workshops ran in the first half of semester in 2020-21 to develop academic style and assignment skills. From 2022, the approach was revised in response to student feedback, shifting towards just-in-time support and increasing the frequency to weekly sessions throughout the semester. These sessions are student-

led, offering more opportunities for students to learn together and from each other, and practice their skills with the Senior Learning Adviser, Librarian and guest unit coordinators as relevant. Regular and "positive staff-student relationships" have been shown to be important for nursing students "to feel accepted, included and valued" and motivated to learn (Levett-Jones et. al., 2009, p. 323). Resulting from these sessions, it became apparent that lacking confidence with essential academic skills extended to digital literacies beyond library skills for some students. This included foundational digital literacies, such as software and technologies, basic computer skills and using Turnitin. It was clear there was a gap, and that the development of a self-evaluation might improve the learning opportunities for all students commencing PG studies.

Literature review

To date, a range of literature has explored impacts on student learning in Australian universities, including the first-year experience and transition pedagogy, the relationship between (nursing) students' sense of belonging and retention, and improvements for the teaching and learning environment (Ahn et al., 2020; Levett-Jones et al., 2009). A significant body of research exists on student experience and success. However, there is limited literature which has explored PG nursing student readiness in terms of academic and digital literacies in the Australian context. Notably, this study is grounded by Kift et al's work on transition pedagogy as a third-generation approach requiring "an institutional vision for FYE that is shared by academic and professional staff who form sustainable partnerships across institutional boundaries" and which conceptualises the first-year experience as "everybody's business" (Kift et al., 2010, p. 10). A 2021 study of PG student experiences in Australia highlights that more accommodating and flexible university scheduling that considers work commitments, caring responsibilities and an emphasis on developing transferable skills to support their success (Cook et al., 2021). They found that "when asked to reflect on what was and was not going well in their university experience, students were more vocal about what was not going well" (p. 160). Research focussed on academic integrity and contract cheating in higher education in Australia has found that students who speak a language other than English at home (LOTE) are more likely to contract cheat (Harper et al., 2019). On a positive note, it has been shown that "improving the teaching and learning environment would make contract cheating less likely". According to the study that reports on findings from a survey of teaching staff ($n = 1147$) conducted at eight Australian universities, academic and professional staff should work to "minimise opportunities to cheat" through careful curriculum design and teaching approaches that educate students "in scholarly practices, including referencing; maintain clear and consistent standards," and support students' "understandings and development through assessment and feedback" (Harper et al., 2019). There is limited research on PG nursing student experiences and learning outcomes in the Australian context. In addition to embedded curriculum support, it is clear that in order to positively impact student learning, PG students should have access to targeted and timely support and resources to develop the skills required to succeed. Student reflections and self-assessments could be important means to determine academic and transferrable skills and if further support, scaffolding and/or curricula development is required for diverse cohorts of first year PG students. For example, some students might lack prior critical thinking experience to link theory to clinical skills or they might need opportunities for time management skills development. It is also timely for academic and professional staff to evaluate and identify areas of improvement from the students' feedback if there is a need to adapt the resources and delivery of skills again in the future. Results can identify areas of improvement to inform the re-evaluation and development of resources for PG nursing students.

Methodology

In 2022, the ethics application for our research project titled "Enhancing the PG student experience and outcomes" was approved (2021-02657-MALDON). The project aims to explore the perceived skills and barriers related to academic and digital literacies among students before they start their PG studies in nursing and midwifery. Pre- and post-semester PG skills self-assessments were conducted using Qualtrics, involving all new PG students enrolled in SNM courses during both Semester 1 and Semester 2 of 2023. The data will be analysed through a descriptive qualitative design and thematic analysis to develop targeted academic and digital skills resources and learning support to enhance the student experience and outcomes. A self-assessment tool was designed in collaboration with academic and library staff and PG students to gauge students' proficiency and confidence levels in essential digital and academic skills to help students to identify any areas for improvement in preparation for their studies. The self-assessment was built in Qualtrics and consists of nine questions, seven Likert-scale questions using a three-point scale and two open-ended questions across the following categories: software and technologies, basic computer skills, searching for information, academic skills, academic integrity and using GenAI tools to support learning. By implementing the pre- and post-semester PG skills self-assessment, we hope to gain insights into students' existing skills and areas requiring further support. This assessment will also help identify areas where students require assistance and to tailor our support programs

accordingly. Since Semester 1, 2023, commencing PG students have been invited to complete the self-assessment to gain a clear understanding of the expectations and assess their own academic and digital literacy levels. Similarly, it enables staff to understand students' preparedness for study. This process facilitates targeted support and ensures both students and staff are on the same page regarding the students' skill sets upon starting their PG journey. In semester 2, 2023 an ethics amendment has enabled us to ask students to share their perceptions of the benefits and limitations of GenAI tools. We are particularly interested in their understanding given it is now crucial in 2023, as noted by our colleagues, for universities to ensure the ethical and appropriate use of GenAI tools to support student learning and academic integrity (Kelly et al., 2023).

Insights from the project so far

85 students have completed the pre-semester Postgraduate Skills Self-Assessment in Semester 1, 2023. The findings regarding their confidence using software and technologies reveal the majority of students believe they need additional practice and assistance. 69% perceive their digital and information literacy to be inadequate for locating relevant information to support their studies. 47% of students need more practice or support in using Microsoft Office Suite. Navigating the Canvas learning management system presents challenges for 63% of students who indicate a need for further practice or guidance. 76% of students lack confidence accessing and utilising cloud-based servers. Furthermore, 64% of students do not feel confident in their ability to comprehend the Turnitin originality and similarity reports, which are integral to maintaining academic integrity. The results indicate that PG students have lower levels of confidence in their academic skills compared to our expectations. 78% of students expressed a need for practice and assistance with academic writing. Moreover, 69% of students require practice and support specifically for paraphrasing, while 76% indicate the same need for critical thinking and analysis. 51% of students require practice and help with English language proficiency, grammar, and spelling. 65% of students express a need for practice and assistance with planning and note-taking skills. Furthermore, 89% of students require practice and help in managing information, including the use of tools such as Endnote. These findings highlight the areas where students may benefit from targeted interventions and support to enhance their academic skills.

Table 1: Student's perceived confidence of academic integrity

Skills	I am confident with this	I need more practice	I need to get help with this
Acting with academic integrity	64%	30%	6%
Paraphrasing from journal articles or texts	36%	47%	16%
Referencing using APA7	20%	50%	30%
Avoiding plagiarism and academic misconduct	56%	35%	10%

While students mostly perceive themselves as upholding academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism and academic misconduct, there appears to be a disconnect regarding the necessary link between these behaviours and the proficiency in paraphrasing and accurate referencing. It is crucial for students to recognise that maintaining academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism require a level of confidence in paraphrasing skills and the ability to reference sources accurately. Addressing this gap in understanding is essential in ensuring students fully comprehend the importance of these skills in upholding academic integrity and ethical scholarship practices. According to 62% of responses, the PG self-assessment aided them in identifying their strengths and weaknesses in terms of digital and academic skills. This provides confirmation that the implementation of this tool can contribute to mitigating the digital inequity faced by these incoming students at the beginning of the semester. The utilisation of the PG self-assessment as an intervention can play a valuable role in equipping students with the necessary awareness and support to address their individual skill gaps and enhance their overall digital competency for academic success.

Conclusion

The findings show that commencing PG students lack confidence in essential academic and digital literacy skills. Student responses to date confirm the usefulness of a self-assessment tool. The importance of communication skills, critical thinking and analysis and digital literacy for both study and work as a registered nurse and midwife is clear. Furthermore, with the growing use of GenAI a "key challenge", as highlighted by Kelly et al (2023), "is the need for strong critical thinking and digital literacy skills". Data from Semester 2, 2023 will include attitudes to the use of GenAI. Ethical practice and integrity are key tenets of the nursing profession. However, some students do not recognise that acting with academic integrity and avoiding

plagiarism and misconduct require confidence to paraphrase and reference accurately. Leveraging partnerships has been essential in understanding PG student preparedness. Collaboration is a crucial element for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Inclusive teaching practices play a critical role in facilitating participation and maximising the potential of all learners, including the development of digital literacy through scaffolded instruction in technology use (Willems et al., 2019). Leveraging institutional partnerships and support have also been essential to upskilling and empowering staff and to ensure digital equity for students. Working with staff to embed academic and digital literacy skills in units is also an important opportunity to use that partnership to equip educators with the necessary skills to effectively teach in the digital age. Fostering a sense of agency among staff is crucial, enabling them to take ownership of their teaching practices and create an environment that supports students' academic and digital literacy development (Resta et al, 2018).

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