NURSING AND MIDWIFERY EDUCATORS TEACHING POSTGRADUATE ONLINE COURSES: A CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY

Introduction

Postgraduate nursing and midwifery educators who teach in university settings are now regularly required to teach online. Some are experienced face-to-face (F2F) educators, who have limited experience teaching in online environments, while others have very little formal teaching experience and are recruited because of their clinical knowledge and experience (Schroeder et al., 2021). Online educators have a complex role that combines teaching with several other elements such as building social presence, undertaking organisational roles, and solving technical difficulties (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Compared to F2F teaching, online pedagogy requires a different mindset and different skillset, where the interdependent factors of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence all drive a meaningful online learning experience for students (Garrison et al., 2010). The flexibility of online postgraduate nurse/midwifery education enables career focused registered nurses and registered midwives to gain a higher degree including level 8, level 9 and level 10 Australian qualifications (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013), while working part-time or full-time. With online education now so readily available in Australia, thousands of registered nurses and registered midwives are taking up the opportunity to study online (Darcy Associates Consulting Services, 2015; Osborne et al., 2018) indicating an increased need for postgraduate nursing and midwifery educators that are skilled and supported in their role as online educators.

Background

Online learning has become increasing popular in tertiary education, particularly over the last ten years due to wider access to the internet, as well as the increased need for prospective students to complete further study, upskill or re-train (Baran & Correia, 2014; Roddy et al., 2017). In the period pre-2020, the demand for online course offerings increased dramatically in universities enabling postgraduate students to engage in intensive courses and upskill at an accelerated rate (Roddy et al., 2017). As 2020 approached, and COVID-19 lock downs were initiated in many communities, the sharp shift from F2F education to online education became even more prominent as educational institutions worldwide had to resort to online methods of instruction to continue to offer their students learning opportunities (Australian Govenment: Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2020). Post-COVID-19, online courses continue to expand rapidly in Australia, overcoming geographic barriers to allow more students access to educational opportunities, as well as the flexibility to combine study with their everyday work or family commitments (Roddy et al., 2017; Stott & Mozer, 2016).

Offering online courses of study involves a wide range of pedagogical considerations and should not simply involve conversion of a F2F course to an online format (Roddy et al., 2017). Many educators in tertiary nursing and midwifery programs are experienced F2F teachers, however the literature reports that these educators often lack online teaching experience and this can result in less than suitable outcomes for educators and students alike (Richter & Idleman, 2017; Stott & Mozer, 2016).

Online teaching is complex and requires different teaching skills to that of F2F teaching. The skills essential to online teaching include being able to design a pedagogically sound and engaging online learning environment, creating an online social and cognitive presence, communicating and teaching through the fingertips, promoting online peer to peer engagement, effective use of online collaboration tools such as video-conferencing, and thoughtful assessment design (Authement & Dormire, 2020; Garrison et al., 2010). Hence, it is recognised that academics teaching online postgraduate nursing and midwifery courses have a wide range of needs as they prepare for the online classroom, including technological and professional development needs, and require mentoring, targeted training and ongoing support.

For staff making the shift from F2F teaching to online teaching, mentoring, training, and ongoing support are important factors for increasing staff self-efficacy and satisfaction. Howe et al. (2018) found those who had taught online several times had increased self-efficacy and overall satisfaction. This was thought to be largely due to the lessons learned through experience. A study by Gazza (2017) found that when staff had time to learn about online teaching, this positively influenced satisfaction and the decision to teach online. Howe et al. (2018) also reported that those who received mentoring had significantly higher satisfaction than those who did not. Other studies also indicated that targeted training was essential to achieving self-efficacy and satisfaction of online teaching staff (Richter & Idleman, 2017; Wingo et al., 2016). The suggestion that more research is required to develop effective training models for online teaching faculty was evident in the published literature (Wingo et al., 2016).

A common notion in the pre-existing literature were that online teaching was more time intensive than F2F teaching. The study by Gazza (2017) identified the back-and-forth nature of interactions between staff and students, and the increased time and expertise required to design the online learning environment, increased workload for teaching staff. Wingo et al. (2016) recognised that preparing online courses was time intensive, suggesting that ample time be allocated to staff workloads to allow for this. As well, class sizes in online learning courses are often much larger, influencing workload of staff teaching online (Gazza, 2017). Another factor influencing increased workload of teaching staff was by virtue of staff being available to students outside regular business hours, blurring the usual hours of work required of staff (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015).

Objective

A literature review was conducted to explore the needs of Australian postgraduate nursing and midwifery educators who teach online, exposing a gap in research reporting the experiences and needs of this population. This prompted the design of a mixed-methods descriptive research study to gain an understanding of the learning and professional needs of Australian nursing and midwifery educators teaching postgraduate courses offered exclusively online, to inform strategies for enhancing support in this population.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the experiences and needs of nursing and midwifery educators teaching in postgraduate courses offered entirely in an online mode?
2. What strategies can be implemented to support nursing and midwifery educators who teach postgraduate courses offered entirely online?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were nursing and/or midwifery educators who have taught in entirely online postgraduate courses/subjects/units in any university in Australia within the past five years. To be eligible, participants could be employed in a full-time, part-time, or casual/sessional capacity.

Recruitment

Recruitment of participants was conducted from June to August 2019 through two methods. First, recruitment was conducted through social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Linked In, inviting Australian nursing and midwifery educators who met the selection criteria to follow a link to the online survey. Second, thirty-nine Australian Nursing and Midwifery schools were identified as offering online postgraduate nursing and/or midwifery programs. Heads/Deans of all thirty-nine Nursing and Midwifery schools were contacted, with an invitation for them to disseminate the study information and survey link to eligible staff in their school.

Instrument

An online survey was developed and tested by 9 academics in health and non-health disciplines to assess for face validity and question clarity, and improvements to content and question clarity were implemented based on feedback. The final survey consisted of 56 items comprising both quantitative and qualitative questions. The first question asked participants to confirm if in the past five years they were employed as an academic in nursing and/or midwifery at an Australian university, including full-time, part-time or

sessional/casual. Those who indicated this was not the case were sent to the end of the survey and excluded from answering any further questions. The second question asked participants to confirm that they had taught a postgraduate nursing and/or midwifery program that was offered entirely online. Again, those who indicated this was not the case were sent to the end of the survey and excluded from answering any further questions. Those who answered 'yes' to the two initial questions were able to answer the remainder of the survey. The remainder of survey items were organised in four distinct sections.

The first section of the survey included one question to extract numerical data about the length of time the participant had been teaching in higher education, and two questions asking participants to rate their experience in the traditional F2F and online modes of teaching, using a scale based on nursing theorist Patricia Benner's stages of clinical competence (Benner, 1984), ranging from: 1 = *novice*, 2 = *advanced beginner*, 3 = *competent*, 4 = *proficient*, 5 = *expert*. No other demographic data was taken from the survey.

The second section of the survey extracted quantitative data using thirty-nine items relating the participant's experiences of online teaching. These questions used a 5-point Likert scale for responses: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree.* Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha in this section was 0.786.

The third section of the survey extracted quantitative data using six items relating to participant's experiences receiving faculty, team and technological support. These

145 questions used a 5 point Likert scale for responses: 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 =
146 *most of the time*, 5 = *always*. The Cronbach's Alpha in this section was 0.862, indicating high
147 reliability.
148
149 The final section of the survey included six opportunities for participants to provide open
150 ended responses to questions about the type of support and training offered to them prior
151 to teaching online, what types of additional support or training they feel would be useful to
152 them in their role as an online teacher, as well as the favourite aspects and least favourite
153 aspects of their role as an online teacher. The survey was developed using Qualtrics and
154 took approximately 25 minutes for participants to complete. Once recruitment had begun,
155 the survey remained open for two months during the data collection phase.
156
157 Ethical considerations
158 Ethical approval was granted by the James Cook University Human Research Ethics
159 Committee (Identification number H7808). Participant confidentiality was maintained as no
160 identifying information was collected. Potential participants were provided with a link to the
161 study information sheet and after reading the study information, they were invited to
162 indicate their consent by clicking a button to proceed to the survey questions.
163
164 Data analysis
165 Data was collected and stored electronically, with password protection used for security.
166 Responses to the survey were analysed using SPSS to perform descriptive statistical tests.
167 Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis, to more deeply understand the
168 experiences and needs of the participants. This paper reports only the quantitative findings

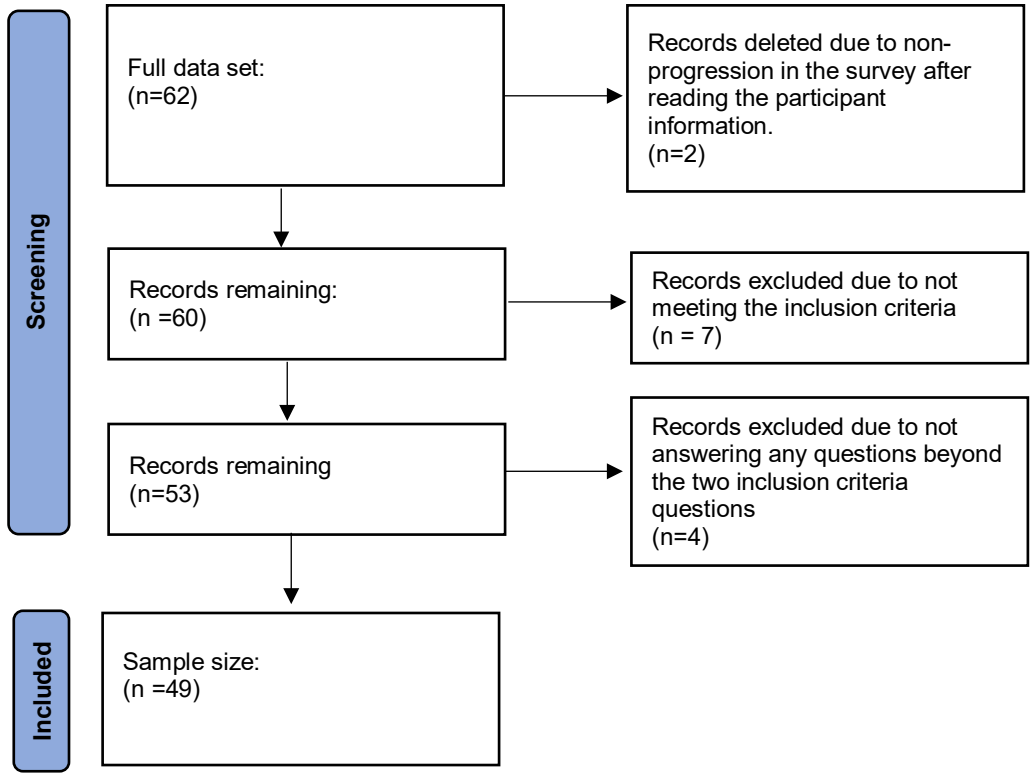
of this mixed-methods study, where the qualitative findings intend to be published separately.

Results

Demographics

The sample consisted of n=49 after data cleaning (Figure 1). Of these, 67.3% had been teaching in higher education between 1 and 10 years, while the remaining 32.7% had been teaching in higher education for more than 10 years. One quarter of respondents had been teaching in higher education for four years or less. When asked about their experience as a F2F teacher, 72.9% indicated they were either 'proficient' or 'expert' in this mode of teaching. However, when asked about their experience as an online teacher, only 52.1% indicated they were either 'proficient' or 'expert' in this role.

Figure 1: Data Cleaning Process



Perceptions about online teaching

The survey asked a range of questions about respondent's perceptions of online teaching. Results revealed more than half of the respondents agreed that online teaching was time consuming (59.4%) and isolating (55.3%). When asked if online teaching takes up less time than teaching F2F, the majority (89.4%) of the sample disagreed. A large percentage of the respondents classified online teaching as challenging (76.6%), but many enjoyed the intellectual challenge that online teaching presents (71.7%). Just over half the sample agreed that teaching online suited their teaching style (54.4%) and allowed for autonomy in their teaching practice (58.7%).

Preparing for online teaching

When preparing for online teaching, staff are required to learn to use new technologies, review and or design learning materials, and have time to prepare for teaching and dedicate to marking student work. Results revealed many respondents enjoyed learning new technology for their work (79.6%) and felt comfortable using technology in teaching (73.4%). However, most admitted they learned new technologies in their own time (83.6%), with almost one-third (30.6%) of respondents indicating they had not completed any training courses to learn the technologies they used in teaching. Fifty-seven percent of the sample believed their employer did provide opportunities to learn new technologies.

Responses revealed some respondents were included in the content writing process (66%), the assessment writing process (64%), and in the process of evaluation and revision of learning materials (75%). Ninety-two percent of respondents indicated they were confident

and competent teaching the content they were required to teach. However, when respondents were asked if they have time to prepare for teaching, only 63.2% indicated that this was the case, with 30.6% indicating that they were not provided with learning materials well in advance of beginning to teach. One quarter of respondents indicated they did not have time to dedicate to marking student work and providing adequate feedback.

Online teaching and student engagement

Eighty-three percent of respondents indicated they provided students with a range of effective learning experiences when teaching online. The online teaching strategies commonly used by respondents included online discussions (93.6%), video conferencing sessions (85.1%), and learner-to-learner interaction (91.5%). Of the respondents, 60.8% believed that the online learning environment was produced effectively to enhance learner engagement. Ten percent perceived that high-quality experiences cannot occur without F2F interaction. Some 17% of respondents indicated they do not get to know their students through online teaching.

Developing as an online teacher

The pedagogies guiding online teaching are vastly different to those guiding F2F teaching (Garrison et al., 2010; Gurley, 2018). However, just 66% of respondents agreed that they understood what constitutes best practices in online teaching. As far as professional development was concerned, 63.8% believed that online teaching offered opportunities to improve teaching, while 80.8% felt that online teaching offered opportunities to develop new ideas about teaching. Approximately half (55.3%) agreed that they were provided with opportunities to share their knowledge and ideas with other online teachers.

Being supported as an online teacher

Having training (Gurley, 2018) and feeling supported (Mellieon & Robinson, 2021) are essential to the satisfaction of online teaching staff. Results in this survey have revealed that many respondents did not receive specific training before beginning to teach online (62.2%), nor have they received any specific training in online instruction (36.8%) or specific training about how to use the learning management system (27.7%). Subsequently, 65.9% of respondents said that they felt that they needed additional training to assist in their role as an online teacher. Survey questions asking about being supported as online teachers have revealed that 66.7% perceived they could be better supported. Fifteen percent of respondents 'rarely' felt supported by faculty in their role as an online teacher, while 17% 'rarely' or 'never' received adequate technological support. A lack of training and support often results in online teaching staff feeling alone. In this survey, 29.8% of respondents indicated they 'sometimes' felt isolated in their role, 19.1% said they felt isolated 'most of the time' and 6.4% said they 'always' felt isolated in their role as an online teacher. Additionally, 12.8% reported that they 'rarely' felt part of a team when working as an online teacher, while 36.2% 'sometimes' felt part of a team.

Discussion

Online teaching brings with it both barriers and opportunities for educators and students alike. Online learning and teaching requires adequate access to reliable technology and internet, and some say that online learning and teaching cannot take the place of F2F engagement due to the lack of human connection (Unnikrishnan et al., 2020). The alternative view is that online learning can broaden opportunities for access to education

and enable the use of innovation and contemporary teaching methods to compensate for the lack of physical F2F presence (Tartavulea et al., 2020). Consistent with a wide range of previously conducted international studies (Authement & Dormire, 2020; Gazza, 2017; Hampton et al., 2020; Matthias et al., 2019; Sinacori, 2020; Tartavulea et al., 2020; Unnikrishnan et al., 2020), in this study we learned that many of the participants were experienced F2F teachers, who experienced the shift from F2F teaching to online teaching as challenging; and requiring different teaching skills and approaches to those commonly used previously in their teaching careers. Importantly, the findings of the study highlight a range of areas where institutionalised recognition and support is key to assisting experienced F2F teachers to successfully shift from F2F settings to online settings.

Consistent with several other studies undertaken in the United States (Gazza, 2017; Richter & Schuessler, 2019; Sinacori, 2020; Wingo et al., 2016), it is not surprising to see the majority of participants in this Australian study reporting that online teaching takes additional time in tasks such as preparing and developing online content, learning to use the technology, teaching through their fingertips, as well as upskilling so as to use sound online pedagogy. In addition, this study revealed online nursing/midwifery educators commonly use their own time to undertake new learning, upskilling, and professional development relevant to their role. Without recognition of the additional time taken to teach in such environments, as well as the often-hidden workload that exists, institutions risk teaching staff feeling undervalued, unsupported, and discontent with their work conditions. Given the increasing casualisation of teaching staff in higher education, this is certainly one area requiring deeper investigation and consideration.

The finding that half of the sample described their role as an online educator as isolating is problematic. The pre-existing literature clearly highlights the isolation often felt by students in online learning environments (Authement & Dormire, 2020; Dreamson, 2019; Elmore, 2021; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Zou et al., 2021), however very little published literature exists regarding the experience of isolation for online educators. In this study, only half of the sample identified they have opportunities to share their knowledge and collaborate with other online educators, highlighting the fact that many online nursing/midwifery educators work in silos where collaboration with others is not being realised to its potential. This unfortunately points to missed opportunities for these educators to learn from each other and develop further professionally, through collaboration with the broader team.

The challenges faced in this virtual teaching space can impact satisfaction amongst both staff and students. Online education, with its increased accessibility, flexibility and popularity in our world today often results in larger student cohorts (Sunar et al., 2020). Managing large online cohorts correlates to increased workloads (Lowenthal et al., 2019; Tynan et al., 2015) as well as reduced potential to get to know the students in the same way that is possible in the F2F environment (Almatrafi et al., 2018; Price et al., 2016). With almost one-fifth of participants in this study claiming that they do not get to know their students, the risk is that the depth of teacher-student rapport and relationships will be markedly reduced, impacting on student satisfaction and success. The previously published literature also points to the challenges in building student-teacher relationships in online learning environments, citing how vital it is for online educators to communicate well, and

build connectivity; a combination of building social presence and a sense of community within their courses (Garrison et al., 2010; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Schroeder et al., 2021).

Significantly, only half of the sample in this study agreed that online teaching offered job satisfaction, while a third of participants believed online teaching does not offer job satisfaction. Teacher satisfaction and self-efficacy are directly correlated to student success (Hampton et al., 2020). Previous literature reports important measures to increase satisfaction and efficacy in the role. First emphasising how important it is that online educators are provided with recognition of their crucial role in educational institutions broadly (Reneau et al., 2018). As well, training and support relevant to online educators specific learning needs as they transition to online teaching is vital to their overall satisfaction and self-efficacy (Wingo et al., 2016). Online educators need training that builds confidence to solve information technology issues, use the learning management system efficiently and confidently, use analytics to better understand student engagement, and prepare and deliver effective online teaching sessions. Likewise, it is equally as important to ensure that educators are satisfied in the virtual classroom, as this may have ramifications for the success of programs and intention to remain in the profession.

Since this study focussed strictly on the experiences of postgraduate nursing educators, further research is indicated to explore whether this is a phenomenon specific to nursing and midwifery postgraduate education, or indeed if this is similar to the experiences and needs of online educators in the growing undergraduate nursing and midwifery online education spaces. Additionally, now that we are in a post-COVID-19 world where online education has become increasingly 'normal', it would be interesting to explore the

experiences and needs of educators who teach into fully online courses now, and compare the results to those of this study conducted pre-COVID-19.

This study found a much larger proportion of the sample perceived themselves to be 'proficient' or 'expert' in terms of their ability to teach F2F compared to teaching online. Additionally, more than two-thirds of the sample reported requiring more training and support in their roles as online educators. If the transition of the education of nursing and midwifery is inevitably going to become more omnipresent in the digital classroom, and educators are going to be expected to 'teach through their fingertips' more and more frequently, we must address the needs of our educators with highest priority. Universities must not assume that the digital classroom is merely a form of the F2F classroom, and we must champion the education and professional development of our online educators to ensure that they are fully competent and confident in performing their vital role (Gazza, 2017; Wingo et al., 2016). Opportunities exist for organisations to ensure their online teaching staff are adequately trained to teach, appropriately resourced with time and professional development, and conduct future research to better determine how to improve learner engagement, online pedagogies, and educator support in this alternative classroom environment.

Limitations

This study captured the perspective of participants at one point in time via a self-report survey. As well, the small sample presents a limitation, where generalisability should be applied with caution. The study is also descriptive in nature, with the researchers recognising that the cross-sectional nature of the study has produced data from a point in

time just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this also presents a future opportunity to undertake a replication study and compare the findings pre- and post-COVID-19. The study focus was on nursing and midwifery educators teaching in postgraduate online courses only; those teaching in undergraduate online courses were excluded from this study. However, the study could be replicated in future studies to include this population.

Conclusions

As a result of this study, it is recognised that the most important thing that can be done for staff who teach into online courses is to give them the education and professional development they crave. This can take the form of information newsletters and tip sheets, regular briefing before and debriefing after each subject, formalised mentor programs for new staff, and inclusion in organisation professional development activities, including a fair allocation of time in workloads to maintain their professional development. Universities must recognise that their staff are important to the success of their programs. If staff are not satisfied, students will not be satisfied, and this will impact on the success of the course or program. This study has helped in our understanding that educators want to provide the best learning opportunities they can for their students in the digital classroom, but they need to feel supported and included, while addressing their ongoing learning and professional needs.

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