Attributes of graduate entry nurses: An integrative review

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INTRODUCTION

Graduate entry nursing (GEN) programmes enable quicker launch into the worforce and may expedite graduates' entry into leadership and other advanced research and practice roles in health care services. The overall aim of graduate entry programmes is in keeping with international literature on health workforce development that articulates strategies for professional mobility between health and other elements of the workforce (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2016).

BACKGROUND

Contemporary approaches to education and training for health professionals need to look beyond existing models and approaches that have served past health service needs. Population growth, cultural diversity, and extended life expectancies, will require different relationships, knowledge and skill sets to support the health and wellbeing of more diverse populations across the lifespan (Wheeler, Fisher & Wing-sum Li, 2014). The New Zealand Ministry of Health (2013, p. 2) supports strategies that will meet future health workforce demands, including enabling both current and future health professionals to "be able to upskill or change their career direction in more efficient, effective and authentic ways". GEN programmes have been offered internationally for a number of years in response to increasing demands for an ongoing supply of nurses to work in all sectors of health services (Downey & Asselin, 2015). New Zealand health service feedback suggests that maturity, multiple skill sets, and critical thinking and judgement are attributes that are evident among graduate entry nurses (Cassie, 2015).

RESEARCH METHOD

An integrative review approach was used to synthesise the published research and other literature on the attributes of graduate entry nurses. The integrative review method enables researchers to synthesise research from a variety of research approaches (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

The research question was framed as:
What are the demographics and attributes of graduate entry to practice students and registered nurses?
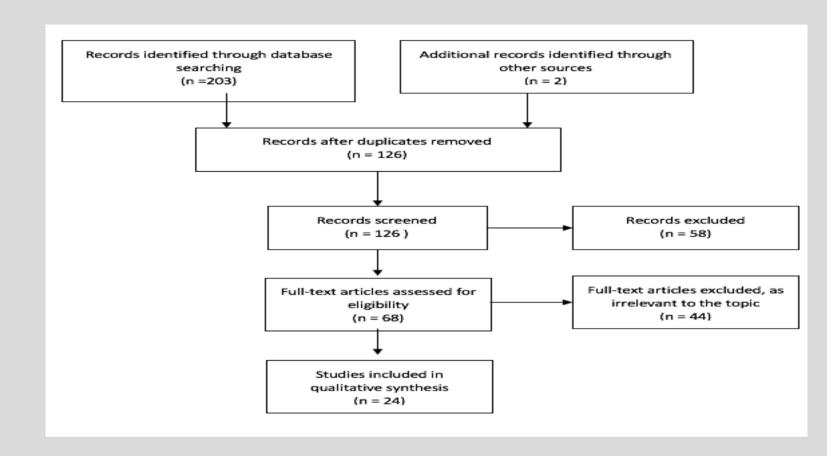
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The research data

Twenty four published research reports on attributes of graduate entry nurses were sourced from CINAHL, Proquest, Science Direct, and open source databases including PubMed, DOAJ and CORE, using keywords 'graduate entry nursing', 'academic performance', 'readiness for practice', 'socialisation', and 'perceptions'.

Table 1: Search record

The Critical Appraisal Programmes (CASP, 2017) Checklist was used to ascertain the quality, relevance and validity of the articles identified in the database and other search approaches. As a result of this critical appraisal, 24 articles were included in the review.

Data analysis

A thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used to analyse the qualitative information presented as findings in the articles. This approach involved three levels of analysis; coding of text line by line, the identification of descriptive themes, and the creation of analytical themes. Descriptive themes were used to group statements from the text of the articles, while the analytical themes were interpretive explanations created in the conceptual synthesis.

Demographics of GENs

Table 2: Age range and gender

Study	Age		Gender	
	Age band	%	Female %	Male %
Everett et al. (2013)	Not identified	Mean age 28	75	25
Gonzales et al. (2017)	21-56	Mean age 28.93	78.6	21.4
McKenna & Brooks (2018)	21-30	56.3	66.8	24.8
	31-40	25.5		
	41-50	15.0		
	51+	2.4		
Ramjan et al. (2018)	23-53	Mean age 30	79	21
Siler et al. (2008)	20-29	65.81	82.5	17.5
	30-39	23.28		
	40-49	7.83		
	50+	3.09		

Table 3: Previous qualification

Degree	McKenna et al. (2018) %	Ramjan et al. (2018) %	Siler et al. (2008) %
Science	37.8	1	56
Business	13.6	1	13.4
Arts	9.8	-	13.2
Psychology	5.6	1	-
Public health/Health Science	5.2	-	-
Medicine/paramedicine	4.9	1	2.1
Communication	-	-	4.9
Allied health or pharmacy	2.1	-	4.8
Education	1.7	-	3.0
RN, overseas	-	17	-
Medical degree, overseas	-	3	-

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FINDINGS

key themes

- Confidence, competence and motivation as learners
- Emotional intelligence within relationships
- Focus on research based practice
- Challenges for faculty

DISCUSSION

Key attributes GEN students bring to Master's level accelerated programmes include critical thinking skills, maturity, motivation to learn, and emotional intelligence (Cantlay et al., 2017; Fernandez et al., 2012; Ramjam et al., 2018). Prior experience of the workforce enables development of a strong work ethic with effective time management, leadership and organisational skills. GENs also understand how research provides the evidence base for professional practice (Johnson & Johnson, 2008). GEN programmes produce graduates that are able to safely enter the workforce with comparable skills to graduates from traditional undergraduate programmes. They are more mature, able to transfer prior work experience into nursing contexts, and seek ongoing learning opportunities as graduate nurses (Oermann et al., 2010; Rafferty & Lindell, 2011). However, GENs require an approach to professional socialisation that takes account of the impact of the attributes they bring to nursing. Sheppard et al. (2018) suggest that a professional supervision model may work well with GENs, where they can experience non-judgmental relationships in the presence of empathy and trust. Research on employment shows that GENs have higher rates of retention, and more rapid career progression to advanced clinical roles (Brewer et al., 2009; Payne & Mullen, 2014; Stacey & Holland, 2017). They tend to be ambitious in their future career direction, but over the long term are likely to have a wide diversity in their professional roles (McKenna & Brookes, 2018).

Conclusion

GEN programmes have demonstrated success in producing work-ready graduates, however further research is needed to evaluate whether findings of international studies are transferable to New Zealand nursing education and