

Sterile nursing schools limit research

Scholarship is absent in nurse training courses, says **Sarah Russell**

EARLIER this year, nursing celebrated its twentieth anniversary as part of the university system. Although there are nursing schools in most universities, the focus is on vocational education, not scholarship. Without a commitment to scholarship, it may be more appropriate for nursing schools to be located in technical colleges.

My observations of two university nursing schools suggest that the transition from hospital to the university has been largely geographical. Within both nursing schools research activity was actively discouraged and critical debates were silenced. Forums to debate different views constructively, such as academic seminars and journal clubs, were largely absent. Instead, there were morning teas with polite conversations and sandwiches to welcome and farewell staff.

Without academic leadership, there was a poor understanding of academic and research processes. This lack of understanding of academic processes, including ways in which academic debate should be conducted, was destructive. Academic staff were often vilified for expressing an opinion. The longstanding nursing tradition of being “sent to the pan-room” appears to have survived the transition to the university.

In nursing schools, most academic staff are ‘nurse educators’, not ‘academics’. As nurse educators, their focus is on teaching vocational knowledge and technical skills. However, a university education is expected to expose students to the fundamental principles of scholarship. A university nursing education should give students understandings of nursing practice within a broad socio-economic, political and cultural context. As it is, the nursing curriculum encourages nursing students to naval gaze by reading only ‘nursing literature’.

Academics in other departments frequently describe nursing schools as “fortresses” with a “siege-mentality”. In nursing schools, there are few vibrant displays of intellectual and political awareness on office doors and departmental notice boards. Instead, notice boards are often locked under glass. The tidy corridors and life-less office doors look more like a hospital than a university.

The isolationist mentality is also evident in the nursing curriculum. Nurse educators give students the impression that ‘nursing’ research, ‘nursing’ pharmacology, ‘nursing’ ethics and ‘nursing’ microbiology, for example, are fundamentally different from research, pharmacology, ethics and microbiology. There is also a view that ‘nursing’ professional development is different from

‘professional development’.

This segregation prevents nursing from maturing both as a profession and as part of the university.

Despite a dearth of research and other scholarly activities, nursing schools are overflowing with professors and associate professors. Many of these professors have been promoted beyond their qualifications and capabilities. This is evident in their lack of academic publications and research activities. Within nursing, a promotion to professor often occurs soon after completing a doctorate, sometimes during the same year. I recently worked with a professor of nursing who had neither a PhD nor a research record. She was appointed to professor and head of school without having produced even one peer reviewed research publication. What academic leadership could she possibly provide?

Nursing ‘leaders’ without academic backgrounds are reluctant to develop strong research cultures. Instead they are more likely to develop glossy research brochures and hold annual ‘research showcases’. In the absence of strong academic leadership, some nursing schools spend more energy selling an image and protecting their turf rather than developing genuine academic substance.

There is an increasing tendency for nursing ‘leaders’ to focus on money-

making activities such as business and clinical partnerships. This is reflected in the increasing number of so-called nursing 'professors' who have been appointed to hospitals. A recent advertisement for a Professor of Nursing referred only to 'business acumen'. Research and other academic activities were not even mentioned in the advertisement.

The emphasis on vocational training – and the lack of emphasis on developing quality research programs – suggests that nursing should not be located within a university. However, if nursing is to remain within universities, the challenges on nursing's doorstep are immense. The biggest challenge is to find ways to mentor early career researchers and increase the numbers of active researchers within nursing schools.

Given that few senior staff in nursing schools have the experience or skills to mentor early career researchers, nursing academics will need to establish strong collaborative relationships with researchers from a range of academic disciplines. They will need to look outside nursing for mentorship and academic guidance.

The future of nursing depends on academics who are willing to embrace new ideas from a range of academic disciplines. However, academic nurses who frequently collaborate with 'outsiders' are often accused of 'lacking loyalty' to nursing. Some are even 'sent to the pan room'. This may explain why so many of us with scholarly aspirations choose to leave nursing to work in established research-oriented disciplines where our research is valued.

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