STUDENT NURSES' EXPERIENCES OF THE COMMON TEACHING PLATFORM FOR UNDERGRADUATE NURSING IN THE WESTERN CAPE PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The higher education system in South Africa transformed over the last two decades in response to societal changes and the new democratic order since 1994. Nursing education programmes in South Africa's higher education sector were also affected by these changes. Restructuring in nursing education led to the establishment of a novel undergraduate nursing programme delivery system in the Western Cape, known as a "common teaching platform" (CTP) for undergraduate nursing. The CTP necessitated collaboration between three higher education institutions in the region. This article reports the findings of a qualitative study conducted during 2010 to explore students' experiences of the CTP. The findings could have significance for strategic decisions regarding the future of undergraduate nursing in the Western Cape.

Focus group discussions were conducted with registered undergraduate student nurses (n=81) to explore their CTP experiences and to identify their views on the success of the collaboration. The results of the study revealed students' positive and negative experiences of the CTP. Students' negative experiences revolved around unmet expectations of the collaboration, such as increased resources and exposure to the partner institutions. There were different opinions as to whether the collaboration was successful. Recommendations include a review of the management and process of the collaboration between the three institutions; workshops for stakeholders to establish a common understanding of the purpose of the collaboration; and a review of the administrative systems of the universities to ensure access by partners and to improve student access to the resources of all three institutions.

KEYWORDS: collaboration among universities, common teaching platform for undergraduate nursing education, higher education in South Africa, nursing education in South Africa

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The higher education system in South Africa has changed over the last decade, both in terms of its size and shape, the nature of provision and the models of delivery. These changes follow the restructuring of South Africa's higher education system and the reduction in the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21, through mergers and collaborations. In some cases historically black universities merged with historically white universities. It also refers to the reconfiguration of the types of institutions which were formed through the mergers and collaborations, including the establishment of universities of technology and comprehensive universities (Jansen, 2004:300-303). These changes had implications for nursing education in the higher education sector in the Western Cape, such as the implementation of a unique programme delivery system based on a CTP approach.

The impact of transformation in higher education on nursing education in the Western Cape Province

Nursing education, within the context of transformation, was identified as a priority for academic programme collaboration in South Africa generally and in the Western Cape in particular. The then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, announced in December 2002 that with effect from 2005, the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and a new institution, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, which resulted from the merger of the Cape and Peninsula Technikons, would be the only institutions offering undergraduate nursing programmes in the Western Cape. This meant that both the universities of Cape Town and Stellenbosch would no longer enrol undergraduate student nurses but would collaborate with the UWC to train nurses in the region (Department of Education, 2002:17).

The Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) argued, however, that the need for qualified nurses in the region required the input of all its member institutions (CHEC, 2006:13). The Consortium felt that an integrated undergraduate nursing platform, later referred to as the common teaching platform (CTP), would benefit from the combined institutional strengths of all participating institutions, in terms of expertise and resources, to produce the required number of appropriately qualified registered nurses.

CHEC's proposal to the Minister of Education, in October 2003, to construct a regional platform for undergraduate nursing education was accepted and a Memorandum of Understanding, a binding agreement regarding specific collaborative initiatives between the parties, was drawn up (CHEC, 2006:13). The CTP for undergraduate nurses in the Western Cape was established in 2005. The universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town, referred to as partner institutions, participated in using the common teaching platform since 2006 at the second to fourth year levels of the programme. The Cape Peninsula

University of Technology unofficially withdrew from participating on the CTP and continued to offer a B Tech degree instead.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The implementation of the common teaching platform was not without student complaints. Many of the problems reported by students persisted over the years and the need to establish the students' experiences of the common teaching platform, through research, became imperative.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim was to explore students' experiences of the collaboration between the three universities in the delivery of the undergraduate nursing programme in the Western Cape Province.

The objectives were to:

- Explore the students' thoughts, feelings and experiences of the common teaching platform
- Determine whether the goals of regional collaboration on the common teaching platform were met.

Operational definitions

> The Cape Library Consortium (CALICO) project promotes the idea of "a library without walls".

Collaboration among universities refers to the combining of their expertise and resources in the delivery of the undergraduate nursing programme in the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

The common teaching platform for undergraduate nursing education is the term used for the collaborative delivery of the undergraduate nursing programme in the Western Cape.

Higher education in South Africa refers to all learning programmes provided by higher education institutions.

The terms higher education institution (HEI), institution and university are used interchangeably in either their singular or plural form.

Enrolling institution refers to the University of the Western Cape.

Nursing education in South Africa refers to the delivery of accredited nursing programmes and in this study focusses on the programme that leads to registration as a professional nurse with the South African Nursing Council.

Offering institution refers to any of the three institutions in the common teaching platform that offer modules for the B Cur programme.

Participating institutions are the three universities using the common teaching platform, namely the universities of the Western Cape, Cape Town and Stellenbosch.

Partner institution refers to either the University of Stellenbosch or the University of Cape Town.

Pipeline students are those who registered for the nursing programme prior to the commencement of the common teaching platform and who repeated their first year in 2005. This group of students was identified for their experience of both the "old" programme prior to 2005 as well as the common teaching platform used since 2005.

Stakeholders are persons or organisations who use or are affected by the common teaching platform, including the three partner institutions, their staff members using the common teaching platform, the Department of Health, the South African Nursing Council and the students.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and approach

An evaluation research design, using qualitative methods, was adopted for this study. According to Wholey, Hatry and Newcomer (2010:5-6), programme evaluation is the application of systematic methods to address questions about how a programme is operating. The authors assert that evaluations should not only evaluate the implementation and results of a programme, but identify where it can be improved.

Study population

The study population comprised all fourth-year B Cur student nurses registered at the enrolling institution (UWC) on the "old" programme, referred to as "pipeline" students, and all student nurses (first to fourth year) registered on the common teaching platform at UWC.

Sampling

Stratified, purposive sampling was used to select eighty one (81) student nurses to participate in the study. This type of non–probability sampling, according to De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport (2005:202), is based on the judgement of the researcher. A stratified sample improved the chances that the sample would be representative of the student nurse population at the UWC.

Description of sample

Table 1: Student participants in focus groups

Year level	Total number of students	Number of focus groups
B Cur 1 2008	19	2
B Cur 2 2008	20	2
B Cur 3 2008	18	2
B Cur 4 2008	10	1
B Cur 4 (pipeline) 2008	14	2
Total	81	9

Data collection methods

A total of nine focus group interviews were conducted between October 2008 and March 2009. Focus group discussions were conducted with two groups of students per year levels 1 to 3, and with one group in the 4th year level of the common teaching platform programme. Focus group discussions were also conducted with two groups of students from the 4th year level of the old programme referred to as "pipeline students", who experienced both the "old" programme prior to 2005 as well as the CTP.

Focus groups were chosen as the data collection method because they would allow the researcher to obtain the views of as many registered student nurses as possible. The students might have been more willing to participate and to share personal experiences in focus groups than in one-on-one interviews. The researcher assured the participants of confidentiality in order to ensure that their participation in the focus groups would be free-flowing and their responses truthful.

Focus group interview guide

The following open-ended questions were used in addition to appropriate probes to focus the group discussion:

- What is your understanding of the common teaching platform?
- What were your initial thoughts and feelings when you heard that the universities of the Western Cape, Cape Town and Stellenbosch would collaboratively participate in your education and training as a nurse?
- What, in your opinion, are the benefits of the common teaching platform?
- What did you enjoy most about being a student of the common teaching platform?
- What did you enjoy least about being a student of the common teaching platform?
- Are you satisfied with the quality of education and training you have received over the past years in the B Cur programme?
- Is there any other input you would like to share?

Academic rigour

Credibility was enhanced because notes were taken and tape recordings made of the semi-structured interviews. Participants were given an opportunity to verify and validate the transcribed information. The recorded interviews were made available for perusal by the research supervisor and the participants.

Confirmability was achieved because the researcher listened and re-listened to the audiotapes, read and re-read the raw texts before analysing the data. Confirming the content of the audio tapes and the written raw text was also done by a research assistant.

Saturation was reached when no new information was yielded from the focus group discussions.

Reflexivity occurred because the researcher acknowledged, from the onset, her relationship with the students being researched and remained aware of the purpose of this evaluation study. The researcher is employed as a Senior Lecturer at the School of Nursing, University of the Western Cape. It would have been prejudicial to allow the results of the research to become a mirror of the researcher's presence, process, participation and personality; or to have an outcome resulting from the position the researcher might occupy in terms of seniority or power, leading to coerced compliance.

Data analysis

An inductive approach to data analysis, as described by Thomas (2003:2), was used for this study, which enabled the researcher to make sense of the situation without imposing pre-existing expectations on the study phenomenon or setting. The researcher began by reading the text to become familiar with it; identified specific segments of text which formed meaningful units; labelled the segments (meaningful units) to create categories; refined the categories to reduce overlap and redundancy; and then formulated themes which incorporated the most important categories.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance and project registration was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the UWC (Project No. 06/4/5), and the proposal was accepted by the university's Higher Degrees Committee. Permission to conduct the study at the university was obtained from the Dean of Research and the Director of the School of Nursing.

Participants were briefed about the purpose of and expected procedure for the study. The potential benefits of the study for nursing education were highlighted but it was made clear that no personal benefit would be provided. Participants were informed about the use of an audio tape, and verbal and written informed consent for its use and for participation in the study was obtained from all participants.

The researcher informed potential participants that participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no effect. Participants were assured of anonymity throughout and after the study period. The audio tapes and all notes were safely stored and were destroyed after the research report had been accepted.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' understanding of the common teaching platform

It was important to establish whether the students knew about and understood what the CTP was about before establishing their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Most students were not knowledgeable about the CTP collaboration. Some students said that they were not initially informed about the CTP but found out later, while others reported that they were informed about the CTP by the Head of Department during a special information session. There were students who reported that they registered late for the programme and missed the information session but received the information from the student handbook. The availability of the student handbook and the fact that students sometimes registered for the programme after the orientation period is illustrated by this student's response:

> *"I didn't participate in the orientation programme because I came late to this institution, when classes had already started. I read [about it] in that School of Nursing book that has everything. So yes, I can say that I was informed because they gave me pamphlets and then I read it."*

Reddy (2007:493) found in his study of mergers that over a quarter of the participants were officially informed about the impending merger by the Head of the Department. However, the majority heard about it incidentally by word of mouth. Since clear

communication of the purpose and vision of a project is crucial for successful implementation of change, it was important that students, as stakeholders, should have had a clear understanding of the CTP.

The lack of knowledge was a possible precursor to students' negative experiences of the CTP. According to Kinsey (2000), one of the biggest mistakes in managing change is not appropriately "setting the stage" for change. She argues that often change is announced in a vacuum with little explanation of what the organisation is trying to accomplish and how the change fits within the organisational vision. Kinsey (2000) suggests that employees must be given pertinent information about the change so that they understand the vision, goals and strategy.

Students' initial thoughts and feelings regarding the common teaching platform

Some students were positive about the CTP, which was linked to their expectations of exposure to the expertise of lecturers from three universities. Others were excited at the thought of having access to the campuses and resources of the partner institutions. Some students thought that the CTP would improve the level of education and that the collaboration would remove the negative stigma attached to UWC students in the clinical setting. Although many students were excited about the potential positive impact of the collaboration on the CTP, others highlighted possible challenges. One student reflected on her fear of the unknown:

> *"I can also say that I had fear of the unknown because I did not know what they would expect of us. And I had that feeling or that belief that this university is lower. It changed my mind when they came here and they taught us because I realised that we are the same and the standard of this university is the same as the others."*

Fear, according to McKeown (2002:12), is a strong emotion which may be destructive to change. This student's fear, however, was not destructive as it was alleviated by her positive experience in the end. Some students mentioned that they were concerned about the impact of differing standards and expectations of lecturers, different lecturing styles and the fact that lecturers from the partner institutions did not have offices on the campus.

Students' positive experiences of the common teaching platform

The teaching and learning process

Students reported that they enjoyed being taught by lecturers from the partner institutions, who they said were well prepared. With regard to the case-based teaching

and learning approach, students reported that in general they enjoyed the teaching and learning methods used in the programme. Some students reported, however, that they did not enjoy group work and self-directed learning, strategies which are central to the case-based teaching and learning approach. Several students mentioned benefits resulting from social interaction in the programme, including personal development and improved interpersonal skills.

The quality of the programme

A few students expressed satisfaction with the quality of the programme, such as one student who said:

> *"the standard of education is good".*

Others felt that the collaboration on the CTP was effective, saying for example:

> *"despite the few problems, it is working well".*

Students' negative experiences of the common teaching platform

Communication difficulties

Students reported that communication with lecturers from the partner institutions, whether by telephone or email as an alternative to face-to-face contact, was not always successful. The lack of information technology compounded communication difficulties between students and lecturers from the partner institutions. Students also reported that it was difficult to communicate their problems beyond the level of the lecturer, and some mentioned that the lecturers tried to keep them away from the Head of Department. Others said that their problems were not resolved. When students' concerns are not taken up and attended to, the potential for improvement of the programme is lost, since students are important stakeholders in the programme.

Attitudes of academic staff from partner institutions

Despite the fact that some students reported that lecturers from the partner institutions were well prepared for lectures, a few students were concerned about the attitude of some of these lecturers towards them. Comments in this regard included:

> *"I got the distinct impression that they couldn't wait to wash their hands off us. Like they've just given us our lecture and get away. We were not good enough for them"*

> *"I felt undermined by lecturers from the other institutions"*
>
> *"Staff from the other institutions have a negative attitude towards students".*

Inadequate office space

Students commented about the lack of office space for lecturers from the partner institutions, which impacted negatively on student-lecturer consultations. As one student said:

> *"lecturers from US [the University of Stellenbosch] and UCT [the University of Cape Town] are not available for consultation".*

Students had to communicate with lecturers from the partner institutions via telephone or email, but students were not always able to access computers or the Internet, while lecturers did not always respond to the students' telephone calls.

Lack of access to resources of the partner institutions

Contrary to their expectations, many students reported that they were disappointed that they did not experience the benefits of using the resources of the partner institutions, as was articulated by one student who said:

> *"I think we are yet to see the maximum benefits as we interact more with UCT and Stellenbosch lecturers. For now it is just the integration of students and, yes, we are getting the benefits. So we are getting some benefits but we would love to get the resource benefits."*

A few students reported about the difficulties they experienced when they tried to access the libraries of the partner institutions. A fourth-year student attested to the impact of inadequate resources on the quality of education when she reported:

> *"I think to a very large extent a lot of us did not benefit from the collaboration as much as we could've. I came to do nursing and I want to be the best nurse that I could be. And I used all the resources that were handed to me in this course to do the best that I could… but if more resources were given, less excuses were given for why they weren't perfect, I could've been much better than I am."*

The Memorandum of Understanding states that while the CALICO project allows students access to libraries across campuses, students are only allowed to borrow books at the enrolling institution. It is evident that many of the potential benefits of the CTP, which students initially identified, were not realised. Successful collaborative nursing programmes, such as in Ontario, Canada, prove that combining resources, including libraries, laboratories, simulation equipment, databases, faculty and teaching space, can

improve the delivery of the curriculum and students' experiences (Council of Ontario Universities, 2010).

Curriculum challenges

Despite some positive experiences, there were numerous comments by students regarding their dissatisfaction with the quality of education. They specifically highlighted challenges with certain core modules in the curriculum in terms of their depth, content and delivery. In most cases their dissatisfaction was about the curriculum in general, and did not specifically relate to a negative impact of the collaboration on the delivery of the curriculum. Concern about the curriculum was also raised by Mfusi (2004:98-99), who argued that mergers do not solve problems with curricula, which are at the heart of the teaching and learning process.

Clinical placement and supervision

Numerous students reported their dissatisfaction with the clinical component of the programme, including clinical placements and clinical supervision. Students referred to the attitude of clinical supervisors, poor treatment in the clinical settings, and stigma in the clinical setting associated with university students as opposed to college students. This relates to the fact that college student nurses spend more time in clinical practice than university student nurses. To this end, many fourth-year students reported that their clinical exposure was insufficient, and that they felt incompetent. It was not surprising, based on the purpose of the collaboration as expounded by the Cape Higher Education Consortium, that students felt that way because lecturers from the partner institutions did not participate in clinical supervision, students were deprived of exposure to their clinical expertise. As one student commented:

> *"US [University of Stellenbosch] and UCT [University of Cape Town] are not involved in clinical supervision. Their expertise is not utilised."*

Lack of synchronisation between the three institutions' administrative systems

The administrative systems between the three universities, the faculty office and the student administration department of the UWC were viewed by students as being poor. Comments included:

> *"...there is poor administration of marks"*

> *"Communication between the department, faculty, other departments and the UWC administration department is poor".*

Students suggested that sorting out administrative issues were time consuming and frustrating. A few students who had transferred from a partner institution viewed this positively and stated that the challenges they experienced at the enrolling institution improved their life skills because they had to do things for themselves, unlike at their previous institutions.

The lack of synchronisation of the administration systems of the three institutions posed specific problems, such as the inaccessibility of the marks administration and e-learning systems by lecturers from the partner institutions. An additional administrative burden was placed on staff of the enrolling institution when they had to respond to queries from students about a module taught by a partner institution.

Management of the process of collaboration

A survey conducted by Wyngaard and Kapp (2004:192), following the mergers of higher education institutions in South Africa, found that participants viewed the process of facilitation of mergers as lacking in prior planning, scientific and logical thinking. A few student nurses also felt that the process of change within the Western Cape was not well managed, and as a result they were not prepared for the change.

Students' views on whether the goals of the common teaching platform had been accomplished

Some students felt that the goals of the collaboration on the CTP had been met. However, many felt that the collaboration was ineffective. In most cases, students who reported CTP negative experiences viewed the collaboration as being ineffective.

CONCLUSION

A few students reported positive experiences of the teaching and learning process and the quality of the common CTP programme. Most students, however, felt that the goals of the common teaching platform had not been accomplished. The students' negative experiences were related to the lack of resources in general and the lack of access to the resources of the partner institutions; the lack of synchronisation of the administrative systems of the three institutions; curricular challenges including clinical practice placements and supervision; communication difficulties; negative attitudes of the academics from the partner institutions; and poor management of the collaborative process.

The students' responses indicated that the curriculum, in terms of its quality, resources and delivery, is at the core of their experience of the CTP collaboration. For the students, this is what essentially determines their success or failure in a programme. The importance of effective change management and communication, in the collaborative process, was highlighted through the students' shared experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be made based on this study's findings:

Ways to synchronise the administration systems of the three institutions must be investigated.

Although the Cape Higher Education Consortium, as the regional governance body, cannot impose binding decisions on autonomous institutions, it can facilitate the development of binding agreements, such as those relating to the sharing of resources across institutions in the region.

The approach to managing the process of collaboration must be reviewed to ensure a more conducive environment to regional collaboration.

Training sessions for members of governance committees must be facilitated by the CHEC, to establish a common understanding of the goals, vision and purpose of collaboration among partners. This will enhance the students' experience of the CTP.

It is important to ensure that staff and students have access to administration systems and resources across the platform. One example is the need to expand access through the CALICO library project, to allow students to access and borrow library materials across the CTP.

Relationships with the clinical service providers must be strengthened in order to re-establish their role as mentors and preceptors for students' clinical learning experiences, in order to improve the students' experiences of clinical learning.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A possible limitation in the use of an evaluation design might relate to the timing of this study. This research study focused on the evaluation of the CTP which was established five years prior to the study. Since evaluations can be formative, summative or both, they allow for the monitoring of programme processes as well as the evaluation of programmes. This enquiry, however, was retrospective and did not monitor the collaborative process, which would have made the evaluation more comprehensive.

Only students participated in focus group interviews. A more comprehensive picture might have been obtained if the views could have been reported from academic, clinical and administrative staff members from all the institutions concerned.

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