Placements and Their Influence on Australian Nutrition and Dietetics Students

L. McCall, C. Palermo & N. Wray

Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to explore the impact of student dietitian placement experiences on attitudes towards a future career in nutrition and dietetics.

Method: Undergraduate students from the Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics (BND) at Monash University who had recently completed their first seven week or final eight week placement were recruited for the qualitative study. Data was collected using focus group discussions. Participants were asked to share their career and placement expectations, placement experiences, career path intentions, and the impact of placements on their decisions.

Results: The data revealed that student placements provide an opportunity to showcase the diversity of workplace settings and environments for dietitians. The experience of the placement is a key factor in determining potential career direction.

Conclusion: Student placements influence career intention and provide insight into their first graduate positions in nutrition and dietetics. Professionals involved in the education and training of student dietitians need to recognise the important influence of student placement experiences.

Key words: Dietitian, Student, Placement, Experience

Introduction

Dietitians have been recognised as important contributors to the health of the nation. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Australian nutrition and dietetics workforce is growing

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across the three main areas of dietetic practice of individual care, community nutrition and food service are essential for entry-level training (DAA, 2008). There is evidence in the health professional literature that experience during practical placements impacts on students' performance, attitude and future careers. Thorough classroom based preparedness, appropriate assessment, positive placement environments and effective supervisors appear to be significant factors contributing to a positive placement experience and the development of effective future careers (Parry et al, 2002; Hayman-White, 2004; Leners, Sitzman, Hessler, 2006; Chan, 2004; Twentyman, Eaton, Henderson, 2006; Rodger et al, 2008). Student exposure to rural and remote health care services also appears to promote careers in rural and remote areas (Woloschuk, Tarrant, 2002; Heaney, Tolhurst, Baines, 2004; Talbot, Ward, 2000; Peach, Bath, 2000; Dalton, 2008). Untrained supervisors, poor communication between university personnel and placement sites and lack of organisation of student supervision are factors detrimental to learning (Leners, Sitzman, Hessler, 2006). While there is this growing knowledge in the medical, nursing and allied health professions, there are no published studies that explore the student dietitians' placement experiences and the impact of placement on their attitudes towards future career path choice in the profession. This study aimed to provide data on student placement experiences and the influence on attitudes towards anticipated future career path direction in nutrition and dietetics.

Methods
A qualitative study design was employed to explore the experiences of nutrition and dietetics students while on placement. The BND at Monash University is a four year undergraduate degree that exposes students to placement from the third year. The placement experience includes a total of 31 weeks, the minimum amount and type of which is prescribed by the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) accreditation program (Table 1). The purpose of this placement program is to ensure students are competent in the three areas of nutrition and dietetics practice: individual case management, community and public health nutrition and food service management (DAA, 2008). Undergraduate students from

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Semester 1 placements</th>
<th>Semester 2 placements</th>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7 week (4 days per week) major public metropolitan hospital</td>
<td>9 week (4 days per week) major public metropolitan hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 week (5 days per week) rural health service</td>
<td>2 week (5 days per week) food service metropolitan hospital or hospice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>8 week (5 days per week) community nutrition</td>
<td>3 week (5 days per week) major public metropolitan hospital</td>
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Table 1: Monash University Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics Placement Schedule
years three and four of the BND who had recently completed their first seven week hospital placement or the final eight week community placement were invited to participate in the study at the completion of timetabled lectures. The participants were a convenient sample of students who volunteered to participate in the study. Ethics approval was obtained from Monash University human ethics committee.

Focus group methodology, as described by Liamputtong and Ezzy (2006), was chosen to allow a range of experiences to be discussed in depth in a relatively short period of time. Data was collected from 12 undergraduate nutrition and dietetics students by the third author, a trained social researcher unknown to the students. Three focus group discussions were guided by broad open-ended questions. Participants were asked to share their career and placement expectations, placement experiences, career path intentions, and the impact of placements on their decisions. The flow of information was determined by individual study participants, although, when necessary, the interviewer sought clarification or elicited additional information. This interviewing technique ensured that study participants spoke about issues pertinent to their experience of placements and helped to provide valuable data. Each focus group discussion, held at different times, lasted 60-90 minutes. All focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim by the third author and de-identified transcripts were sent to participants for feedback. No participants requested their transcripts be amended.

All transcripts were managed by QSR Nvivo (Version 2.0.161) and analysed using a content analysis approach (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2006). Data from the transcripts were grouped into themes. Each theme was then analysed in detail and sub-themes emerged (Table 2). The themes were not pre-determined but identified by the frequency in the transcripts. All authors discussed the themes and searched for relationships between participants' responses according to the stage in their studies to enhance the credibility and validity of data analysis. Key themes

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Key Theme</th>
<th>Sub Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>Placements provide knowledge and understanding of different workplace settings and environments</td>
<td>• Shows <em>real</em> dietetic practice</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Shows different areas of work of a dietitian and the different settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement experiences influence career choice direction</td>
<td>• Confirmed career or course choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Acute care environment seen as the norm for first workplace choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Negative experiences in organization impacted on choice of this workplace for future employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Supervisors impact on quality of placement and potential area of future work choice</td>
</tr>
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</table>
were then summarised by the authors and narrative scripts selected to represent the range of subjects and provide the best illustration of the themes.

**Results and Discussion**

All 12 participants were female, the average age was 24, the majority (78%) were unmarried and half were Australian born. The most common language spoken was English. While this is a small sample (18 per cent of the eligible sample) from one University offering dietetics training in Australia, the sample characteristics are representative of students enrolled in this program. It is also indicative of Dietetics as a young, female dominated profession in Australia (Brown, Capra, Williams, 2006). The study provides some useful data from which the concepts might be explored in more detail in future research.

The analysis identified two key themes with sub themes as shown in Table 2. There was no difference observed between the responses of students from third year (at the end of their first placement) or fourth year (at the end of their community placement). This study found that placements provide knowledge of different workplace settings and environments and the placement experience impacts on perceptions of potential future career choice direction.

**Placements provide knowledge and understanding of different workplace settings and environments**

The participants described that placements located early in the course structure had definite benefits. They were able to understand the “reality” of their profession by exploring the practice of dietetics and experiences of the profession.

“...placements have been a good experience in terms of possible career paths. They have allowed me to gain insight into what the future may hold.” [student 307, first placement]

The value of early placements in teaching and learning in health professional education has been reported (Tippets and Westpheling, 1996). This study shows that placement early in the course reinforced whether students had made the correct choice of study and whether they would practice as a dietitian in the future. This has implications for curriculum planners in considering placement in the early years of the degree.

The majority of participants indicated that placements enabled them to connect with health professionals and learn about various career paths available within the profession. They described that placements exposed students to different specialty areas of practice. Over the course of placements, students were able to identify different roles within their profession.

“I suppose at the start I thought that dietitians only work in hospitals but over the past four years, we learn that you can go into other areas. You can do food service, industry, so many different pathways. I guess it’s about opening more options.” [student 410, final placement]

The participants explained that they found placements useful to ascertain what type of setting they would like to practice. This was particularly pertinent for those students who, previous to
placements, had limited exposure to the range of worksites they were able to work in as a health professional. This study provides the basis for future research into the influence on specific placement experiences, such as rural, on career choice.

"Initially I was really interested in sports nutrition ... but after doing some clinical placements and focusing a little bit more on clinical nutrition and disease based nutrition, exercise science is not that interesting compared to this." [student 302, first placement]

While the intention of the variety of placement site experiences is to develop entry-level competency in dietetic practice, it appears that exposure to this range of settings may also impact on knowledge of different areas of work within the profession. The role of placements in providing this unintended outcome has been described elsewhere (Rodger, 2008).

**Placement experience influences career choice direction**

Exposure to a wide range of placement experiences to address the DAA requirements is influential on the new graduates' career path choice. They influence where students choose to work and also change career path intentions. Both positive and negative experiences influenced these decisions. The majority of students indicated that placements confirmed that they wanted to work in nutrition and dietetics. However a few students were distressed that it was only during placements they realised they did not desire to work in the profession. For those students who had recently completed their first placement, they indicated that placements had not completely confirmed their desire to work as a health professional. For some students, the placements enabled them to understand the emotional labour required in particular roles, and therefore their career path. This provides further support to expose students to working roles of health professionals early in the curriculum either through innovative classroom based teaching methods, such as problem based learning or simulation (Tavakol and Reicherter, 2003) or through earlier practical placements.

That's the reason I don't want to do dietetics [anymore]. I don't want the contact; one-on-one all the time. I want a desk job where I talk to my colleagues. [In dietetics] I come home drained and I don't want to talk anyone. It's because you're being so friendly and happy all the time [at work] and then I feel grumpy and terrible all the time at home. ... The constant having to talk to people is a strain for me and that's one of the reasons why I don't want to do it. [student 408, final placement]

Students who had a difficult placement at a particular site indicated they would not apply for a position there in the future but would still consider a career in the same area at another location. Negative placement experiences may be detrimental to students and the profession.

"If you've liked the places you've worked, well you're probably going to want to work there. But if you hated the placement you wouldn't want to work there, if you had bad emotions associated with that placement." [student 409, final placement]
Regardless of the career intention, the majority of students indicated that in their first graduate position they wanted to gain experience and confidence by working in an acute setting.

"You have to do some clinical to consolidate what you've learned and after that maybe move into some other areas ... Once you're in, you can then change and do what you want. I think most people start with clinical to get that experience and then go out and do what they really want to do." [student 410, final placement]

Student placements provide insight which may inform the choice for first graduate position in nutrition and dietetics. New graduates perceived the need to consolidate their clinical knowledge in a hospital based position on graduation. The reasons for this may include the DAA requirements for clinical placement being more than other areas of placement and the interest in working overseas. However, data from a recent profile of the dietetics workforce indicates that growth and diversity in the dietetics profession is in other sectors such as private practice and industry (Brown, Capra, Williams, 2006). In order to meet future workforce needs, curriculum planners need to consider preparing graduates for the diversity and growing career path areas in nutrition and dietetics. There is a need to comprehend the key influences on career path choices of dietetic graduates and the extent to which student placement experience is one such influence.

Placement supervisors were identified as having influence on students' work-related career choices. The participants reported that positive student-supervisor relationships and supervisors who created supportive learning environments created positive overall experiences and that this influenced their decision to work in the field of the supervisor. This is consistent with findings from other health professions (Parry et al., 2002; Hayman-White, 2004; Leners, Sitzman, Hessler, 2006; Chan, 2004; Twentyman, Eaton, Henderson, 2006). Professionals involved in the education and training of student dietitians should recognise their potential influence.

The limitations of this study should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. The exploration of other factors influencing career choice before students enrolled in the curriculum was not explored due to the time limitations of the focus group. The small and discrete sample size also prevents this data being applied to other settings. The findings of this study have been used to assist in the review and redevelopment of the BND at Monash University towards a more integrated curriculum. The accompanying faculty develop program will reiterate the importance of quality teaching and the role of the supervisor on future career choices of students.

Conclusion

This study provides preliminary data indicating that student placements may influence future career choice direction in nutrition and dietetics. Student placements provide an opportunity to showcase the diversity of workplace settings and environments for dietitians and are necessary to achieve practice competence. The experience of the
placement appears to be a factor in perceived career choice direction. The possibility of graduates entering the profession in a non-acute hospital setting should be promoted. Further research investigating the role of specific workplace setting placements on career choice that take into consideration other factors such as employment opportunities and workforce demands need to be undertaken.

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References


