The mature student question

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Summary Demographic changes resulting in an increase of mature students on to pre-registration nursing programmes within our university has lead to the development of a welcoming programme for pre-registration mature nursing students. Three questionnaires were utilised in the development and evaluation of the welcoming programme. Each questionnaire had open ended questions which were thematically collated and summarised. The closed questions were computer analysed to derive simple descriptive statistics.

   The main components of the welcoming programme were socialisation of the individual to university life and study skills. The study found that there was a small significant difference between the needs of mature students and of standard entry students in relation to information about the nursing course, study skills and time management. The students who participated in the welcoming programme progressed a little better on the nursing course. Students' recommendations for further development of the programme included, additional study and IT skills and an introduction to subject areas on the nursing course. If we are to continue to recruit mature students on to our nursing courses we need to ensure that supports are in place to facilitate the mature student prior to and during their nursing course.
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Introduction

Nursing in Ireland traditionally had high levels of recruitment (Mc Carthy, 1997), the demographic change in the school population occurring now in Ireland and previously elsewhere (Skilbeck, 2001) has led some to predict that a decline in enrolment will occur despite the still increasing demand for trained personnel. This has led to the entry of whole new categories of students, especially more mature students, into all academic areas including nursing (Skilbeck, 2001). This trend is evident in Ireland, where in 1999 24% (An Bord Altranais, 2000) of pre-registration nursing places were taken up by mature students whilst in 2002, 52% of the places taken up by mature students (An Bord Altranais, 2002). The aim of this study was to develop

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and evaluate a Welcoming Programme for mature students who had been accepted onto a pre-registration nursing programme within the university.

Background

Over the last eight years in Ireland, there has been a transition from the traditional or apprenticeship model of pre-registration nurse education and training courses to Diploma and to Degree (Government of Ireland, 1998). This, coupled with the impact of the changing demographics in relation to recruitment to nursing, highlighted the need for our courses to be able to facilitate and address the needs of the mature learner. The progression of nurse education to a degree standard, while increasing the intake of non-academically experienced students, creates difficulties for students (Allen, 1990) and has therefore contributed greatly to the need for introductory programmes (Jeffreys, 1998). Introductory/Welcoming programmes are in place in many nursing courses. In our university the welcoming programme helps the student become familiar with university and the support and academic services provided. It also enables the student to meet and form acquaintants with other mature students across various courses in the university. An Bord Altranais defines mature students as individuals who are 23 years of age or over on the first of January of the year they commence their nursing course. The university accepts this definition for the pre-registration nursing courses.

The initial idea to explore the need for a mature students' programme 'was highlighted by members of the nursing studies curriculum development group. This arose out of concerns from nurse tutors and subject lecturers who felt that mature students, despite their motivation, were not 'performing' as well as the rest of the cohort and they were disadvantaged by the fact that many of these students had not being involved in education for a number of years and needed time to adjust to being a full time student.

Methods

The nursing studies course in this university offers nursing in three disciplines: general, psychiatric and intellectual disability/mental handicap nursing. In the development and evaluation of the welcoming programme three questionnaires were used. The course co-ordinators explained the purpose of the study and the function of the question-naires to the students and consent was explained verbally. Completion of the questionnaire was accepted as consent. Each questionnaire was distributed and returned within a class period.

Questionnaires

Questionnaire I: To establish if there was a need for a specific mature students' programme a survey was carried out on first year nursing students. The survey included background questions on age and nursing speciality and an open ended question on the most important skills and knowledge they would have liked to have known before they commenced their nursing course. The analysis of the questionnaire is described below.

Questionnaire II: Nursing students who participated in the welcoming programme completed an evaluation on the last day of the programme. This evaluation consisted of obtaining the students' views through eight open-ended questions to elicit if the programme objectives were achieved and to identify areas for future development. The objectives of the programme are listed in Table 1. The analysis methodology for the questionnaire is described below.

Questionnaire III: This questionnaire aimed to evaluate the Mature Students' Welcoming Programme. At the end of the first academic year a questionnaire was distributed to the mature nursing students. This questionnaire had 34 items and consisted of both closed and open questions. The questions covered the following topics, demographic details and attendance at mature student welcoming programme, the benefit of the programme, the changes they would recommend for future programmes, their prior level of education, their progress through the nursing course to date and the areas they find difficult in this course. A summary of the questions used in this questionnaire is shown in Table 2.

Analysis

All three questionnaires had open-ended questions, which were thematically collated and summarised. The closed questions were computer analysed to derive simple descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics of population expressed as percentages, mean and standard deviations are used throughout the study. The main type of statistical analysis used in this study was Chi square (χ^2) contingency tables. This type of contingency tables is used to show if a parameter has a significant influence over the frequency distribution within a table (Munro,

Table 1   Mature students welcome programme objectives

  (i) To facilitate the student to meet and form acquaintances with other mature students

 (ii) To assist the student to become familiar with
    (a) The physical layout of university
    (b) The physical layout of hospital
    (c) The support and academic services provided by university

(iii) To cover the basic study skills the student needed to get started in university

 (iv) To give the student a basic understanding of how
    (a) The IT system works
    (b) The library system works

 (v) To familiarise the student with
    (a) The university staff with whom they will be working
    (b) Content and academic expectations of the nursing course

 (vi) To afford those students who have no/very little knowledge of IT the opportunity to
    (a) Acquire a basic understanding of how to use a computer
    (b) Feel more confident about using a computer

Table 2   Questionnaire 3: Summary of questions used from students questionnaire (mainly evaluating the welcoming programmes)

Background questions:
1. Gender   2. Age   3. Number of Dependents
4. Nursing discipline: General Psychiatry Mental handicap
5. Attendance at Mature Student Welcoming Programme

Questions on Mature students programme:
6. Identify the factor/s that discouraged you from availing of the programme
7. Identify the factor/s that encouraged you to avail of this programme
8. Did the welcoming programme help you in the nursing course. Give reasons for your answer
9. What elements of the welcoming programme helped you most in the nursing course?
10. What changes, if any, would you suggest for the welcoming programme in relation to the following?
Please give reasons for your suggestions
(a) Timing of Programme (b) Study Skills (c) Information Technology (IT) (d) Introduction to the Library
(e) Introduction to University (f) Introduction to the nursing course (g) Introduction to the teaching staff (h) Other
11. Would you have been prepared to participate in the programme if it was of two weeks duration and it
included a short introduction to the subject areas
12. List in order of priority the subject areas you would like included in a two week programme and give reasons
for you answers

13. *Progression through course:*
    (a) Have you progressed satisfactorily on the programme to date (i) Theory (ii) Practice
    (b) What areas of the nursing course do you find (i) Least difficult (ii) Most difficult
    (c) Have you ever considered leaving the course?
    (d) Indicate the reasons why you considered leaving
    (e) What factors made you stay?
    (f) Have you availed of any of the university support systems

14. *Experience prior to Course*
    (a) Prior to entry on this course did you have experiences in the caring field?
    (b) Prior to entry to the nursing course did you study any of the following subjects Nursing Biology Psychology
        Sociology indicate level
    (c) Did you undertake any course/s in the last five years? Please identify the course/s
    (d) Was this course assessed/examined?
    (e) If yes how was this course assessed/examined?

2001). This type of test is useful to test the significance of data that are categorical in type. To use the table the data are first categorised, i.e., attendees/non-attendees at course. These results were then tabulated against other parameters, i.e., success in exams. If one parameter does not influence the other then the calculated χ^2 of the table will not be significant: the distribution within the table will be random. If one of the parameters in the tabulation does influence the distribution to a degree unlikely to be due to change, the tabulation will not be random and the calculated χ^2 will be significant (Dudley et al., 2000).

Findings

Questionnaire I: The total number of students for this year was 219. The sample number for this questionnaire was 130, which included 89 standard entry students and 41 mature students. Not all respondents answered all questions. The students identified that they would have liked to have more information on certain items prior to commencement of the nursing course. These are listed in order of frequency of responses in Table 3. Further analysis of the distribution in this table between mature and standard entry students using χ^2 contingency tables showed that there was a (just) significant difference (significant at the at 0.05 level, DF = 9) overall between the needs of the mature student and standard entry students. When each item in the table was analysed singly, knowledge of the course, knowledge of biology and financial issues were still different (significant at the 0.05 level (DF = 1).

Programme design and development

How a student progresses though a course is influenced by many factors. There are several prominent determinants in successful progression through a nursing course identified in the literature, previous education (Ofori and Charlton, 2002; Kevern et al., 1999; Houltram, 1996; Jeffreys, 1998; Glackin and Glackin, 1998; Harvey and McMurray, 1997), age (Houltram, 1996; Kevern et al., 1999; Ofori and Charlton, 2002), support mechanisms and their use (Harvey and McMurray, 1997; Levin and Levin, 1991).There are innumerable other factors both external and internal of courses that influence progression for example attrition and stress particularly evident in the mature student (Lindop, 1991).

The first welcoming programme was designed based on the results of the literature findings and the results of Questionnaire 1. The overall aim of the programme was to create an awareness of what would be involved in the nursing course and in so doing provide an opportunity for the student to enable them to source and utilise university resources in preparation for uptake of the nursing course. Common aspects of the programme were open to other mature students pursuing science-focused courses in University. These included IT skills, university orientation and support services information. The programme commenced two weeks before the start of the nursing course. All mature students were notified by post of the availability of the programme and invited to participate in it.

Due to the limited duration of the programme: one week, the focus was confined to:

(1) The socialisation of the individual to university life, which included the following main areas:

- Tour and orientation to the university and its main facilities,
- Small group discussion with mature students currently on the nursing course,
- Meeting and discussion with the lecturers and the staff from support services through which the student issues and concerns were discussed.

Table 3 Questionnaire 1: Feedback from nursing course students: What information would you like to have more off prior to nursing course?

Standard entry student		Mature students	
1	Knowledge of course	1	Knowledge of course
2	Prior subject knowledge	2	Knowledge of biology
3	Study skills	3	University orientation
4	University orientation	4	Prior subject knowledge
5	Knowledge of biology	5	Study skills
6	Money matters	6	Holidays
7	Holidays	7	Feedback from past students
8	Attendance	8	Time/stress management
9	Feedback from past students	9	Profession of nursing
10	Student support	10	Money matters

Topics ranked according to frequency of occurrence.

This component gave the student information about the course as was identified as a need from the survey (Table 3) and the literature (Williams and Calvillo, 2002; Coakley, 1999; Harvey and McMurray, 1997).

(2) Study skills component which included

- Study skills
- Information technology (IT) skills at various levels, e.g., beginner, intermediate and advanced
- Time management
- Self awareness

This component addressed the study skills and time management as identified as needs from the student survey (Table 3) and the literature on study skills (Jeffreys, 1998; Levin and Levin, 1991) and time management (Burris, 2001; Levin and Levin, 1991; Howard, 2001).

Questionnaire II: A total of 67 mature students were invited to participate in the welcoming programme of which 44 attended, 33 mature students returned the questionnaire. Not all respondents answered all questions. Students agreed that all the programme objectives were achieved (Table 1). The students felt the programme was very successful and very helpful in preparing them for undertaking the nursing course. Students documented that it gave them confidence and the information that they needed for starting the course. The general consensus was that students would have liked more input on study skills particularly with regard to ways of improving spelling and grammar. They also felt they needed more practice to advance their IT skills.

Questionnaire III: This questionnaire surveyed the 204 students, of which 75 were mature students that were enrolled in the nursing course at the end of year one of the course. A total number of 47 questionnaires were returned from mature students, not all respondents answered all questions. The average age of the respondents was 31.7 ± 6.7 years and included 10 males and 37 females, 52% of these students partook in the welcoming programme. In relation to the uptake of the welcoming programme the trends showed that there were more males in the non-attendees and that the non-attendees had less dependents (Question 1,3,5 see Table 2). There was a significant difference (at the 0.05 level) between attendees and non-attendees and whether they had studied in the last five years, with proportionately more non-attendees having attended other courses.

The students identified the following factors that prohibited them from partaking in welcoming programme (Question 6), work commitments, late offers of places on course/not offered programme and on holidays. The students identified the following three main factors that encouraged them to avail of the welcoming programme (Question 7), an opportunity to receive information about the university and orientation to the university, to gain insight into the nursing course and meet other students. There is a significant difference (at 0.05 level) in the theoretical progression of mature students who attended the Welcoming Programme (Table 4) and those who did not. Analysis of the whole class (Table 5) showed that progression was also slightly significantly influenced by whether students undertook a course in the last five years, the level of course they undertook and the type of assessment they experienced on these courses. These were the parameters that were measured

Table 4 Summary results of χ^2 contingency tables attendees/non-attendees at the welcoming programme

		χ^2	Degrees of freedom	Level of significance	n
1	Level of previous experience -v- attendance	3.407	4	0.5	47
2	Studied in last five years -v- attendance	3.9386	1	0.05	45
3	Satisfactory theoretical progress to date -v- attendance	5.372	1	0.05	42
4	Type of assessment previous experienced -v- attendance	5.0798	3	0.1	47

Table 5 Results of χ^2 contingency tables comparing all students progression and previous experience

		χ^2	Degrees of freedom	Level of significance	n
1	Type of assessment previous experienced -v- progression	12.143	3	0.01	46
2	Course undertaken in last 5 years -v- progression	4.531	1	0.05	44
3	Level of previous experience -v- progression	6.6297	4	0.2	46

in this study, as cited in the Programme design and development section these are only some of the known factors that may influence progression.

Students (n = 24), when asked to list in order of priority the areas to include in an expanded welcoming programme (Question 12) listed the following as their first priority: biology 50%, nursing 21%, psychology 17% and sociology 12%. This correlates with the literature where it has long been shown that nursing students find biology difficult (Nicholl, 1996; McKee, 2002). Likewise when asked what areas they found most difficult in the course both mature and standard entry students (n = 60) listed the following; biology 60%, volume of work 12% and nursing studies 10% (Question 13bII). The distribution for least difficult aspect of the course was more diverse with a total of 45 replies indicating: nursing 31%, clinical practice 22%, sociology 20% and psychology 14% (Question 3bI).

Further evaluation of the welcoming programme

The students stated the increased course information assisted them in their integration into university and hospital life. Integration is sometimes a problem for mature students (Rautopuro and Vaisanen, 2001; Hamill, 1995). The majority of students (91.3%) commented that the programme helped them with the nursing course in at least one of the following ways; by enabling them to meet other mature students and course tutors/lecturers, giving them an insight into what would be expected of them as a participant on the programme and giving helpful tips and information about support services available, etc. All students replied that the welcoming programme did assist them in the Nursing course. When asked which element they found most helpful (Question 9, Table 2) they identified in order of importance: meeting 2nd year mature students, meeting staff, meeting classmates, learning about university and facilities, study skills and computer skills.

This additional support may also have impacted on improving attrition in this group. There is an increasing amount of wastage in courses (Braithwaite et al., 1994; Glossop, 2002; White et al., 1999). Although some studies show more mature students than younger students drop out from nursing courses (Braithwaite et al., 1994) others have shown that there is no correlation between retention rates and age (Kevern et al., 1999; White et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 1994; Bean and Metzner, 1985; Singh and Smith, 1975). In this study when asked if they had considered discontinuing the course, (Question 13c) 85% of students

had considered discontinuing at some stage. Support from other students (45%), friends (17.5%) and family (12.5%) encouraged them to stay on the programme (Table 2, Question 13e), while others identified the tutors as being significant in influencing their retention. Jeffreys (1998) acknowledges the role family and the faculty play in providing emotional support leading to better retention. Another factor which contributed to student retention was course enjoyment as identified by 25% of students This as well as self-efficacy, are factors acknowledged by Metzner and Bean (1987) as being a significant variable in affecting a person's retention.

Despite meeting the academic entry requirements of the course many healthcare mature students who seek advice and support from academic staff express a low level of confidence in their academic ability (Shanaghan, 2000). Mature students often bring with them fears, doubts and inadequacies of earlier schooling and as a result have often developed a poor self-concept (Glackin and Glackin, 1998). Whilst the literature acknowledges the need for academic support for the mature student other issues such as lack of childcare provision, financial difficulties and family commitments can be problematic for the mature student and needs to be addressed through adequate support mechanisms for these students (Glackin and Glackin, 1998). In this study 50% of students considered leaving the course because of financial (Question 13d). Only 4.25% of mature students felt the need to avail of student support services during their first year on the nursing course (Question 13f). The services utilised were the learning support services and they reported that they found this service beneficial.

Maslin-Prothero (1992) suggests that mature students are more likely to lack qualifications and experience of academic work and consequently may be disadvantaged by the demands of the course. Mature students frequently possess characteristics such as previous life experiences that could act as buffers to lessen the shock of adapting to new situations. In this study 78.7% of the students had previously worked in the caring field (Question 14a) mainly as care assistants/attendants. Surprisingly since commencing the nursing course 64.3% felt that their perception of nursing has changed, this dissonance centred mainly around academic factors with students identifying there was a higher academic standard required of participants and a larger theoretical component than they had anticipated. It has been identified in the literature that clinical placements have also been found to be stressful (Burris, 2001) even more

stressful than the educational setting (Lindop, 1991) this was not shown in this study.

Of the 47 respondents 12 students gave suggestions for improving the programme (Question 10), which in order of frequency of responses included the following three areas:

(a) Increasing the study skills component and include it more on an ongoing basis in the nursing course
(b) Allocate more time to the introduction of the library resource skills
(c) Develop the optional IT component so that it is more specific in meeting peoples varying needs levels.

When asked if they would be prepared to participate in the programme if it was two weeks duration and included a short introduction to nursing, biological sciences, psychology and sociology (Question 11, Table 2) 65.5% of respondents replied yes.

These areas for improvement were discussed within the curriculum development group and were taken into consideration in the development of the programme for the subsequent cohort of students.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it took place in one college, like all single sites studies the generalisation of the findings across other sites is dependant on the existing structures available within that institution.

Conclusion

The current strategy is to widen access of entry to pre-registration nursing courses to include non traditional groups. Third level institutions must adapt their courses to facilitate this new type of student (Ayer and Smith, 1998). We as educators recognise that mature students needs are different and verified this in this study, particularly with regard to overall knowledge of the course, biology and financial issues. We could accommodate these needs through changing the course structure (Anonymous, 2000) and introducing more support mechanisms (Houltram, 1996; Jeffreys, 1998). The mechanism we have used to improve support in this university is the use of the welcoming programme, which we have evaluated in this paper. The students identified that the welcoming programme was beneficial to them; this

was also reflected in the slightly significantly better progression of the attendees in the nursing course. Students' recommendations for further development of the welcoming programme included the course to be expanded in duration to include more input on study and IT skills and an introduction to subject areas on the nursing course. In the UK there is a decline in the number of mature students applying for nursing courses (Watson, 1998) with the caring professions losing out to more business-orientated courses. If we are to continue to attract mature students to our nursing courses it is imperative that supports are in place to accommodate the mature student prior to and during their nursing course.

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