Exploring nurse students' expectations for developing a quality assurance course

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Abstract

Aim : The aim of this qualitative study was to explore nurse students' expectations on a quality assurance course and to use the data provided for further development of the course.

Method and material : The sample studied consisted of 12 postgraduate nurse students who were anticipated to attend a quality assurance course for nurses in U.K. Data were collected by the completion of the "Quality Assurance Expectations' Questionnaire (QAEQ)". The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions focused on three main areas: a) expected achievements of the students on knowledge, skills and attitudes, b) expected subjects to be included in the course, c) students' current experience and involvement in quality assurance activities. A content analysis was used to identify the categories and themes found in the nurses descriptions about their expectations on the quality assurance course.

Results : The findings of this study highlighted that students' expectations related to improved knowledge and skills on quality assurance issues. Expectations on course content focused on issues of quality assurance implementation and evidence – based practice. More specifically, students were expecting to learn about the essence of quality assurance in general and how quality assurance programmes can contribute to the improvement of the health care system in general. Professional development was also reported by the students since, they were expecting to improve their clinical performance and thus to reflect improved patient care and improved nursing practice. Furthermore, they stated their expectation to be able to discuss in detail with their colleagues and other health professionals about quality assurance as well as to be able to initiate methods of quality assurance issues in their working environment. Finally the nurse students' expectation to be actively involved to quality assurance activities in health care was also reflected in terms of obtaining advanced knowledge and skills.

Conclusions : Exploration of students' expectation is a crucial developmental component influencing the overall process of programme planning and implementation.

Keywords: nurse education, educational course, quality assurance, students' expectations

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Exploring nurse students' expectations for developing a quality assurance course   254
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Introduction

Quality assurance is an integral part of all health care delivery with the primary purpose to monitor, evaluate or improve the quality of health care delivered by the health care provider. Therefore, quality assurance is undertaken for a valid purpose and its outcomes are used to improve health care.

The importance of implementing quality assurance initiatives and improving quality is well understood in most health care organisations. This work becomes more challenging as internal and external conditions rapidly change. A quality improvement framework has started to be developed in order to help clinicians and administrators to organise integrated, multifaceted quality programmes that have the flexibility necessary for success in today's fast-paced health care environment [1].

Since quality assurance is integral to health care, it is essential that health care organizations educate their staff about all the requirements for quality assurance. In this respect, the provision of quality care and the implementation of quality assurance programmes in health care organisations are closely related to education that nurses receive in regard to quality aspects.

The World Health Organisation [2] supports that everybody in the health care system needs education to accept the idea of continuous improvement, to use the results and to participate in the activities involved. Within this frame, special courses and other activities should be maintained to disseminate the concepts of quality and encourage the staff to apply them. Finally, studying staff's and students' expectations with regard to proposed educational activities has been also referred as an essential component for successfully implementing quality assurance initiatives to health care organisations.

The importance of studying students' expectations has been reported in the literature as an appropriate technique not only for enhancing individuals' involvement in educational programmes but also for developing and evaluating programme processes [3]. Seminal pieces of work focus on students' expectations. Ziegfeld et al.,[4] discussed the necessity of studying in depth students' expectations on educational programmes. The author focused specifically on the area of quality of care and stressed that students' expectation about education on quality of care should be explored before the application of any educational activity.

Exploration of students' expectations is essential for the success of the educational programmes. Santos[5] stated that exploring students' perspectives could be beneficial for programme development and improvement. Concerning programme plan and evaluation, Thompson and Sheckley et al.,[6] and Laforet-Fliesser et al.,[7] valued students' expectations on self-efficacy, learning, knowledge and skills. The exploration of students' expectations before programme planning can be proved a valuable source of information for educators and course developers. Data provided by students' expectations studies reveal information on students' characteristics, students' experience and perceptions and group's identity and cohesion. Such issues appear to assist the development and the implementation of educational courses, and to affect the educational process as a whole.

In addition, Cernik et al.,[8] and Ziegfeld et al.,[4] supported that health professionals' expectation in regard to education on quality of care should be explored prior to the application of any educational activity. Santos [5] advocated that, by examining students' expectations and perspectives before programme implementation, positive or negative tendencies might be identified, which are valuable for further programme planning. Students' expectations concerning several aspects of learning such as self-empowerment and personal development were measured in several studies which aimed to overall assess nursing courses or educational programmes [6,7].

Morgan[9] in a reflective effort to explore the students' experiences on what

learning is, what studying is and for which reasons students come to be studying, highlight the diversities of students' views and interpretations as well as expectations in regard to the process of studying. The author identifies three main orientations as these reflected by students in undertaking a specific educational course or programme. These orientations express a student's relationship with an educational programme and are personal, vocational and academic.

The same author associates the students' views and orientations with the evaluation of education by stating that the concept of orientation to education forms the crucial basis of a student's relationship to a course, and for further understanding how and why students tackle their work in particular ways. With regard to learning processes, it is important to underscore that from a teacher's perspective, appreciation of the complexity of "learning" for the students, is appropriate in order to help students to develop as learners and consideration of students' expectations is crucial for improving learning methods and strategies.

Based on the reported evidence, the present study has been designed with the aim to explore nurse students' expectations on a quality assurance course and to use the data provided for further development of the course.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was of a qualitative nature. A convenience sample of twelve post-graduate nurse students who were anticipated to attend a quality assurance course for nurses in a University Hospital in U.K. was used.

The data for this study were collected through the Quality Assurance Expectations' Questionnaire (QAEQ) in order to identify and explore nurse students' expectations prior to the course. The QAEQ was developed after careful examination of the relevant literature. Knowledge and expertise of a group of experts in this field was taken into account and contributed in the final form of the QAEQ. Four open-ended questions were included in the QAEQ. These questions focused on three main areas: a) expected achievements of the students on knowledge, skills and attitudes, b) expected subjects to be included in the course, c) students' current experience and involvement in quality assurance activities.[10]

More specifically, questions focused on participants' expectations from the quality assurance programme, in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes on quality issues. Participants were also invited to write quality assurance topics, which they would wish to be included in the content of the programme and to indicate two nursing aspects related to quality of care that should be analysed and discussed. In an initial effort to assess their current involvement in quality assurance initiatives and their previous knowledge on quality of care, participants were asked to state, if they were currently involved in quality activities at their work place and if they ever participated in a seminar or course related to quality assurance in health care.

A pilot study took place involving five nurse students. Results from the pilot study yield no problems of understanding and completing the QAEQ. In this respect no further modifications were required for the QAEQ.

The distribution of the QAEQ to the study participants was made two weeks prior to the implementation of the quality assurance course. All participants were informed of the purpose and design of the study. Confidentiality preserved during data collection. It was stressed to the students that participation to the study was voluntary and decision to participate or not would not influence their involvement in the course.

A content analysis was performed after data collection and specific themes and categories were identified concerning students' expectations from the quality assurance course. The goal of content analysis is "*to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study*" [10]. One of the biggest advantages of a content analysis methodology is that it

facilitates the production of core constructs from textual data through a systematic method of reduction and analysis.

Ethics committee approval to complete the study was obtained from the Hospital. Written consent to participate was also obtained. The National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines were followed to protect participants' confidentiality.

Data analysis started with reading all data repeatedly to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole. Following the principles of content analysis, the students' statements were reviewed and examined for common concepts and themes. Words or phrases constituted the units of analysis. These words appeared to encompass similar abstract concepts and meanings. The students' statements were then divided and constructed into categories along with selection of the words or phrases which were considered representative of these categories. [10]

Results

The questionnaire was completed by all the student nurses who attended the course. Their ages ranged from 23 to 43 years with a mean of 32 years. Nursing practice experiences ranged from one to twenty years with a mean of nine years. All the participants were female and their educational background included a Bachelor Degree of Nursing, while their working experience was in clinical, educational and research settings in public and in private health care sector.

Data interpretation highlighted issues which contributed to the overall educational process. Understanding and exploring students' expectations enhanced substantial judgments regarding the process of introducing the quality assurance education to this particular group of health professionals.

From *general* to *advanced* professional knowledge

Nurse students were initially asked to state what they were expecting to achieve in terms of knowledge, attitudes and skills on quality issues from the programme. Three main concepts were revealed from the examination of the statements. The concept of *"learning"*, the concept of *"doing"* and the concept of *"conveying"*. The statements which included these concepts were then classified in certain categories. Results were fall into three categories. The first category was concerned with "*general knowledge on quality*". The second category concerned with "*improved skills and performance*" and the third one with "*advanced knowledge on quality*".

More specifically, the first category *"general knowledge on quality"* involved general aspects of quality assurance. Students were expecting to learn about the essence of quality assurance in general, the main meaning of quality, the quality related theory, the process of quality assurance, the application of quality in practice and the availability of tools for measuring the quality of care. In addition, students were expecting to learn how quality assurance programmes can contribute to the improvement of the health care system in general, the ways through which quality assurance can be achieved and the impact of educating nurses in quality assurance aspects.

The second category *"improved skills and performance"* was related to clinical practice and the expectations that students had in regard to the influence of the programme to their performance. To this end, students were expecting to learn about methods to provide better patient care, to be able to improve nursing in theory and practice, to achieve personal development and to improve their skills and their relationships between colleagues and patients. Professional development was also reported by the students since, they were expecting to improve their clinical performance and thus to reflect improved patient care and improved nursing practice.

In the third category *"advanced knowledge on quality"*, the students expressed their expectation to obtain

advanced knowledge about quality assurance issues in health care and thus, to be able to explain to their peers about quality assurance and its facets. Furthermore, they stated their expectation to be able to discuss in detail with their colleagues and other health professionals about quality assurance as well as to be able to initiate methods of quality assurance issues in their working environment. Finally the nurse students' expectation to be actively involved to quality assurance activities in health care was also reflected in terms of obtaining advanced knowledge and skills.

Using quality initiatives and evidence-based practice

The second question of the QAEQ focused on the students' expectations on the content of the course. Two main concepts were revealed from the examination of statements. The concept of *"measuring"* and the concept of *"developing"*. In this respect, students' expectations on course's content concerned two main categories. The first category is relevant to *"implementation of quality assurance methods in clinical settings"* and the second category is relevant to *"use of evidence-based practice"*.

Concerning the first category, students expectations were mainly focused on the relationship among quality assurance and clinical practice, tools and methods of quality assurance and examples of implementing quality assurance in the health care settings, quality assurance and cost effectiveness, quality assurance and ethical issues, quality assurance and improved relationships.

In respect to the second category, students' expectations related to research and quality assurance, methods of introducing research results into practice and means of measurement nursing effectiveness.

Quality concepts on care and nurses' performance

In the third question, students were called to indicate two nursing aspects, involving significant problems, related to quality of care that should be analysed and discussed. In this question, results were fall into two categories. The first category concerned with "*quality and patients' care*" and the second with "*quality and nurses' work*".

In the first category *"quality and patients' care",* students focused on nursing aspects such as psychological support provided to patients, patients' right and ethics and how quality assurance may influence these aspects. The best patient outcome and how the best therapeutic result can be achieved were also considered as major nursing problems related to quality assurance. Finally, the reduced patients' length of stay and effectiveness of clinical practice were reported.

In the second category *"quality and nurses' work",* students were referred to the organisation of the workflow by the nurse managers in the clinical settings and the barriers of implementing quality assurance in hospitals. Furthermore, nurses' workload and quality assurance, quality assurance and care of specific groups of patients - such as HIV/AIDS patients and quality assurance on specific nursing interventions, were mentioned by the students as circumstances which involve significant problems in relation to quality assurance.

Finally, it is worthwhile to mention at this point, that the majority of the respondents had no previous experience and never been involved on quality assurance initiatives or seminars.

Discussion

The three categories identified in the results –namely, "*general knowledge on quality*", "*improved skills and performance*" and "*advanced knowledge on quality*" – seem to be in accordance with Morgan's [9] concept regarding to students' orientation in studying. The first category, in which students expect to achieve general knowledge on quality, can be related to

Exploring nurse students' expectations for developing a quality assurance course   258
pp:254-262
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personal orientation in which students are concerned with "broadening" aspects of university education and see it as means of changing. The second category in which students expect to improve their skills and performance can be related to vocational orientation which is associated with qualification aspects and improved skills for a particular job or a future career. The third category, in which students expect to obtain advanced knowledge in a certain field of expertise, can be associated with the academic orientation which reflects the students' intellectual interest to study a particular subject and to pursue the next step of the educational ladder.

According to these categories, concepts such as knowledge, skills and attitudes were directly associated with the respondents' expectations. Students' expectations ranged from a continuum of gaining "*general knowledge*" and information on quality assurance, to achieving "*advanced professional knowledge*". Students appeared motivated to initially obtain knowledge about the essence of quality assurance and to be able to define it. Then, they moved forward towards obtaining more specific knowledge on application of quality assurance methods in clinical practice. Finally, they referred to advanced knowledge, in terms of combining the theory and practice, by being able not only to explain and critically discuss quality of care aspects, but to be also able to implement those aspects in everyday practice. This continuum is in accordance with the "*holistic*" motivation to education as this described by Morgan [9]. The author refers to the concept of the "*holistic*" motivation to education as viewed from the students' perspectives. This "*holistic*" motivation and the variation associated to students' orientations then can be described under the headings of personal, vocational and academic orientations.

The categories on students' expectations from the quality assurance educational programme, included also concepts of self-development through advanced knowledge and improved skills,

professional development, improved interpersonal relationships among other colleagues and patients and improved nursing performance. These results are supported by the relevant literature, which indicates that, major reason for students to pursue post-graduate education, included personal development and enhancement of skills and knowledge [11].

Parham et al., [12] stated that development of personal qualities was reported by students as important educational and development needs. The relationship also between professional development and advancement of knowledge were underscored in several studies, which associate the training needs of the students and the higher academic knowledge with the scientific and professional development [13,14]. Furthermore, Enthoven et al., [15] associates educational activities with health professionals' development and continuous quality improvement. In regard to students' expectations to improve interpersonal relationships within their working environment, Stichler [16] states that nurses contribute to the development of organizational cultures that foster interdisciplinary collaboration because of their advanced knowledge, skills and competence.

Three main points should be noted down as essential concerning the students' expectations from the programme. The gradual development of their knowledge, the improved patient care through application of best clinical practices and the development of the nursing science in its entity. Consideration of these issues as central in students' expectations from the educational programme can be critical for gaining a deeper understanding on students' philosophy, motivation and priorities, and thus, directing the educational process accordingly. Further judgment on controlling and finalising the content of the programme can be directed by the students' expectations as these reported at the present stage.

Students' expectations on course's content revealed the importance of

Exploring nurse students' expectations for developing a quality assurance course   259
pp:254-262
E-ISSN:1791-809X   www.hsj.gr

"implementation of quality assurance methods in clinical settings" and the *"use of evidence-based practice"*. The relevant literature highlights the importance of education in promoting the utilisation of quality initiatives and evidence-based practice in health care settings. Stevens et al.,[17] supports that the implementation of evidence-based practice in nursing holds promise of improving quality of care and client outcomes. To assist with development of evidence-based practice in nursing, strategies for locating existing evidence-based practice guidelines should be initiated. Introducing postgraduate teaching programmes on quality improvement and evidence-based practice can help health professionals to implement quality improvement activities into their clinical practice[18]. Headrick et al.,[19] reports that advanced educational preparation for health professionals is essential for implementing quality initiatives in practice and for this purpose the development of training programmes were included at the European agenda for health care reform[20]. In addition, Sorrentino et al., [21] and Whitley and Putzier et al.,[22] in their studies on using quality assurance methods and tools in practice, reflected the spiral interaction between implementation of quality assurance programmes and improved relationships of health care professionals and departments within health care organisations.

In accordance with the above, when participants were asked on nursing problems, which were expected to be discussed, they focused on "*quality and patients' care*" and "*quality and nurses' work*". More specifically, they underscored the implementation of quality assurance in practice, its influence of quality to patients' care, as well as its influence to nurses' work. Except the central issue, which emerged from exploring students' expectations, this of implementing quality assurance methods into practice, two additional aspects of quality assurance initiatives were evolved at this point. Issues related to patient satisfaction and job satisfaction were mentioned by the respondents as problems,

which could be analysed through the quality assurance educational programme. The students' interest in these aspects is in accordance with relevant literature, which advocates that patient satisfaction and job satisfaction are considered as major quality indicators in health care services. Both issues are directly related to the quality of care provided within an organisation and to nurses' educational preparation on quality issues [23,24].

In general, students' expectations, as expressed by the participants, rely on empirical knowledge, working experience and fragmented information. Triandis[25] speaking about human expectations, state that people's expectations reflect their previous experiences. He further discusses the diverse expectations of people who lived in different cultures and thus bear major differences in experiences. The common cultural and educational background of nurse students who participated in the study and their common goals and purpose in attending the quality assurance course contributed positively in the formulation of shared expectations and common views, priorities and needs on what is considered essential and expected to be learned within the frame of the course. In this respect, homogeneity of the group contributed positively in the development of the quality assurance course. Important points to be considered in regard to students' expectations and course development are the following:

- Development of educational courses can be significantly supported by exploring students' characteristics and expectations.
- Students' expectations are crucial factors for successful programme planning, implementation and outcome.
- Exploration of participants' expectations is important for the quality of teaching and learning provisions in an organised manner.
- Issues of homogeneity/heterogeneity of a group and related advantages and disadvantages are important to programme development.

- Groups' identity, goals and cohesion are central to programme planning and implementation.
- The exploration of students' expectations from an educational intervention complement the process evaluation activities.
- Students' orientations, experiences and expectations lead to a deeper understanding of the process of studying and thus to a better programme planning.

It is inevitable that the effectiveness of the intervention is subjective as they are evaluated through the questionnaire data submitted by the individuals. The sample was not representative of all the student nurses who attended a quality assurance course in U.K, but it was probably representative of all student nurses who attended a quality assurance course at this University Hospital during the study period. Since a truly representative sample of all student nurses is probably impossible to specify or enrol, the researchers chose rather to obtain a sample that was clearly defined and for whom comprehensive study of the recovery process would be most relevant. Finally, the small sample size could be considered as the limitation of the research and therefore, a larger scale effort would be needed to determine whether the results reported in this research can be generalized to the broader population of student nurse in UK.

CONCLUSION

Concluding, the essence of the exploring students' expectation before the development and implementation of an educational course relates to the in-depth understanding, and valuing students' characteristics and expectations throughout the process of the course. Consideration of these issues enhances substantial judgments regarding the process of introducing educational courses to a particular group of health professionals. In relation to the development of the course, students' expectations and experiences, their reactions and their interactions provide to the course its own unique character from an early development stage. In this respect, examining aspects relevant to characteristics and expectations of course participants can be regarded as a critical developmental component which further enhances the overall educational process.

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Exploring nurse students' expectations for developing a quality assurance course   262
pp:254-262
E-ISSN:1791-809X   www.hsj.gr