Realising Professional Practice (NR5G346), Faculty of Health Sciences, Australian Catholic University

Primary contact: Professor Sally Borbasi (sally.borbasi@acu.edu.au)

Realising Professional Practice is a large undergraduate unit, and serves to facilitate the transition to professional practice for students, connecting nursing theory with nursing practice. Currently offered across five campuses in the final semester of the Bachelor of Nursing program, it is currently delivered face-to-face by five independent teaching teams (one team per campus) to a cohort of 868 students (Semester 2, 2011). Students in this unit have considerable clinical commitments during the semester – they are required to complete 40 days of clinical practice, as well as their final theoretical units. Additionally, they are focused on procuring positions within hospital-based graduate programs, and spend less time on campus than in previous semesters. Student feedback (anecdotal and otherwise) indicates that students are looking for flexible delivery options so they can undertake their study at a time and place that meets their individual requirements.

As student numbers continue to grow, resourcing this unit is proving increasingly problematic, particularly on the smaller campuses where there are fewer teaching staff. Through the redesign process, the Faculty of Health Sciences intends to integrate technology to support and enhance student learning, greater student engagement with the unit content because of the flexibility afforded by the blended mode, and a decrease in the instructional costs per student. However, the key objective is improved student learning.

Choice of redesign model: The Replacement Model

The proposed unit redesign will see face-to-face lectures reduced from 24 hours per campus to just six hours per campus, with the additional lectures replaced by self-directed individual learning activities. Face-to-face tutorial sessions for groups of 25 to 30 students will be replaced by scaffolded and facilitated online group work activities that teams of students will be able to complete at their own pace. The redesigned unit will be delivered centrally, with the same resources being used across each of the campuses, and with members of the teaching team carrying up to 50 students for each online tutorial session. The focus of the teaching role will shift from one of content delivery to one of learning facilitation.

The proposed redesign seeks to facilitate student inquiry, and the learning activities will be developed to equip students with a skill set that will make them more effective practitioners. Students will have greater control over their learning, and will experience greater autonomy, as the redesigned unit will limit didactic teaching, and will provide more opportunities for them to engage in active learning. The reduction in face-to-face teaching will provide members of the teaching team with additional time to develop and refine learning activities and assessment tasks that will facilitate improved learning. Additionally, they will be available to consult one-on-one with students more often, and will have more time to devote to supporting students who are experiencing difficulty.

Choice of assessment plan: Before and after comparisons of common final exams and student work using common rubrics

An item of assessment that is comparable between the traditional offering and the redesigned unit will be identified. Student performance on this assessment item across the alternate offerings of the unit will be reviewed to determine the impact the redesigned unit has had on student learning. A common final exam paper comprising a comparative mix of short answer and short essay questions will be used. Additionally, overall grades between the traditional delivery mode and the blended delivery mode will be compared to determine the impact of the redesigned unit on overall student achievement for the unit.

Cost reduction strategy: increase the number of sections that each instructor carries for the same workload credit, accommodating enrolment growth

The redesign reduces the number of people required to deliver the unit and increases the number of students carried by each online tutorial facilitator. By examining the mix of teaching personnel and reassigning tasks to the most suitable staff types, we expect to produce genuine cost savings. Online teaching will also reduce the need for classroom space. The redesigned sections will involve fewer in-class and out-of-class teaching hours. Therefore, the percentage of an average faculty member’s instructional time that is devoted to one section of this particular unit on an annual basis will be lower under the redesign and costs will be less under the redesign. Faculty members that are freed up from face to face teaching through the redesign will have time reallocated towards other activities associated with the scholarship of learning and teaching, leading to improvements in the education experience for students. Freed-up time may also be allocated towards research and other departmental priorities.