

Qualitative research into study preparation recommendations to facilitate role adaptation as a student nurse

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Investigate and identify preparatory academic skills and resources required for individuals preparing to commence undergraduate online nursing studies.

Background: There is much research available on the transition of student nurse to graduate nurse, however the transitional pedagogical journey into a student nurse role has been less explored. This project aimed to identify the skills and knowledge which would benefit the individual commencing their online nursing studies to inform study preparation resources and facilitate role adaptation into a profession requiring registration at the student level with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Focus groups with student nurses and an online survey for academics were implemented to identify challenges for students and core areas to inform preparation for practice resources.

Methods: The project applied a qualitative grounded theory study design, implementing an academic staff survey and student focus groups. Results were thematically analysed to identify dominant study challenges and resource recommendations.

Results: A total of 26 academics participated identifying student course challenges attributed to: unrealistic expectations and understanding of the nursing role; poor academic skills; clinical practice demands; imbalance of work, family, life and studies and; an unsupportive university system. The student focus group included 43 participants across all year levels and identified the main challenges as clinical requirements and academic skills and support. Focus areas to prioritise for a study preparation resource are summarised as: building academic skills, time management (and prioritisation), introduction to the nursing role and course expectations, and introducing a peer support pathway (through use of social media).

Conclusion: An online study preparation resource for student nurses to access when they receive their acceptance into a nursing course presents a step with potential for a more successful course progression. For the university, this has potential to impact course retention and satisfaction. For the student it presents a supportive process which can lead to improved academic skills and an early understanding of the professional role and responsibilities of being a nurse.

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Implications for research, policy and practice:

Acknowledging the need to adapt to the role of nursing student for the individual commencing their nursing studies and providing support at the point of course acceptance will ultimately facilitate a more successful student journey.

Access to contextualised study preparation resources prior to commencing nursing studies has the potential to reduce attrition rates, increase grades and improve role adaptation.

What is already known about this topic?

- The first year of nursing studies has higher attrition rates often due to lack of understanding of the professional nursing role and an inability to manage personal and academic expectations.
- There is much research on the transition of student nurse to graduate nurse, however this is lacking for the individual transitioning into the student nurse role.

What this project adds:

- This project recognises challenges to role adaptation can occur as the individual commences their nursing studies and becomes part of a regulated health profession.
- The provision of contextualised academic and nursing resources on acceptance into a nursing program can better prepare students for the integration into academia and the nursing role.

Keywords: academics, nursing education, role adaptation, study preparation, undergraduate student nurse

INTRODUCTION

The transition for the student into a graduate nurse role has been well researched and strategised, however there could be more on supporting the individual entering undergraduate nursing studies. This project focused on the transition step into a student nurse role with the aim of identifying the challenges new student nurses faced in this course. The primary aim is to present focus areas to inform study preparation resources and ultimately improve student success and retention. It is proposed that these resources be presented to students with their university Bachelor of Nursing (BN) course acceptance letter. This is recognised as a time when they are likely curious and excited about entering their studies and motivated to interact with nursing-focused academic and professional support resources.

BACKGROUND

Registered nursing in Australia is currently at a nexus of workforce shortages and burned-out nurses creating a period of upheaval for the healthcare industry.¹ These circumstances have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, a workforce that is often supported by recently graduated nurses, and an ageing population who is living longer despite the prevalence of high acuity comorbidities and chronic disease.^{2,3} The nurse has become more visible and vital than ever with Australian communities understanding the importance of maintaining this workforce.

Preparing nurses to enter this dynamic and demanding work setting requires a supportive undergraduate course environment that is understanding of the unique challenges

within this curriculum. For a commencing student nurse, adaptation into this regulated student role can in its own way be aligned with transition shock also referred to as reality shock. For the student nurse this can be related to the sudden onset of academic expectations, professional responsibility and liability associated with nursing registration and practice.⁴ We often associate transition shock with the newly graduated nurse independently entering the health workforce however in Australia, student nurses are registered by their universities with the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency, Nursing and Midwifery Board in the interest of public safety.⁵ Student nursing registration can be viewed as a life-changing event with the student nurse bound by the same registration standards as a registered nurse.

These new student nurses can be reported for being a risk to the public and have to voluntarily provide any information regarding health issues which may impair their practice, as well as criminal activities. With many student nurses entering the health workforce early in their studies (increasingly so during the COVID-19 pandemic), role adaptation support and resources need to be provided early in the student journey.⁶

Undergraduate nursing courses undergo double accreditation being reviewed both by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) and university approval aligned with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).^{7,8} It was anticipated the introduction of national accreditation by ANMAC in 2010 would ensure a level of quality across all program delivery and improve the skills and knowledge of the graduating nurses.⁹ The Bachelor of Nursing are demanding courses which are mandated to include complex science units

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with a focus on anatomy and physiology, pathophysiology, pharmacology, medical surgical nursing, and incorporate over 800 hours of clinical placements. Students have pre-clinical requirements to meet regarding basic life support, manual handling and they must be fully vaccinated in accordance with Australian clinical requirements. To succeed in this course, students need to be motivated and ready for academic and practical challenges.

This journey for the novice student involves many different preconceptions of what they expect their learning journey to be and this can include periods of doubting and questioning whether they have made the right career choice.¹⁰ Tertiary studies present a very different learning environment to that of secondary/high school studies and there are demands on nursing students personal life due to registration standards and intensive course and clinical placement requirements. It is recommended that the adaptation into this role for individuals is seriously considered. This is especially relevant with the increased utilisation of student nurses into the health workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{6,11}

Nursing can be described as a tactile profession and delivery of an online course is challenging, particularly with consideration to capturing the human interaction which is expected with the nursing role. Quality online teaching today relies on academics who in addition to their teaching skills are apt at managing a balance of the administrative duties and accommodate the widely varied background of the students who enter their units. They are required to have an ability to constantly assess their own values and teaching expectations whilst producing high quality learning environments.^{12,13} It is also important to look at how and what is being taught from the students' perspective and to be receptive to student feedback. The university needs to meld to the students' lives and needs and not just the students mastering the university environment.

Attrition rates in first year nursing have long been recognised as problematic and this has been attributed to factors such as personal influences (self-esteem, work, study, life balances, sense of belonging), academic and financial challenges.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ This is exacerbated by the pressures faced by nursing students with the additional demands of registration, understanding the professional role of the nurse and complex course expectations as previously highlighted.

The project for undergraduate nursing study preparation aimed to identify those factors which presented as a challenge to students successfully completing their course with focus on the very first moments they accept a place offering. With the implementation of a grounded theory methodology, this project aimed to build recommendations to focus study preparation and reduce shock in adapting to the student nurse role through the exploration of both academics and students views. It proposes these study resources be available to student nurses when they are first accepted into a course, prior to commencing their studies.

METHODS

The Bachelor of Nursing (BN) course in which these students and academic are involved was offered by a regional university located in the Northern Territory, Australia. Student enrolment numbers approximated around 1,500 students at the time of the project. Of note, the course is delivered as a fully online BN with face-to-face internal classes available at three different campus sites. The majority of students studied in an external mode, were considered to be mature-aged, and included an international student cohort.

This project implemented a qualitative research method using a grounded theory approach and purposive sampling. Cited as a method to identify and construct theories as data and information is explored, the grounded theory approach to this research compared and aligned the outcomes from both staff and student perspectives to identify those aspects beneficial to student nurse study preparation.¹⁸ A project team workshop with four nursing academics and two education technologists was conducted to identify academic survey and focus group questions.

A total of 30 academics directly involved in undergraduate nursing unit delivery and student support were emailed an invitation to complete an anonymous online survey (using Qualtrics) with an opt-out approach. The academics were from a variety of roles within the nursing program, and all directly contributed to the student nurse journey. These academic positions spanned from nursing program management, unit delivery and clinical coordination, teaching, and supervision. Bachelor of Nursing administration staff were omitted from the survey. This survey focussed on what the academic considered would help new students have a more successful academic journey with a mix of seven closed and open response questions. A first question requested academics to identify their years of teaching experience with undergraduate nursing students moving into three question sets focussing on the academic's perspective of:

1. Why students were unsuccessful in their first year.
2. What study preparation resources would facilitate student success.
3. How these resources should be presented to students.

The initial question set (1) requested an open answer response to present factors that may contribute to student nurses being unsuccessful in their first year of study. The term "unsuccessful" refers to failing to pass units or withdrawing from studies. Question set two presented eighteen study preparation resources for academics to identify the top five for new students with an open answer opportunity for other suggestions. Question set three provided fourteen different methods to present study resources to students with a follow up open response to suggest other options. The final open answer question was *Do you have any other suggestions to contribute to the development of a study preparation resource for undergraduate nurses.*

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Focus groups were run with students across all year levels asking students to remember what it was like when they first started their nursing degree and look at the biggest challenges, identifying information they thought would benefit nursing students before commencing their studies. A flyer was circulated for students coming on campus (from both local and interstate) to attend their clinical teaching blocks inviting them to reflect on what it was like when they first started their degree, and what they thought new nursing students needed to know to succeed. There were four leading questions to keep discussion on track.

1. Did you complete any background preparation to prepare you for your studies, before you started the course- such as look at the university library site, find out more about nursing in Australia?
2. Could you tell us what the biggest challenges were for you when you started your Bachelor of Nursing course?
3. What sort of additional information would have helped you early in your course?
4. What advice would you give students who are about to commence the Bachelor of Nursing to help them be prepared?

In alignment with a grounded theory approach, results of each cohort were thematically analysed separately and then compared to identify dominant study challenges and resource recommendations. In addition, the top choices for the academic's survey response were identified in the closed response questions. These approaches aimed to present a set of principles to base study preparation resources for student nurses. This project received approval from the Charles Darwin University, Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number H17136).

RESULTS

ACADEMIC STAFF SURVEY

A total of 26 academics responded with between one to ten years plus teaching experience. In the responses presented by academics, there were five dominant themes identified for

the first question set exploring why they believed students were unsuccessful in their first year.

- 1: Unrealistic expectations and understanding of the nursing role.
- 2: Poor academic and health literacy skills- inclusive of understanding and having the ability to navigate the Australian health system and academically related to poor time management and prioritisation skills and lack of understanding of university study expectations.
- 3: Challenges with clinical practice- knowledge and time lapse between learning skills and applying skills.
- 4: Inability to balance work, family, life and studies.
- 5: Academic/university downfall- system or staff not supporting students.

In the second question set, which focussed on what should be prioritised in a study preparation resource for new students, a resulting six core factors were identified. Those areas which were either deemed as less important (as per the academic's responses) or which received no nominations were: the university and college structure and hierarchies, the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Boards' role and regulations (noting the professional role of the nurse was identified), and university governance documents. Those areas identified as priorities for nursing student support have been aligned with the core student challenges (factors contributing to unsuccessful course progress) and are presented in Table 1.

The final question set focused on the way a study preparation resource should be presented, revealed the top five suggestions as:

1. A help-yourself module presenting a number of different resources students can choose to complete.
2. Creation of reusable learning objects (these are short learning modules using multimedia and which are usually in the form of quizzes or question/answers).
3. A student journey/ story of a nursing student's journey.
4. Learning materials with quizzes.
5. Top 10 study tips.

TABLE 1: ACADEMIC VIEWPOINT ON CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS COMMENCING THEIR BACHELOR OF NURSING STUDIES AND THE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES REQUIRED TO SUPPORT NEW STUDENTS

Challenges to student success	Priority study preparation resources	Extra resource focus areas
Unrealistic expectations and understanding of the nursing role	• Critical thinking and clinical reasoning in nursing	• The professional role of the nurse • Reflection and reflective practice • Australian health system
Poor academic and health literacy skills, poor time management and prioritisation skills, lack of understanding of university study expectations	• Referencing skills • Research skills • Reading and note-taking	• Academic integrity • Communication skills
Challenges with clinical practice, knowledge and time lapse between learning skills and applying skills	• Foundations of nursing, medical and health terminology	• Evidence-guided nursing practice
Inability to balance work, family, life and studies	• Time and self-management	• Staying healthy while studying
Unsupportive university system or staff	• Introduction to online learning platform	• University culture

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The academics have collectively recommended online resources which are interactive and implement a variation of information presentation (to suit different learning styles). Additional recommendations included: traditional lectures (face to face interaction), and online quizzes using gamification tools.

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

The student focus groups were held with four groups, one in each of first year (6 participants) and third year (15 participants) and two with second year groups (22 participants) totalling 43 students. Of significance, all participants agreed that they would explore a nursing study resource if this was presented when they were first accepted into the course. According to the focus groups their exploration of the nursing course had been limited prior to commencing their studies, mainly looking at study plans, clinical requirements and talking to friends. However, this does imply they were on the university website and curious about their course. The main point of difference between the student focus group responses was the first years' attention on challenges with academic work, particularly with referencing and navigating the university and unit websites as demonstrated in the following comments:

Navigating the webpages/ online units information and assessment information (First Year Student 1)

I found the number of exams hard to cope with (First Year Student 2)

The hard units such as pathophysiology and pharmacology (First Year Student 3)

Coping with all the reading and learning a new referencing, how to reference like the teachers wanted (First Year Student 4)

The second and third year students were more focussed on challenges related to professional nursing and clinical placement requirements as was evident in their comments:

Factor in additional costs and time to meet pre-clinical requirements such as vaccinations and basic life support certificate (Second Year Student 1)

Placement information and getting your placement allocated and getting no response (Second Year Student 2)

Being an international student and holdups with placements meaning extending visas (Third Year Student 1)

Be realistic about how long it will take to complete the course given holdups with clinical placements (Third Year Student 2)

All the focus groups responses to the leading questions were thematically analysed with dominant themes presented in Table 2. An interesting aspect from the student's perspective was the reference to seeking peer support. This was evident with focus group feedback for new students to meet with past students and/or join the student Facebook pages. At this university, student groups had created their own Facebook pages associated with each unit they enrolled in, administration of these were handed on to the next group of students each semester. These sites were not part of the official university social media sites, unmonitored by the academics and demonstrated how the student nurse cohort were creating their own peer support networks.

TABLE 2: UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES FOR STUDY CHALLENGES AND PREPARATION FOR NEW STUDENTS

Question Focus	Focus Themes	Description
Students preparation for studies prior to their commencing	• Study plans • Clinical requirements • Peer support	• Part and full-time study plans • Simulation blocks and placements • Pre-clinical requirements • Spoke to friends enrolled in the course
Challenges commencing Bachelor of Nursing studies	• Academic skills • Time management • Clinical requirements • Finances	• Difficult units (such as anatomy and physiology, pathophysiology and pharmacology) • Pre-clinical requirements • Multiple submissions • Navigating the study plan, university webpages and online unit information. • Academic reading, writing and referencing skills • Costs of units, pre-clinical requirements, taking time off work. • Isolation of external enrolment & time differences between States/Territories • Being an international student (different systems and cultures)
Additional information which would have helped early in the course	• Time management • Prioritization • Academic skills • Clinical requirements • Peer support	• Library skills • Organising assessments and unit requirements • Study plan • More theory before practical • Collaborating with current students
Advice for students commencing Bachelor of Nursing studies	• Peer support • Clinical requirements • Communication • Course delays • Resource access • Self-care • Realistic expectations	• Collaborate with fellow students & staff • Social media sites for students (external to university control) • Clinical placement delays • Access library and academic support • Organise assessment dates and readings • Actively look after yourself • Consider part-time if working

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DISCUSSION

It is recognised that there will be differences between the life experience and preconceptions students bring to their studies and the expectations of the academics providing and facilitating this education. Collaboratively exploring their perspectives, experiences and recommendations for the preparation of the BN student journey can inform an evidence-based study preparation resource. Current programs generally have an approach which connects students to support and resources to enhance their academic skills and resilience once they have commenced their studies (start of the academic semester). Other study preparation options are Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) to provide a course taster, tertiary enabling programs to provide a course entry pathway for students who may not have an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), with some universities offering free introductory subjects for students.¹⁹⁻²¹

The approach proposed by the project team is to present a set of contextualised preparation resources for the BN course prior to the student commencing their studies, when they accept their course position. This is supported by the student focus group responses, demonstrating students were accessing the university site to find out more about their course prior to their actual commencement. Students are generally motivated and excited when they are first offered a university place and this presents an opportunity to tap into this motivation starting students early with resources directly relevant to their course and personal requirements. It is anticipated that this will aid the students course progression and satisfaction, and improve retention rates. Figure 1 presents the variations in these approaches.

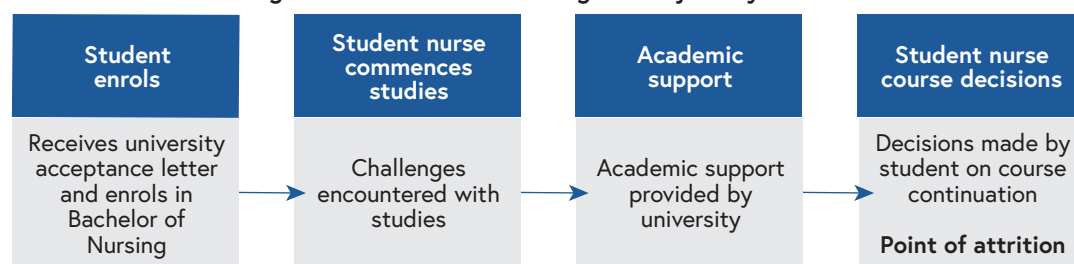
The research results identified the points of difference between academics and students in what was required for these resources as the student's identification of financial burdens, need for peer support, and the isolation felt by external students. The areas both groups prioritised were around academic challenges specifically with assessments, time management and prioritisation of tasks and library skills (associated with referencing and navigating the library systems). These align with previous research into nursing student attrition rates which identifies contributing factors relating to clinical placement, stress and nursing role expectations with an additional aspect (not identified in this project) of pre-enrolment criteria.²²

The principle areas therefore recommended for the development of study preparation resources are identified as:

- Academic skills and navigation of university systems.
- Introduction to being a nurse (professional role expectations), clinical preparation, medical terminologies, critical thinking and reflective practice.
- Self-care, time management and prioritisation of tasks, with peer support.

Although parts of these focus areas may resonate with other health courses the point of difference is contextualising these for the nursing profession. For example, academic skills development would direct how to conduct an article search using nursing literature. This also resonates with the 'whole-of-course curriculum design' recommendations to ensure students are aware of foundational course expectations, leading to a more quality program.⁹

Current model of undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing course journey



Proposed model of undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing course journey with study preparation resources

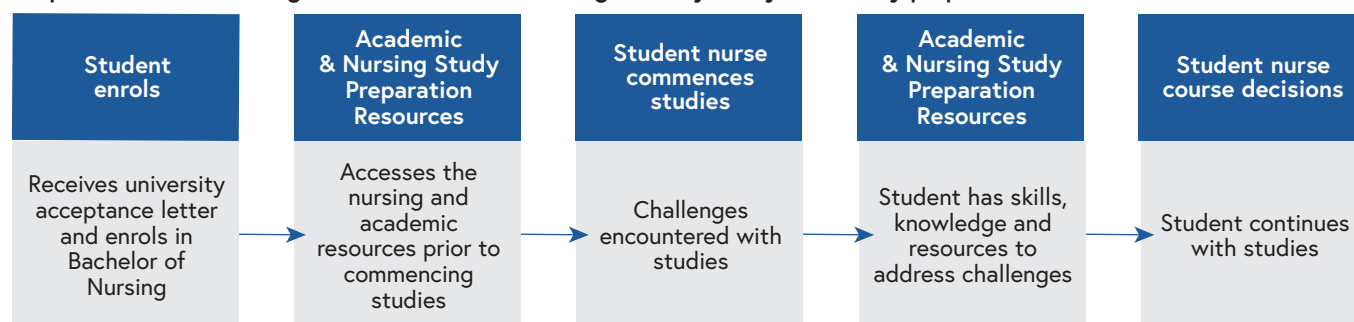


FIGURE 1: COMPARISON OF CURRENT AND PROPOSED MODELS OF STUDENT SUPPORT

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Universities have teams capable of developing interactive and engaging online resources, and social media sites such as Facebook are easy to establish and well received by students as a peer support environment, meaning this is an achievable investment for institutions.^{23,24} During COVID-19 the entry of tertiary studies into the online environment escalated thus presenting this form of resources as keeping with this momentum, adding another layer of student preparation and support.²⁵

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO DESIGN STUDY PREPARATION RESOURCES

To increase student retention within the first year of BN study and ultimately boost the Australian nursing workforce new strategies are required, particularly with so many courses now being delivered in online environments. Nurses are identified as active learners and have better learning experiences when they are interacting with their materials.²⁴ The learning styles of student nurses are an important consideration for the design of these online resources, with research demonstrating that learning style and academic achievements are linked.²⁷⁻²⁹ Therefore, aligning these study preparation resources with the student nurses recognised as active learners the concept of constructivism is recommended. This acknowledges learners are not passive in the learning cycle but instead are actively constructing their learning experience as presented by Biggs and Tang in the following statement.³⁰

Constructivism emphasizes what students have to do to construct knowledge, which in turn suggests the sorts of activities that teachers need to encourage in order to lead students to achieve the desired outcomes.^{30(p.22)}

Both the first-year nursing students and academics flagged academic skills and navigation of university systems as important for the new student. This collectively incorporated referencing, research, reading and note taking skills, organising assessments, study plans and online learning/course platforms. Using constructivism would incorporate some form of group work or peer platform to allow students to learn from each other. To design academic resources using this framework the materials around the academic skills need to be engaging and encourage active thinking. Using a co-design approach with these materials would be recommended as this incorporates the student voice, however recent research has also indicated that altering BN courses to meet student satisfaction (based on student course satisfaction surveys) can also negatively impact the course quality.³¹

In relation to the nurse role and professionalism, this project's findings recommend early incorporation of clinical preparation (and requirements), introduction to medical terminologies and aspects of critical thinking and reflective practice. Another consideration is ensuring student nurses begin to grow their confidence to advocate for patients in

alignment with the concept of moral courage.³² Materials for this skill set could take a cognitive dissonance approach which incorporates presenting contextualised foundational nursing challenges for the student to navigate with access to meaningful feedback.

An additional recommendation is to ensure student nurses have access to and understand their student nurse registration requirements on enrolment, particularly as they are often supporting clinical areas as students.¹⁰ Understanding nursing students are active learners who will gain much of their knowledge through actions and reflection approaches should further direct the design of professional practice resources. This can aid their professional growth and development. An example would be an early introduction of a critical decision making framework or critical thinking skills used in nursing practice.

The importance of self-care cannot be underestimated for nursing students when many are balancing work, study, financial demands, children and other everyday essentials of life. Clinical placements in Australia are unpaid, this is stipulated by the Australian Federal Government, Fair Work Ombudsman, deeming nursing placements as vocational and therefore legally unpaid.³³ Pressures such as requiring time off work to attend placements and meet the associated travel and accommodation expenses places students under a lot of pressure.

Student nurses are entering a profession where they will be caring for people and to do this, they also need to care for themselves. The student focus group highlighted this point for new students and their suggestions of access to peer support would be a positive pathway to facilitate this for students. This resonates with a social constructivism paradigm which identifies that learning occurs through collaborations with other students and peers.³⁴ It is noteworthy that they referred to social media as the best method of connecting students.

The project outcomes also identify areas requiring further investigation, which includes how aware student nurses are of the professional (and legal) obligations of being a registered student nurse at the point of course enrolment. Further exploration is needed of the potential existence of transition shock for students entering a BN course, and linking this to those student nurses who are entering the workforce during their studies. The next step for this research project is to investigate student nurses who have access to contextualised study preparation resources and provide a comparison of course satisfaction and attrition with those who do not have such access. It would also be advantageous for nursing curriculums to understand how student nurses use social media within their student groups for peer support. This would further highlight potential issues they are encountering as they progress through their studies and inform a reactive cycle by the university to counteract these.

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CONCLUSION

This project identifies a number of study preparation resources for the individual transitioning into nursing studies. With the majority of research and resources focused on the transition from student nurse to graduate nurse, it needs to be recognised that there is potential for challenges to role adaptation as individuals move into a profession that is both regulated at the student level and academically challenging. Students agreed that providing access to study preparation resources as soon as they received their university acceptance letter presents a supportive step in preparing the new student nurse for course challenges.

The project presents several relevant challenges for students new to an undergraduate nursing course aligned from both the academic and student perspective. The identified challenges primarily focussed on clinical requirements and academic skills, supporting these as areas that early student preparation would benefit. One main point of difference identified by students (in comparison to academics) was the benefit of connection to peer support groups using social media. This project suggests that time management and prioritisation of tasks, building academic skills, introduction to the nursing role and course expectations with a peer support pathway using social media will ultimately facilitate a more successful student journey.

Conflicts of Interest: The author reports no conflicts of interest.

Funding: This project received no funding.

Ethics: This project received approval from the Charles Darwin University, Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number H17136).

Consent: All participants in the online survey and focus groups provided consent to have their participation recorded and presented in this project.

Data access: Please direct data requests to the author, all reasonable requests for access will be considered.

Acknowledgements: This article acknowledges the following project team members who contributed to the original project plan.

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