

ENGENDERING CHANGE: EMPOWERING NURSE ACADEMICS TO TAKE PART IN A UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Any school of nursing, which is building upon a college-based teaching culture to create and maintain a viable research culture within a university, must build from within its own resources. This paper outlines a strategic approach to create a research culture in one such school. We describe the empowerment philosophy based on critical and feminist approaches that underpinned our strategy in transforming what was a teaching based college of advanced education culture to that of a university in which both research and teaching are required of its staff. A climate to facilitate change was created and a research support structure was put in place. The success of the strategies can be assessed by the increased participation in research activities, enhanced productivity and evidence of increasing confidence of staff.

INTRODUCTION

To create a research culture in nursing a number of complexities and challenges have to be addressed. Nursing is relatively new to academia, and the majority of nurses are women who face many obstacles in achieving academic recognition in any discipline (Gregor et al 1995). Nurse academics were recruited to Australian universities from hospital schools of nursing and clinical agencies where they were respected for their teaching and clinical skills. They were then expected to complete a Masters degree and then enrol in PhD degrees, which are now becoming a desirable, if not essential requirement for promotion.

The Flinders University School of Nursing and Midwifery was created from a merger of the former College of Advanced Education and Flinders University in 1991. Since 1975, the School had delivered well recognised diploma programs during the period when traditional hospital schools were closing. Since 1993 however, State and Federal Government economic rationalist policies have impacted to the extent that the School has halved in size. Educating a nursing workforce is still core business but finding income generation opportunities and increasing research activity are priorities.

The strongly held beliefs of staff that our mission is to offer effective educational programs to meet health workforce needs is being constantly challenged by Federal Government policies of economic and educational reform. In this emerging environment, teaching income is reduced and research activity is rewarded. This conflict between research and teaching orientations is echoed across Australia (Harman and Wood 1990) and inevitably continues to shape the emphasis in the University. The School has had to position itself to meet this requirement.

CREATION OF A CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

Using a critical theory perspective in which one seeks to understand the established order (Stevens 1989; Thompson 1987), it was seen that in the college system staff received many rewards for maintaining the status quo. For example, considerable power over colleagues (and students) was exercised through the ways in which teaching teams and curriculum processes operated. The relative isolation in each topic maintained the myths and mystery surrounding their particular teaching area. They retained job security through making 'the system' work.

However, when the School became part of the University, a different hegemonic institution in which different power relations existed, little was done to ensure that staff understood the nature of this radical cultural shift. Rewards for making the university system work are different - they are focussed on research effort rather than teaching. Staff experienced considerable alienation from the dominant culture of the university and received little support or mentoring from their new colleagues. The flow-on effects led to the development of the usual characteristics of an oppressed group. In particular, a lack of confidence in their own ability to defend and contribute to nursing knowledge through research ensured that the nurses on the staff had little opportunity to articulate a nursing position at curriculum or policy level or to access resources.

Once these structures were recognised by applying critical theory, it became possible to promote change. The perspective of critical theory showed that the School was part of a hegemonic institution which fostered the belief that the system of privilege, status and property it defended operated in the best interests of its staff and students, whose compliance or support was being elicited (Fay 1987; Burns and Grove 1993). Staff believed that if they worked hard they had jobs for life, they owned particular areas of academic study, that students are passive learners and want to be here, and so on. In this way the status quo was maintained. Thus, the ideology prevailing in the college culture did not serve the staff's true interests in the new one. It concealed and misrepresented the real conflicts of interests - and led staff in effect, to be conscious participants in their own domination. Moreover, as there was little attempt to properly integrate the School into the university, there was increasing alienation and feelings of disadvantage compared to their university colleagues. It is only now when economic rationalist policies are beginning to alter the relations of power in the School and the University that academic staff are willing to commit to structural and educational reform.

A critical interpretation as described above prevents personal blaming and sacrifice of individuals - it is nobody's fault. Importantly, it ensures a climate of

mutuality and open governance in which the nature of oppression is revealed so that it can be challenged and changed. A critical and feminist approach to management allows change to be focused on ideology and structure rather than on individuals. A transformative leadership style combined with open governance was employed in which the processes of transformation were visibly negotiated. This allows a climate of trust and respect among staff to move towards more constructive power relationships between people who must work together to serve their mutual interests in a university context.

For the last four years staff have been encouraged and facilitated to examine the available options for change. We have worked together to create a strategic plan and a business plan, workloads now include research and publication and significant fiscal changes have been made. People are not ideological dupes (Willis 1997). We are able to penetrate at the level of practice the elitism of the beliefs of those with more power even though we might knowingly choose to perpetuate those beliefs for our own 'survival' (Clare 1991). In this way nurse academics can take control of their career opportunities, workloads, teaching and research activities to compete with others in the university system.

DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH CULTURE

Research cannot happen in a vacuum. It requires a community of scholars where open, non-distortive communication allows discussion and debate about sometimes highly emotive issues. Staff (and students) need to be able to trust one another to the extent that *ideas* will be challenged, not personal idiosyncrasies. Excitement and enthusiasm accompany hard work and the application of research evidence in practice and teaching is expected. The new processes in the School encourage a spirit in which achievement is appropriately celebrated and setbacks acknowledged in a supportive climate.

Establishing this transformative program also requires the support of mentors who are secure enough in their own discipline to allow staff the freedom to explore and to be innovative in their approach to knowledge. The School has actively sought colleagues in the University and international scholars for this purpose.

The importance of the academic environment was borne out by an Australia wide study which found that a cooperatively managed structure, participative governance and collaborative leadership are critical factors in enhancing research performance (Ramsden 1994). Similarly, the Centre for Policy in Nursing Research in the United Kingdom identified the need for improved leadership, experience, expertise, confidence and infrastructure to improve research capacity in nursing (Traynor 1998). The crucial role of infrastructure was also

emphasised by the achievements of Western Sydney in the development of a research culture in the university and health authorities (Greenwood and Gray 1998). Beverland and Bretherton (1993) described the need for the implementation of a strategic process in the development of a research culture in a New Zealand Institute of Technology.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES

To facilitate change in the culture of the School, funding was negotiated from the University to create the position of Research Manager at postdoctoral level, a unique position in the University to augment the post of Foundation Professor of Nursing.

This position, taken up in early 1996, combined an academic and administrative role. Leadership and guidance was provided to staff in applying for funding, planning and conducting their research, and improving the outcomes by publication. Staff workloads were negotiated within a system that used the four categories for promotion as a guide. In this way time for research was made available and both clinical and classroom teaching were counted in staff workloads.

In 1997, research infrastructure funding funded additional research and administrative assistance and the creation of a Research Education Unit. This funding had not previously been available in the School. In addition, funding from the School budget and research income was directed to the Unit in recognition of the essential need to establish research in the School.

THE RESEARCH EDUCATION UNIT

Through 1998-2000, the Research Education Unit comprised up to 3.8 full time equivalent staff under the supervision of the Research Manager (now Director). These staff range from a relatively junior level administrative assistant to senior lecturer level. The broad range of skills of these staff enables the Research Education Unit to maintain its core business and provide a service to academics and senior students.

The core business comprises: maintenance of the school research database which records all research activities; management of the annual government required data collections; publication of research bulletins and an annual staff profile booklet; acting as a resource centre with references on writing, publishing and a comprehensive collection of journal guidelines for authors; hosting research forums with, both staff and visiting speakers; and, monitoring the units own services.

Staff in the unit assist with: identifying funding opportunities; the preparation of grant applications to

ensure that they are of high standard before submission; the preparation of ethics applications; planning research careers - particularly in obtaining an appropriate balance between postgraduate study and other research opportunities; choosing journals for publication; ensuring that manuscripts meet editorial requirements and dealing with the reviewers' comments; management of qualitative and quantitative data; literature searching; article retrieval; and, software basics.

While providing these services, the unit maintains its emphasis on research education. Its aim is to enable academic staff to become empowered by acquiring the necessary research skills. Staff are encouraged and expected to take final responsibility for their research.

IS RESEARCH EDUCATION MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

The extent of the understanding and knowledge of the role and services of the unit by the academic staff was sought in its first year of establishment. A questionnaire survey revealed that 97% of the respondents knew of most of the services provided by the unit. Over 70% of respondents considered that they had gained in skills and knowledge and felt more confident in conducting research. By mid 2000, the unit had completed 763 requests for assistance from 89% of the School's academic staff.

At present, the most popular service is that of article retrieval. Since the three library collections are geographically separated, the unit can markedly increase the efficiency of obtaining articles. Also popular are literature searching via electronic databases, reviewing of grant and ethics applications, and editorial support in publishing.

In 1998, an academic editor was appointed to work specifically with staff who had few or no publications in refereed journals. This resulted in sixteen papers being

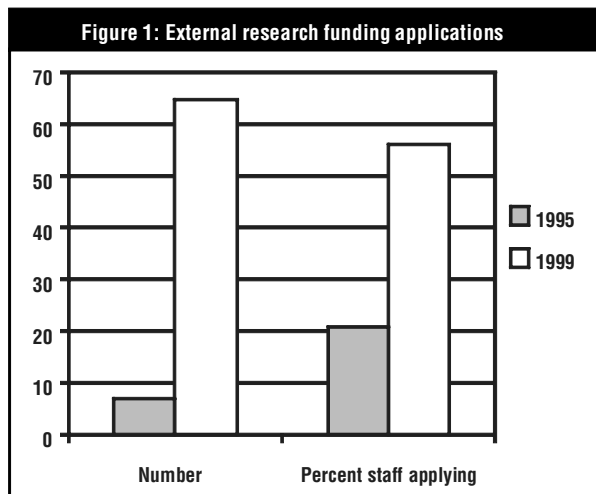
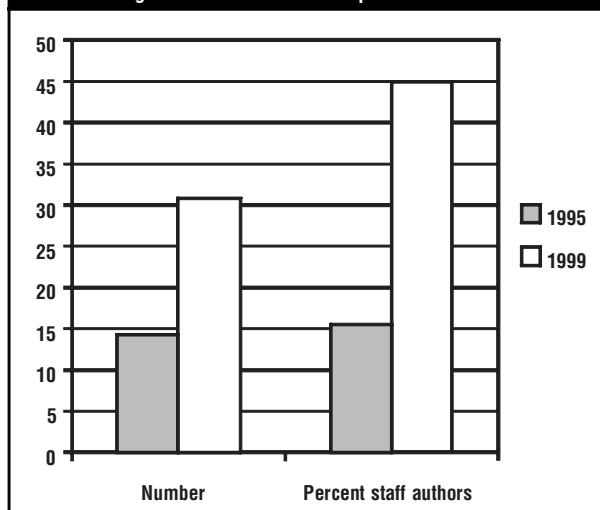


Figure 2: Refereed Journal publications



published by the beginning of 2000.

In Figures 1 and 2 the marked increase in external funding applications and refereed journal articles published from 1995 (prior to creating the position of Research Manager) to 1999 is illustrated. In keeping with the aim of empowering all staff to take part in research activities, the percentage of staff applying for external funds and publishing refereed journal articles has dramatically increased.

PLACING THE SCHOOL IN CONTEXT

It is important to keep in mind that many academic staff are not yet in a position to be successful in applying for external funding, given that the majority are not doctorally qualified. In 1995 only two nurse academics in the School held PhDs, increasing to 14 in mid 2000. Seventeen are still enrolled in research higher degrees, while the remainder hold or are enrolled in coursework Masters degrees. The relatively underqualified position of nursing academics was illustrated in a 1994 study in which 30% of the Australian academics whose highest qualification was a Bachelor's degree came from nursing (Deane et al 1996). Further, the low percentage of the School's nurse academics holding PhDs contrasts starkly with national 1996 data showing that an average of 47.7% of all Australian academics held PhD qualifications (Probert et al 1998).

The research productivity of women academics increased with qualifications and experience (Gregor et al 1995; Deane et al 1996). Thus, few in the School of Nursing have had the time necessary to acquire a sufficient publication record to compete for external research grant funding. The length of time needed is clearly pointed out by Emden (1998), who suggests that 'as most early career nursing researchers are currently mature age women

working full time', they will require longer than the accepted two to three years. She emphasises the need for nursing academics to be strategic in their approach. This was also documented by Roberts (1997) whose study of nurse academics clearly identified their expressed need for mentoring to assist them in entering the research culture.

The significance of the percentage (45% in 1999) of staff in the School contributing to publications (see Figure 2) is apparent when compared to a 1993-1994 study which showed that only 7.5% of Australian nursing academics had published in refereed journals (Roberts 1996). Further favourable comparison can be made with tenured, doctorally prepared nurse academics in a United States study in which 65% had published research articles in the preceding three years (Megel et al 1988).

Figures 1 and 2 show that not only are more grants being sought and more publications being produced, but, more importantly, an increasing percentage of staff are participating in these research activities. This is in keeping with the employed philosophy of empowering staff so that *all* can participate in and benefit from the new hegemonic culture in which participation in research is an essential element for career progression and promotion.

CONCLUSION

Many nurse academics need to overcome significant barriers to take their place in the university. The university culture of recognition of research by publications and grants presents hurdles to those from a practice and teaching background. The demand to complete higher degrees while carrying significant teaching, administrative and/or clinical loads places them under enormous pressure. Further the hard won newly completed PhD still does not equip the researcher with a track record of publications and funding. This study illustrates how structural change was introduced into the School body via transformative leadership and how strategic planning and sustained support in all aspects of research has enabled many staff to establish their research track records in a timely fashion.

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