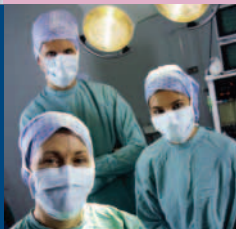




Myth Busters

National Nursing and Nursing Education Taskforce



N³ET Myth Busters is designed to increase public awareness and understanding of contemporary nursing/midwifery issues in the Australian context by providing facts that challenge common nursing/midwifery myths.

Myth: People 'drop out' of nursing more than other careers

Attrition, or people dropping out of professions, careers and courses of study, happens in all settings and sectors. Indeed, it is becoming less common for us to have just the one career or even one type of job in our life – something our grandparents would find surprising. While nursing is often regarded as having high attrition rates, evidence shows that attrition rates in nursing, either during study or after registration, are similar to, and often lower than, other careers in Australia.

Due to global nursing shortages and the ageing population, attrition at all points in the profession is of serious concern; however, stories about levels of attrition in nursing are sometimes misleading and out of context. There is often confusion about what is meant by 'attrition' and reports about nursing often confuse students with those who are registered and working as nurses.¹ So, it is important to separate out the Myths from the Facts when talking about attrition rates within nursing in Australia.

Myth: Students drop out of nursing more than other courses

THE FACTS:

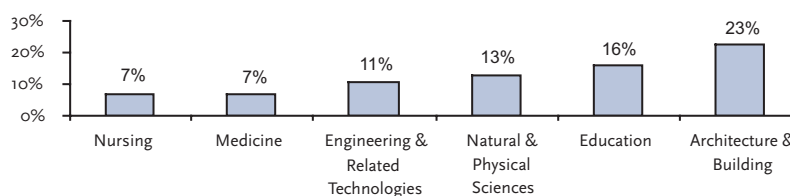
Students studying nursing in Australia have lower rates of attrition than fellow students in other health programs, such as behavioural science, physiotherapy and psychology, and they have a lower rate of attrition than other non-health based programs.

An ongoing study of young people in Australia has found that of all the students who commenced higher education (university course) in 1999–2000 there was an overall attrition rate of 14 per cent.

As shown in the table below, attrition of nursing students was the lowest recorded, at 7 per cent, compared to 23 per cent in architecture and building and 16 per cent in education.¹

The same study followed a sample group of students from 1995 to 2001 and found that 91 per cent of those studying within a health field, which included nursing, persisted in their original program of study. This figure was the second highest rate amongst 12 broad clusters of study.²

Figure 1: Per cent of attrition for all study participants who commenced higher education 1999/2000 by the end of 2001 (most recent course of study).



Source: Australian Council of Educational Research

There are many reasons for students leaving studies, such as changing courses, deferring or moving into the vocational, education and training (VET) sector, and rates differ between universities and between courses; however, most universities consider attrition rates of less than 30 per cent to be acceptable.^{3,4}

It is expected that movement across, and between, courses will occur as students make decisions about courses and careers, defer study for personal reasons or external factors like leaving for paid work. What is important is what happens over time to the net effect of that movement. The table below compares the number of students who start nursing courses (commencements) with those who complete (completions). This data shows that while the number of commencements and completions fluctuates, the gap between the two has not altered significantly from 1997 to 2003.

The N³ET Taskforce is committed to building an enhanced and sustainable healthcare system through the promotion of professional visibility and pride, quality education and regulation to nationally consistent standards and capacity in practice, education and research for all nurses and midwives across Australia.

www.nnnet.gov.au

C/- Department of Human Services, Level 20
50 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000

Phone: (03) 9096 8137

Fax: (03) 9096 9212

Email: erin.statz@dhs.vic.gov.au



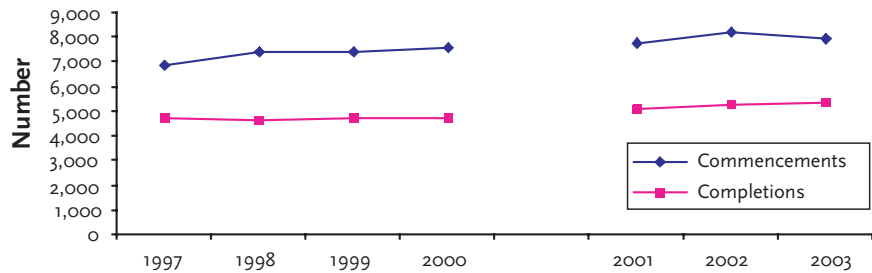
NOTES

- i There are two levels of nurse in Australia – Registered Nurses who undertake a three year university degree (Higher Education) before being eligible to be on the Register, and Enrolled Nurses who do a 12–18 month course of study at a Technical and Further Educational institute (TAFE) and private providers within the VET sector.
- ii After a period of time (generally five years) of not practising nursing/midwifery, there is a requirement to remove a nurse's/midwife's name from the register or roll.
- iii Nursing is the most rapidly ageing health occupation, with the proportion of workers aged 45 years and over increasing from 32 per cent in 1996 to 42 per cent in 2001¹. This means that retirement is one of the reasons for leaving nursing, an issue that will become even more significant over the next 10 years.
- iv During the decade 1988–98, the proportion of female nurses working part-time increased from 40 to 45.8 per cent. This tendency to work part-time is not confined to nursing. The proportion of females working part-time in allied health (including areas such as physiotherapy, medical imaging and occupational therapy) also increased from 39 per cent in 1988 to 44.7 per cent in 1998.
- v The unrealistic portrayal of nursing by the media and the lack of accurate information about the diversity and complexity of nursing work, is also believed to play a role in some students' and nurses' decisions to leave nursing.

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Figure 2: Australian citizens/residents commencing and completing nursing courses in Australia.



Source: N3ET analysis of DEST data

Note: In 2001, the field used to describe the type of course students study changed. A new field became available which is used to identify students studying courses leading to initial registration as a nurse.

Myth: Nurses finish their studies and then don't work as nurses

THE FACTS:

For those who have successfully completed studies in nursing, opportunities for securing full-time employment following graduation are among the best of all professions.

Just over 95 per cent of nursing graduates who completed study in 2003 were in employment within four months of completing their qualifications. This compares favourably with fields of study such as social work (78 per cent were in full-time employment) and education (79 per cent)⁵ and indicates that nurses are choosing to work within nursing rather than looking for work in non-nursing jobs.

It has been estimated that around 20 per cent of nurses leave the profession after the first year of practice^{6,7,8}. If this is the case, it is certainly a concern, particularly given the increasing need for more nurses to meet Australia's health care needs into the future. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of data on this issue for many professions, including nursing, and so it may be that nursing is no different to other professions. Indeed, studies of attrition amongst teachers in both the United States and in New South Wales estimate that up to 40 per cent of teachers leave the profession in their first three years of teaching.^{9,10}

Myth: There are too many qualified nurses who are not working in nursing anymore

THE FACTS:

Another aspect to this myth is that there is high attrition in the nursing workforce and that people leave nursing to take up other work. Again, while statements like this are made, there is little good data that allows us to know what is actually occurring within nursing or to compare nursing to other careers. The physiotherapy profession in Australia, for example, experiences attrition rates exceeding 20 per cent annually, which it attributes to factors such as burnout, disillusionment, stress, family responsibilities, and leakage to postgraduate medical courses.¹¹

It is known from the detailed data collected each year on nurses who are registered in each state and territory¹² that most registered nurses are actually employed within nursing. In 2002, 91 per cent of all

nurses who were registered were employed in nursing and, of the small proportion (9 per cent) who were not employed in nursing, more than half were not looking for any work or were overseas.^{11,13}

There are many reasons why people change study, change jobs, and change careers. Within nursing there are too many myths and too few good studies that allow us to understand what drives these decisions.

What factors affect people staying within a given workforce such as nursing?

- The need to leave the profession for periods of time for family care or responsibilities.
- The desire to move around to gain experience, travel overseas and re-enter at other points.¹⁴
- The ageing of the workforce.¹⁵
- The trend across Australia's workforce to part-time employment. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there continues to an increase in the proportion of people working part-time.^{15,v}
- Expectations and realities of working are often not matched, resulting in people leaving/changing professions or careers.^{16,17,v}
- Change in expectations of work or employment or so called 'generational issues' mean that younger employees are more likely to move from one job to another, and value flexibility, variety and choice in their careers compared to other generations.¹⁸

Accepting a certain amount of movement within and across professions and careers is normal. The focus is now on the recruitment (*how do we get people to join our organisation?*) and retention (*how do we get people to stay in our organisation/sector/profession?*). Governments across Australia recognise the need to recruit and retain nurses to meet the growing health care demands of our ageing population. Federal and State Governments are responding through increased funding of university places and implementing programs to promote recruitment of new nurses and retention of existing nurses, and to encourage nurses who have left the profession to return.

While nursing attracts many myths, the evidence demonstrates that attrition from nursing study and employment is not exceptional. Nursing, in fact, offers very good employment opportunities and experiences relatively high rates of retention in both study and employment.