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# Exploring and Improving Student Engagement in an Accelerated Undergraduate Nursing Program through a Mentoring Partnership: An Action Research Study

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## Abstract:

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) project aimed to engage students from an accelerated 'fast track' nursing program in a mentoring collaboration, using an interdisciplinary partnership intervention with a group of academics. Student participants represented the disciplines of nursing and paramedicine with a high proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students. Nine student mentors were recruited and paired with academics for a three-month 'mentorship partnership' intervention. Data from two pre-intervention workshops and a post-intervention workshop were coded in NVivo11 using thematic analysis. Drawing on social inclusion theory, a qualitative analysis explored an iteration of themes across each action cycle. Emergent themes were: 1) 'building relationships for active engagement', 2) 'voicing cultural and social hierarchies', and 3) 'enacting collegiate community'. The study offers insights into issues for contemporary accelerated course delivery with a diverse student population and highlights future strategies to foster effective student engagement.

**Keywords:** nursing, student engagement, social inclusion, diversity

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Reported and discussed in this paper are the results from a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study, designed as an exploratory project to increase understanding of and foster nursing, paramedic and interdisciplinary student engagement on campus. Worldwide, universities have adopted multiple initiatives to improve student engagement on campuses, through increasing diversity either in course offerings or in their student population (Kahu & Nelson, 2017; Moore-Cherry, Healey, Nicholson, & Andrews, 2016). In contemporary higher education, staff-student partnerships have become a focus for working with specific student groups to achieve goals such as fostering social inclusion and student involvement to improve academic success (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). These partnerships acknowledge the importance of building supportive campus community strategies both for staff and student personal development and engagement (Bambrick, 2002).

In mid-2016, nine academics and nine student mentors from the University participated in a three-month mentoring partnership. The aim of the partnership was to engage students and staff in a collaboration to explore community building on campus through a mentoring and leadership intervention to improve understanding of the development of a collegial community.

The study sought to answer the question: "Can a mentoring partnership between students and academics improve student engagement in an accelerated nursing program?"

Reported herein, are the themes that emerged from the study and proposed recommendations for improving community collegiality for both students and academics.

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## Background

This study was conducted at an urban, satellite campus in one Australian state, which is geographically remote from the main university campus in another state. Typical of the distributed university model described by Bambrick (2002), central administration for the courses, as well as student course pedagogy, financial and support services, are conducted from the main campus. Similar to other distributed models, at the satellite campus, staff and students experience a sense of geographic, administrative, collegial and personal isolation from the main campus. A number of additional factors that contribute to the lack of engagement and poor sense of community on the satellite campus include the accelerated nature of the degree programs offered, a predominance of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in the nursing cohort, a mix of blended and online programs and high staff attrition.

For the past six years, the university has offered an accelerated, two-year, six-semester degree course in both nursing and paramedicine at its main campus as well as at its satellite campus (study location). The satellite campus has captured a 'niche market' by offering one of very few accelerated programs available in both paramedicine and nursing. The nursing program attracts a large proportion of health care professionals who have trained overseas and seek a pathway to professional registration as their qualifications are not recognised in Australia. The increase in students in this cohort supports the trend across universities in Australia to invest in what is seen as a valuable nurse education investment (Glew, 2012). While accelerated study programs can facilitate faster entry into the professional domain, a key demand of such programs is the requirement for students to assimilate information at a rapid pace (Seldomridge & DiBartolo, 2005). The combined need for rapid adaptation to higher order thinking, cognitive load and time management required from accelerated degrees has been identified as challenging for some students (Coggins, Hays & Larson, 2016).

Managing the requirements for success in an accelerated program is particularly challenging for the high proportion of CALD students in the nursing cohort enrolled on campus, because, for most, English is their second language. Many also are required to travel long distances to the campus and are time poor due to their family and work responsibilities. There may be additional barriers to participation and success for CALD students such as lack of staff sensitivity to cultural differences, cultural miscommunication, feelings of under representation or isolation, fear of failure, difficulty in establishing peer relationships, intense loneliness and isolation and lack of professional role models (V. Wilson, Andrews, & Woodard Leners, 2006).

Highlighted in this discussion are the challenges with blending learning, accelerated pathways, long travel times for students, CALD students and the complexities of students balancing work and family commitments. These factors can lead students to develop feelings of isolation and disconnection, which can impede the development of relationships between students and staff and students and their peers (Wilson et al., 2006). Feelings of isolation amongst students can ultimately lead to feelings of rejection and even exclusion, particularly when there is a high proportion of relatively new academic staff. Increasing staff capability and confidence as mentors and leaders has been identified as highly significant for students, who benefit both directly from increased staff investment in the quality of their campus and indirectly through high staff morale (Bambrick, 2002; H. Wilson, Sanner, & McAllister, 2010).

## Literature review

The literature highlights the benefits for CALD students of developing relationships with academic staff and peers to increase engagement and success. In their study tailored to CALD nursing students, Boughton, Halliday, and Brown (2010) aimed to address communication and relational challenges by developing relationships with academic staff. Their relational mentoring strategies focused on communication, professional leadership, confidence building activities and support-seeking strategies (Boughton et al., 2010). A study conducted in Australia by Rogan and San Miguel (2013) concluded that innovative online programs tailored to CALD students can improve clinical language for English as a Second Language (ESL). Further intervention strategies are required that embed development of English, academic writing and clinical language as foundational aspects of curriculum design (Glew, 2012).

Internationally there is increasing evidence of successful university mentoring programs in nursing, both from academic staff and peer mentors. A study conducted in the UK found that nursing students valued the teaching, support and encouragement they received from academic staff as mentors, and this relationship met their expectations of mentorship (Foster, Ooms, & Marks-Maran, 2015). In his series examining mentorship in nursing in Gibraltar, Vinales (2015) concluded that mentors play a vital role in the education of nursing students across the academic and clinical environments (Vinales, 2015). When evaluating the success of their 14 week peer mentoring program in Turkey, Demir, Demir, Bulut, and Hisar Demir et al. (2014) found that

student mentees were supported in developing problem-solving skills, adaptation to the university environment, self-awareness, self-confidence and establishment of positive relationships with their student mentors. The Turkish study highlights the importance of mentoring in assisting students to manage stress by reducing anxiety and shifting from external control to internal control (Demir et al., 2014). A mentoring program in the US, 'MENTOR', is showing positive results for ethnically diverse nursing students, and both in Australia and New Zealand there is increasing evidence that mentoring provides a satisfying learning environment in a range of education and practice settings (Crooks, 2013; Harding & Mawson, 2017; Nowell, Norris, Mrklas, & White, 2017).

Development of crucial and beneficial relationships between students and academic staff may also be influenced by the design of the curriculum. In Australia, the shift from face-to-face learning to online and blended learning is a widespread phenomenon across universities. Students undertaking distance education are more likely to experience isolation and the literature indicates that the creation of communities is particularly challenging in online courses (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Those undertaking education away from the classroom are also less likely to complete their course owing to a sense of isolation, lack of support and dissatisfaction with teaching styles, as well as the weight of various commitments that characteristically burden those who seek out distance education (Rovai, 2002). Although some online learning is an integral part of the accelerated programs, the vocational nature of both the nursing and paramedicine disciplines requires a commitment to face-to-face learning and to preparation for clinical placements (Botma, Hurter, & Kotze, 2013). This teacher-student mentorship, which traditionally occurs face-to-face, is a crucial facilitator of professional socialization (Rogan & San Miguel, 2013). The feasibility of maintaining these mentoring relationships as university courses increasingly move to blended and online environments is an area of concern (Chen, Hannah, Bauer, & Provant-Robishaw, 2015; Manusco-Murphy, 2007).

In this study, academic staff believed a local collaboration with students based on mentorship and leadership would be beneficial to improve confidence and morale, create a sense of engagement within the campus community and augment several existing university wide programs aimed at fostering student engagement, promoting belonging and developing social inclusion.

## Theoretical framework

Social inclusion is "about bringing people on the margins 'in' ... [and] experiencing what happens on the 'inside' ... social inclusion is consistent with a positive human development approach to well-being and the creation of healthy, vibrant communities" (Freiler, 2001, p12). On an individual basis what happens on the inside is relevant to student achievement, and thus bringing people in, especially those on the margins, is critical to the development of an inclusive space, and student engagement. Hence, social inclusion provides an appropriate underlying theoretical frame as it focuses on 'what it means to be human: belonging, acceptance and recognition' (Freiler, 2001, p. 2). This conceptualisation of social inclusion is based on five premises: 1) recognising and respecting diversity and commonality; 2) human development through nurturing talents, skills and capacities; 3) engagement in decision making; 4) sharing social and material spaces; and 5) financial security (Freiler, 2001).

Bailey (2008) applied this social inclusion framework in educational settings articulating four dimensions: spatial; relational; functional and power dimensions (see Table 1). He argued that participation provides a focus of social activity, an opportunity to make friends, develop networks and reduce social isolation and that this can support the development of social capital. Social capital being 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.51). In particular, Bailey acknowledged the contribution of Bourdieu (1986) to debates around social capital and Bourdieu's view of social capital as a resource which yields power and argues that social inclusion involves both the growth of individuals and the expansion of social capital at a collective level (Maxwell, 2012).

**Table 1:** Social inclusion framework.

Dimension	Characteristics
Spatial	Closing of physical, social, cultural and economic distance
Relational	Sense of belonging and acceptance
Functional	Enhancement of knowledge, skills and understanding
Power	Agency and community capital

## Study design and methodology

### Method

This study used a pragmatic action research method with a participatory action research (PAR) design. This design was chosen because of its focus on co-generating knowledge between students and academics through collaborative communication processes, and the capacity to generate social action through increased participants' control over their own situation (Leviin & Greenwood, 2001). In keeping with PAR processes, research planning, data collection, and data analysis occurred in iterative and reflexive cycles based on the preceding stage of the project, resulting in action to change practice (Fabbro, Mitchell & Shaw, 2015; Lea et al., 2014; Stratton et al., 2015). The PAR methodology aligned with the aims of the researchers, with its active approach to inquiry, collaborative decision-making and participation in practical outcomes (Heron & Reason, 1997).

### Participants

A team of nine academics based on the satellite campus volunteered to participate in the research project. These academics, from the disciplines of nursing, paramedicine, health science and bioscience, have been working on campus for between six months and four years at the start of the project and have an average of twenty years' experience in tertiary education settings. Existing final year nursing and paramedic student mentors from the university's established mentor program were contacted by email and phone and invited to join the project. Subsequently nine student mentors were recruited as a convenience sample, ensuring equal gender, CALD and disciplinary representation through the selection process (See Table 2).

**Table 2:** Participant identification codes.

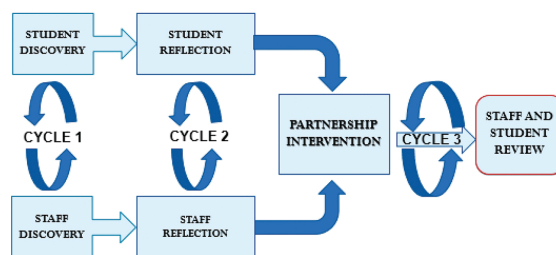
Identification Codes	Participant Category	Age	Gender	CALD
SMN#1;2	Student Mentor	40–45	Male	Yes
SMN#3;4	Student Mentor	30–35	Female	No
SMP#5	Student Mentor	25–30	Female	No
SMP#6;7;8	Student Mentor	20–25	Female	No
SMP#9	Student Mentor	35–40	Male	No
A#1;4;7	Academic	60–65	Male	No
A#2;8	Academic	40–45	Female/Male	No/Yes
A#3	Academic	50–55	Female	No
A#5	Academic	55–59	Female	Yes
A#6	Academic	35–40	Male	No
A#9	Academic	60–65	Male	No

### Ethics

Ethical clearance for academic and student mentor participation in the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (No.H11576). All participants attended information sessions where the project was explained, and information and consent forms provided, confirming they understood the study terms before they agreed to participate.

### Design

The study was conducted from July to December 2016. Discovery, reflection and review workshops mirrored the cyclical PAR design (see Figure 1 below).



**Figure 1:** Participatory action research design.

## Research question

The study sought to answer the question: "Can a mentoring partnership between students and academics improve student engagement in an accelerated nursing program?"

The discovery and reflection workshops were conducted prior to the partnership intervention and were attended by academic and student mentors separately. In these workshops academic and student participants separately developed 'terms of engagement' for the partnership. All participants came together for the final review workshop post-intervention where each individual partnership shared their reflections. The workshops were semi-structured, with facilitators using a table of topics to guide the discussion, including activities around leadership and mentorship frameworks, barriers to student engagement and issues for students at the campus (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Workshop topics.**

Workshop	Frameworks and Topics
Discovery	<b>Adaptive leadership</b> Value, purpose, process; leading adaptive change
Reflection	<b>Peer mentoring</b> Shared core skills – self management of learning, skills and performance Listening actively, building trust, encouraging, identifying future goals
Review	<b>Terms of engagement</b> Strategies based on engagement, connection, participation, attendance

## Workshop frameworks

In the workshops, the facilitators used leadership and mentorship frameworks as foundational tools to encourage dialogue about leadership and mentorship experience, strategically building on the existing university initiatives aimed at improving student engagement. As a basis for transitioning students and staff to collaborative decision-making, the frameworks used were: 1) adaptive leadership that focused on surviving change and wrestling with the normative questions of value, purpose and process (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009); and 2) skills-based mentoring that encourage self-management of learning, skills and performance (Helyer & Lee, 2012; Parsloe & Wray, 2001). Questions asked, and topics covered in these workshops started with what leadership and mentoring meant to participants. They then progressed to what 'engagement' involved and how relationships between academics and students might develop to facilitate engagement, thus creating a more inclusive campus community (See Table 3).

This approach was chosen because the existing mentorship programs on campus were central structures that supported student engagement, yet the student mentors had very little direction or training for enacting their mentorship roles on this satellite campus.

## The partnership intervention

Prior to the reflection workshop, student mentor and academic participants reviewed the transcripts from the discovery workshop. Reflection on these transcripts in the reflection workshop formed the foundation for developing the partnership intervention 'terms of engagement'. During the three-month partnership intervention, relationships between the academics and students were developed and intervention outcomes focused on

building community engagement. Intervention outcomes were captured in each partner's reflective narrative shared during the review workshop.

## Data collection

Qualitative data were collected from five audio-recorded workshops and written partner reflections. The study used a qualitative inductive design to explore iteration of themes across each action plan cycle (see Figure 1). NVIVO Version11, a qualitative management software, produced data driven codes and themes, which were then compared and converged across staff and student mentor participant quotations. To achieve data integrity four academic staff participants independently conducted thematic analysis.

## Findings

The emergent themes from the workshops, summarised in Table 4, are: 1) 'Building relationships for active engagement'; 2) 'Voicing disciplinary, cultural and social hierarchies'; and 3) 'Enacting collegiate community'.

**Table 4:** Major themes and subthemes.

Emerging Themes	Codes - Academics	Codes - Student Mentors
<i>'Building relationships for active engagement'</i>	Authority, power differential, boundaries Relationships and active listening Cultural identity and diversity Teamwork and mentorship Social positioning Values and integrity	Knowledge and expertise Leading others, role of mentorship Collegiate culture Learning from each other Active listening Building trust Engagement
<i>'Voicing disciplinary, cultural and social hierarchies'</i>	Role of mentorship Relationships and building trust Creating a space Allowing students to lead	Role of mentorship Knowledge and expertise Power differential, boundaries Engagement Social inequities across disciplines Power hierarchies
<b>Codes - Academics and Student Mentors</b>		
<i>'Enacting collegiate community'</i>	Finding voice Structured mentoring relationships Connectedness, engagement, outcomes focus Vulnerability, power differential Cultural diversity	

## Building relationships for active engagement

Themes from the discovery phase of the study reflect the different social positions of the academics and student mentors but converge within the relational dimensions of engagement, and specifically on the importance of 'how you engage in that relationship' (A#3). Academics identified a tension between their position of authority within the university and how the partnership mentor role, which was described as 'collegial' or mutually respectful in the leadership framework, presented. One academic stated, 'I was thinking about myself as a leader because when you said authority I think maybe one of the challenges in this project is to sort out the boundaries' (A#1).

The idea of delving into a mentorship relationship with students without clear structure was daunting to some academics. One academic asked: 'What am I mentoring them in? What is it that I'm doing? What is the basis of the relationship?' (A#4). Reflecting on teaching as a relational practice, academics identified that boundaries

were key to safe and respectful engagement with student mentors but should not be '*[a] power ... [or a] privileged position*' (A#5).

'You have to be strategic in terms of developing relationships ... I really think the structural stuff is always important ... because people aren't sitting in vacuums. ... you can't disengage from the fact that ... we hold these positions of authority' (A#2).

The academics agreed that during the partnership intervention, they could move between the roles of mentors and mentees and allow the student mentors to lead.

In their discovery workshop student mentors focused on the qualities of an effective leader. They identified that demonstrating disciplinary knowledge and expertise was essential for leadership, and that knowledge was foundational to building trust. Hence for student mentors trust was seen to be essential in collegial relationships, to: '*Actually get a group of people to ... follow the leader into an unknown ... [and be] willing to take a risk*' (SM#9).

While student participants easily identified qualities and capacities of an effective leader, they voiced concern around their capability to mentor other students:

When you're leading ... whether you want to be a member of the top of the community to guide or help first you have to have knowledge of what you're doing ... knowledge is very important ... (SM#1).

Hence student mentors felt that when building relationships for engagement disciplinary knowledge was foundational, but the ability to be reflective, collaborate and create positive spaces for learning was also prioritised. One student mentor explained:

*The more reflective we are within ourselves the better we can facilitate or lead other people's learning. You obviously ... [need] the knowledge, but ... it's not about my time to shine. It's about my time to help ... people work better collaboratively, they have more confidence, it's a lot more of a positive space ... it's okay to be wrong and I don't have to know everything* (SM#4).

## Voicing disciplinary, cultural and social hierarchies

During the reflection phase of the study, academics identified the importance of listening as central to preparation for the mentor partnership, particularly their role in creating space for students, '*giving that power to them ... giving them voice*' (A#6). In considering how to elicit the student voice and '*ensuring those voices will be more heard*' (A#7), the differences in professional cultural identities and social positioning on campus between nursing and paramedic students surfaced. When describing the nursing culture one academic stated: '*Nursing has a very understated culture ... they do a whole bunch of leadership but they're not forward and proud like the paramedics*' (A#2). This statement was explored by another academic who suggested that the nursing culture is, '*seen but not heard, you know it's hidden under layers that we need to unravel for the nursing students*' (A#6). Academic participants then contemplated how hierarchies could be overcome with such statements as, '*It's about 'two people exploring ... and learning from each other*' A#9, '*it's how you walk your walk*' (A#6) and '*transcend the discipline*' (A#8).

In their reflection workshop student mentors began their discussion by exploring what engagement meant to them, particularly in relation to mentoring. For some student mentors engagement is founded in support, '*because you're basically taking a step on a path that you're not sure about, especially with [the] fast-tracked course*' (SM#2). Other student mentors felt that the degree, '*will change you on a very core level especially in health*' (SM#8), that in clinical placement '*with the things you see you need support*' (SM#7) and the mentor mentee relationship '*is a really important component of what we do and what we should be bringing ... [to the degree]*' (SM#8). Student mentors agreed that students from CALD backgrounds need additional support, especially in the first year of the degree. This raised the issue of support from the main campus as voiced by one student mentor, '*Realistically looking at it, do you think [the main campus] sees ESL as such a big problem? Considering ... [they don't] have a very diverse culture*'. (SM#3)

The focus of the student mentor reflection workshop then shifted to the disciplinary and cultural differences between cohorts at the satellite campus, as student mentors identified that the paramedic cohort was more engaged with mentors than the nursing cohort, and in campus life generally. Student mentors believed that not only were traditional disciplinary and social boundaries influencing campus relations, the nursing cohort experienced the additional challenges of cultural diversity. One CALD nursing student mentor recalled how his limited English and the time taken to complete assessments had impacted on opportunities for social engagement on campus. '*We are receiving a lot of support but still support was not enough like in my first two semesters when we start, ... 80 % [of the cohort] were born overseas ... we had problems with our assignments.*' (SM#1). These challenges related to ESL placed enormous pressures on CALD nursing students as there were '*a million students*' (SM#1) waiting for assistance from student support staff and:

*for this campus it was really new students for the first two semesters it was really hard because majority of students 60 % in every class was from every other country. They had a lot of problems. Two of my class mates gave up in the first semester. (SM#1)*

## Enacting collegiate community

In the post-intervention workshop, student mentors led the discussion by sharing reflections from their partnership intervention with the group. One CALD student mentor averred:

*We can really focus on building a community as a group of people ... things that we can implement that would be more workable for people who have very demanding lives outside of the study (SM#1).*

Structured mentoring relationships were identified as essential to ensure that first-year students get early help to offset the 'constant stress' (A#3) of accelerated programs. Moreover, while student mentors demonstrated confidence and appeared to have found their voice in the context of the research group, they highlighted some serious challenges in their confidence to enact collegial relationships and identified this was related to a lack of support in both clinical and academic settings. One nursing student mentor reflected on her feelings of disconnection that intensified when attending a clinical practice placement off campus. She wondered, 'How am I meant to be in this position to be mentoring someone at a time at Uni when I feel most abandoned?' (SM#3) Another nursing student mentor suggested instead of starting by 'creating a program', mentorship needs to start with strategies for collaboration, including dialogue and relationships that consider, 'How do we just begin a conversation and how do we create a collective?' (SM#4)

Student mentors once again highlighted the challenges of building a collective on campus by emphasising the cultural and social differences between the paramedic and nursing cohorts. As an example, a paramedic student mentor reported how 'pub-crawls' (SM#5) were key to creating a sense of community amongst her peers, while a CALD nursing student asked, 'What is a pub-crawl?' (SM#2) Further insights about cultural differences within the nursing cohort were reflected by another nursing student mentor who responded, 'You guys are on pub crawls, we don't even know each other's names' (SM#4). One CALD nursing student mentor who had experienced challenges engaging online exclaimed:

*How can we connect? ... My speaking is accented ... and this is the matter of disconnection. ... 80% [of my CALD classmates] they are not feeling comfortable. I asked one of them why are you not asking on discussion boards? She said: "one mistake they attack me" (SM#1).*

In an attempt to address this statement, another student mentor asked the question, 'So the main thing is how we establish relationships, create a sense of connectiveness and trust, a holistic campus and build a community?' (SM#4)

Finally, the following statement from a CALD student mentor concludes:

*It's very important because you're basically taking a step on a path that you're not sure about it, you don't know what to expect especially with fast-tracked course. So you need support as much as you can get. (SM#2).*

## Discussion

The study findings demonstrate the potential for a partnership that engages nursing students collaboratively with academics as a pathway to improving opportunities for student engagement and success. From 'the safety' of the partnerships, student mentors could voice issues related to campus hierarchies across disciplines that emerged as major challenges for enacting collegial community. Bailey's (2008) social inclusion framework provides a lens to examine the project's findings, the partnership intervention and future strategies as they unfolded during the PAR democratisation process. The links between the iterative PAR process and the social inclusion model are established through the dimensions of relations, function, power and space.

During the discovery phase, academics and student mentors shifted their attention from leadership frameworks to interpersonal qualities of leadership/mentorship roles, where positive relationships could provide the conditions for relational inclusion (Bailey, 2008). Academics highlighted the need for boundaries and structure within the project, while student mentors articulated the importance of trust and safety (relational aspects of inclusion) as key aspects of developing mentorship capacity. All participants spoke about the centrality of developing trust and this can be related to the development of social relationships and the formation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Both academic and student mentor participants described existing relationships on campus positively and the findings illustrate that these relationships were built on trust with careful attention to the social positions of academics and student mentors within the institution.

Initially, in the discovery phase, student mentors focused on the importance of building skills and capacity, emphasising their needs as leaders and mentors to develop appropriate skills. The development of knowledge and expertise can be likened to the functional dimension of social inclusion (Bailey, 2008). This dimension involves increasing capacity, capability and competence (personal development) through the development of skills, talents, knowledge and understanding. This occurs through the development of leadership and team work and results in the development of improved self-esteem and self-confidence (Maxwell, 2012).

During the reflection phase, leadership and mentoring were described by academics as offering a chance to create opportunities and space for students to have a voice (spatial dimension), to foster long term relationships (relational dimension) and identify the challenge of overcoming power differences (power dimension). As a whole, students identified the values of belonging as inclusive with 'ownership', and intimated that these values played a significant role in affecting a number of aspects of their interdisciplinary collegiality, and ultimately their individual development and academic performance. These values also assisted to provide psychological empowerment for academics who are reasonably new to the work environment and culture (Singh, Pilkington, & Patrick, 2014).

Also in the reflection phase, the differences in social positioning and traditional disciplinary hierarchies between nursing and medicine emerged in the relationships between nursing and paramedic student cohorts on campus. Both academics and student mentors agreed that a peer mentorship program based on interdisciplinary collaboration has potential to work through the relational and power dimensions of inclusion, thus breaking down this hierarchy on campus and preparing for interdisciplinary team practice that overcomes historical workforce hierarchies (Nancarrow & Borthwick, 2005; Orchard, Curran & Kabene, 2005). This would also allow students who have a shared experience of the accelerated program to connect, fostering inclusion and leading to practical support through teamwork.

In the final review workshop, student mentors identified exclusionary factors for CALD nursing students, many of whom were studying at an academic level in English for the first time (functional dimension). This, together with the demands of the accelerated program, impacts on their ability to gain knowledge, reduces confidence and can result in a sense of isolation and social exclusion. A further example of social exclusion for CALD students was the lack of social connection with peers through events such as the pub-crawl, an iconic social event in the university environment in western society, but not for non-alcoholic drinking students. These cultural differences reflect the findings of other researchers who attempted to address these issues for CALD students (Boughton et al., 2010; V. Wilson et al., 2006).

By the final workshop, the importance of community connectedness, of 'walking together', recognising cultural differences and a shared vision through partnership came forward as critical factors for diverse nursing students. The positive experience of the mentoring partnership intervention developed a greater understanding of the cultural diversity of students on campus, providing a greater recognition and sense of belonging amongst the diverse student cohort (V. Wilson, Andrews & Woodard Leners, 2006).

## Implications

The purpose of this study is to explore, through a mentoring partnership intervention and social inclusion framework, ways to improve student engagement for diverse students in an accelerated nursing degree program. As indicated in the findings the study has identified the importance of staff relationships and capacity building, in engaging with students to build the social capital of individuals, the campus and the university. The study has highlighted new ways of working that contribute to staff, student and institutional understanding of fostering student engagement on campus, thus enhancing student success. In recognition of the importance of student engagement the study findings have underpinned successful application for further action research cycles to extend the project, with the long-term aim to inform local understanding and contribute to current, institutional student engagement and retention programs.

## Conclusion

It is acknowledged that this paper is limited to a small cohort of students in an accelerated pathway and the analysis highlights, rather than generalises, strategies that 'start with partnerships'. In the context of this study, the partnerships became a way of working with and giving voice to nursing students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, to challenge social hierarchies, express agency and develop relationships as a basis for collaboration, teamwork and practice support. The partnerships were identified as important, not only in helping to mitigate the feelings of isolation and dislocation experienced by students engaged in the accelerated

program, but also in starting the process of collaboration as co-creators in their learning and teaching experience.

It is therefore proposed that when addressing challenges of accelerated nursing and paramedic undergraduate degree programs, a mentoring partnership can provide a useful resource in facilitating student success and retention. Students highlighted the importance of nurturing, sustained relationships between themselves as students and academics and between students and other students.

As a backdrop of rising interest in student engagement in the educational interface, particularly for CALD students, it is recommended that further work be undertaken to examine and review institutional practices such as using traditional curriculum design for accelerated, content rich courses with high numbers of students for whom English is an additional language.

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