

# **The experience of new graduate nurses in rural practice: A phenomenological study**

**Jacqueline Lea**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
degree of Masters of Nursing (Honours) of the  
University of New England.

May 2003  
© Jacqueline Lea

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgement is given to the following people for their encouragement, support and assistance through the writing of this thesis.

Dr Mary Cruickshank	Principal supervisor
Associate Professor Jenny McParlane	Second supervisor
Irene Sharpham	Editor
Sue Jacka	Formatting

I would like to thank the ten participants who took time out from their busy lives to share their experiences with me.

Special thanks must also go to my husband Jim and my children, Joey, Hannah and Liam whose patience, encouragement, love and support have helped to make this work possible. Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my Dad.

## STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

*The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that it does not contain any material that has been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.*

.....  
  
.....

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1.	Background to the study	1
1.2.	Purpose of the study	3
1.2.1.	Research questions	4
1.3.	Significance of the study	4
1.4.	Methodology	5
1.5.	Limitations and key assumptions	6
1.6.	Organisation of the thesis	6
1.7.	Definitions of terms	7
1.8.	Conclusion	9
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Literature review</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1	Section 1	12
2.1.1.	Rural nursing practice in Australia	12
2.1.2.	The new graduate nurse in rural practice	13

2.2	Section 2	15
2.2.1.	Role Theory: A theoretical framework	15
2.2.2.	Role stress	19
2.2.3.	Role conflict	20
2.2.4.	Role ambiguity	21
2.2.5.	Role incongruity	21
2.3.	Section 3	22
2.3.1.	Role transition for the new graduate nurse	22
2.3.2.	Professional socialisation and reality shock	22
2.3.3.	Theory practice gap	25
2.3.4.	Enculturation of new graduate nurses	32
2.3.5.	Graduate nurse programs	35
2.3.6.	The transition process for graduate nurses in the rural workforce	40
2.4	Conclusion	45
 <b>Chapter 3 Methodology</b>		<b>47</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>47</b>
3.1.	Justification for the research design and methodology	47
3.2.	Reflective journal	50
3.3.	Setting	51
3.4.	Sampling procedure	52
3.5.	Data collection procedure	53
3.6.	Interview schedule	56
3.7.	Data analysis procedure	58
3.8.	Ethical considerations	59

3.9. Rigour and trustworthiness of the study	60
3.10. Methodological issues and limitations	61
3.11. Conclusion	62
<b>Chapter 4 Data analysis</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>4. Introduction</b>	<b>63</b>
4.1. Profile of participants	66
4.2. The journey of transition	67
4.3. Theme 1	69
4.3.1. Stage 1: 'Having rural connections'	69
4.3.2. Summary	74
4.4. Theme 2	75
4.4.1. Stage 2: Socialising to the registered nursing role in rural practice settings'	75
4.4.2. Sub Theme 1: Ward culture within rural settings	75
4.4.3. Summary	84
4.4.4. Sub Theme 2: The workload in rural practice settings	84
4.4.5. Summary	88
4.4.6. Sub Theme 3: Level of responsibility in rural practice settings	88
4.4.7. Summary	95
4.5. Theme 3	96
4.5.1. Stage 3: 'Expectations of rural graduate nurse program'	96
4.5.2. Sub Theme 1: Preparedness for rural practice	97
4.5.3. Summary	101
4.5.4. Sub Theme 2: Expectations and unmet promises of rural graduate nurse programs	101
4.5.5. Summary	110
4.6. Conclusion	111

<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Discussion and conclusions</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>114</b>
5.1.	Major findings and conclusions	114
5.2.	Implications and recommendations for undergraduate nursing education	117
5.3.	Implications for the recruitment and retention of graduates within rural practice	121
5.4.	Implications for nursing practice	122
5.5.	Recommendations for further studies	123
5.6.	Conclusion	125
<b>List of references</b>		<b>126</b>
<b>Appendices</b>		<b>137</b>
Appendix 1		137
Appendix 2		141
Appendix 3		143
Appendix 4		145

## APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Information sheet for participants and consent form	137
Appendix 2	Participant profile sheet	141
Appendix 3	Participant letter	143
Appendix 4	Interview schedule	145



## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1: Profile of participants

67

## ABSTRACT

In Australia, rural nursing is a distinct practice and rural nurses constitute the largest group in the rural health workforce. However, the rural workforce is ageing, the turnover of nurses in rural areas is high, and attracting nurses to these areas is increasingly difficult. The possibility of attracting a substantial number of nurses from metropolitan and urban areas remains remote whilst there is an overall shortage of nurses. Thus, rural health services are experiencing recruitment and retention difficulties, and a lack of attention to these workforce issues from universities, rural and remote nursing organisations, and the Federal Government has further compounded the situation. Despite this, little is known about the recruitment and retention of new graduates in rural health areas and the potential long-term investment they could offer to rural health services. In addition, there has been very little research conducted which specifically focuses on the new graduate's experience of rural nursing practice. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the journey of transition for new graduate nurses in rural practice and to develop an understanding of the meanings that graduates have of their transition experience.

This phenomenological study was conducted in eight rural health care facilities of northern NSW. Role Theory and its associated concepts of professional socialisation and reality shock provided the theoretical framework that guides this study. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with ten new graduate nurses who were making the role transition from student to registered nurse within rural practice settings. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, and three major themes emerged from the data, which represented stages of the graduates' journey of transition.

The findings from this study demonstrated that there are specific aspects of the transition experience that are unique to graduate nurses within rural practice settings. Furthermore, issues within rural practice settings that impact on the recruitment and retention of new graduate nurses in the rural nursing workforce were identified. It is hoped that the findings from this study will be utilised by nurse academics when preparing undergraduate students for rural nursing practice and also by area health services to assist with planning and implementing graduate nurse programs so that new graduate nurses will be retained within the rural nursing workforce. Finally, this study highlights the overall recruitment and retention problems faced by the rural nursing workforce which will add significantly to the nursing literature and alert the nursing profession to the current employment issues faced by rural graduates.