Commentary

Standing out from the crowd: Improving employability through peer programs and continuing professional development in undergraduate paramedic programs

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Abstract

This commentary discusses two valuable extracurricular opportunities that exist for undergraduate paramedic students to further develop the attributes and capabilities necessary for becoming more competitive in gaining graduate employment in Australian ambulance services. The authors propose that participation in peer programs and CPD while at university offer a relatively simple, cost-effective and equitable opportunity for students to improve their competitiveness for employment with Australian ambulance services.

Keywords:

employability; peer program; continuing professional development; CPD

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Introduction

The continuing professionalisation of paramedicine has significantly transformed the Australian paramedic tertiary education landscape since the first degree conversion program was offered at Charles Sturt University in 1994 (1). Currently, there are 17 universities offering undergraduate paramedic programs previously accredited by the Council of Ambulance Authorities that allow graduates eligibility for national registration with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). Authority for accreditation of educational programs has subsequently transferred to the Paramedicine Accreditation Committee under the auspice of the Paramedicine Board of Australia. Proportionately, final year paramedic student enrolments have risen to 2692 in 2018 representing a 274% increase over the previous 5 years (2). Early indicators also predict a marked increase in university applications in 2021 as current Year 12 students defer plans for the traditional gap year due to COVID-19 and global travel restrictions (3). Coupling these higher education factors with a national attrition rate for Australian jurisdictional ambulance services under 3% (2), competition to secure a graduate position is high. Therefore, a reasonable question for an undergraduate paramedic student seeking a graduate paramedic appointment is: 'How can I stand out from the crowd?'

We propose that tacit, yet valuable extracurricular opportunities exist for undergraduate paramedic students to further develop the attributes and capabilities necessary for becoming more competitive in gaining graduate employment in Australian ambulance services. A reasonable approximation of the key attributes and capabilities required for graduate employment in Australia can be distilled from a simple thematic analysis of the selection criteria for the three ambulance services on the eastern seaboard (4-6) that employ four out of five of Australia's jurisdictionally-based paramedic workforce (2). The key attributes and capabilities include communication and teamwork, aptitude for problem-solving, planning and organisation, and commitment to clinical proficiency.

Peer programs and continuing professional development (CPD) activities are examples of two extracurricular endeavours that may improve employability prospects by offering students an opportunity to further develop the attributes and capabilities sought by ambulance services. Peer programs refer to a suite of peer-to-peer activities that enhance the student experience through social learning opportunities. Common examples include facilitating study sessions, mentoring and coaching. Arguably, students in peer leadership roles are best placed to develop their key attributes and capabilities. For instance, a peer leader responsible for facilitating a study session engages in authentic and collaborative relationships with other students, academics and professional staff (communication and teamwork) in negotiating workspaces, rostering peer learning

facilitators and developing learning activities for participants (problem-solving, planning and organisation).

Continuing professional development is another option for enhancing a student's employability prospects, particularly in demonstrating a commitment to clinical proficiency. Engaging in CPD demonstrates commitment to clinical proficiency by enabling the individual to self-identify knowledge gaps, complete a suitable learning activity and partake in self-reflection. Learning activities that meet regulatory standards for inclusion in one's CPD portfolio include but are not limited to: attending an industry conference, completing an industry specific online course, listening to a relevant podcast, or reading relevant journal articles. On completion of the activity, the learner should record a reflection about how the activity has benefited their development. Reflection is considered essential to self-directed learning (SDL) and is integrated commonly into adult learning practices (7). Additionally, critical reflection is linked to SDL, lifelong learning (LLL), CPD, professionalism and the proficiency of clinical skills (7,8).

Paramedics are required by the Paramedicine Board of Australia to engage in a minimum of 30 hours CPD annually to renew registration (9). While we acknowledge that paramedics registering for the first time in Australia do not need to meet this standard (9), it is noted that undergraduate student paramedics are already registered with the National Board (10). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that a student who has engaged in extracurricular, self-directed CPD activities has demonstrated a commitment to lifelong learning and clinical proficiency beyond the prescribed university curriculum. Engagement with CPD also communicates to a potential employer the ability of the applicants to meet some of the regulatory requirements of their future career.

We contend participation in peer programs and CPD appreciably enhance the employability of undergraduate paramedic students. While other options for extracurricular enhancements exist, peer programs and CPD offer a relatively simple, cost-effective and equitable opportunity for students to improve their competitiveness for employment with Australian ambulance services. Certainly, graduate paramedics may also explore growing opportunities for employment in the private sector and non-traditional roles. However, further research is required to better understand the translational effectiveness of the extracurricular experience with respect to paramedic employability. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, peer programs and CPD should be seen as simple options for prospective paramedic job applicants to stand out from the crowd.

Competing interests

The authors report no competing interests. Each author of this paper have completed the ICMJE conflict of interest statement.

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