

The Experiences of Newly Qualified Sonographers: A Case Study Design

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Abstract:

Over the last two decades, ultrasound imaging and practice has undergone a significant transformation shaped by cultural, sociological, technological and educational influences. The continual rise in the demand for ultrasound services has had several reverberations and ramifications for the dynamics, constitution and wellbeing of the sonography workforce. Moreover, the adoption of ultrasound technology by various professionals has resulted in professional fission and fusion with both vertical and horizontal substitution within this heterogeneous workforce. It is against this backdrop that newly qualified sonographers enter the workforce. One under-researched area is an understanding of the experiences of these newest members of this multi-disciplinary workforce.

This qualitative research utilised a case study methodology to explore the experiences of newly qualified sonographers. The participants were from a multi-disciplinary background including radiographers, midwives, nurses and clinical scientists. The data collected via face to face interviews, work log diaries and researcher field diary was analysed using thematic analysis. A conceptual framework was initially developed to guide this research from three main dimensions namely individual, organisational and professional. The themes depicting the trajectory of the newly qualified sonographers during their first year of ultrasound practice were then embedded into this conceptual framework to explore issues that impact on the experiences these sonographers. Three main overarching themes arose from the data analysis and were associated with processes such as transition, role development, and maintaining competency and credibility. The eight subthemes related to reality shock, role adjustment, role contribution, role (re)definition, transitional support, maintaining skills, professional relationships, emerging occupational identities and professional recognition and regulation.

The knowledge and understanding generated has broader benefits not only for the individual professional but also for ultrasound educational curricula, individual organisations and professional bodies. For higher education institutions, there are areas identified that could be incorporated in the curriculum to improve the preparedness of newly qualified sonographers for practice. For organisations there is a need to develop specific preceptorship programmes in the initial period of transition whilst drawing upon theories such as cognitive apprenticeship and situated learning to facilitate role development after qualification. To support a multidisciplinary ultrasound workforce, the fostering of communities of practice should be encouraged as a social learning environment to facilitate knowledge exchange and maintaining competencies and credibility. Professional bodies should promote strategies to develop future roles and career development of sonographers to create a greater sense of professional pride, belonging and security whilst supporting both uni-professional and cross-boundary ultrasound working.