

## Exploring the Impact of Promoting Mental Health, Addiction, and Intellectual Disability Nursing as a Career to Undergraduate Nurses in Their Last Year of Study

By Katie Owen, Agustilia Rodrigues and Cath Fraser

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### Abstract

Specialist nursing practice in mental health, addiction and intellectual disability (MHAID) comprises a growing sector of public health demand, and yet this field is one of the least popular career pathways for student nurses (Happell et al., 2019a; Owen, 2021). International studies and personal observations by members of the research team as nurse educators suggest two key factors at play. First, student willingness to work in MHAID specialist roles is impacted by entrenched stigma and discrimination against people who experience mental distress, addictions and intellectual disabilities. Second, students have voiced their perceptions of specialist mental-health nursing as less important than general nursing. Working in MHAID is commonly seen as carrying little prestige, variety, challenge or opportunity for skill development; worse, such findings from surveys of final-year student nurses' employment preferences have remained relatively unchanged over the last 20 years, at least (Wilkinson et al., 2016). With employers desperate for specialist MHAID staff, and education providers charged with meeting industry needs, how can nursing programmes begin to combat this bias and bring about attitudinal change? This paper describes a pilot initiative with Year 3 undergraduate student nurses in one Te Pūkenga subsidiary, which we believe shows considerable promise for a wider roll-out across the tertiary healthcare-education sector. A hui supported by Whitireia's Community of Practice for Mental Health and Addiction within the School of Health and Social Services allowed students to interact with multiple industry stakeholders: District Health Board (DHB) partners; graduates working in the mental health and addictions sector, experts by experience; and the postgraduate New Entry to Specialist Practice in Mental Health teaching team. A subsequent survey evaluation confirmed the positive impact of the initiative regarding altering negative stereotypes of nursing roles within MHAIDs and increasing the number of students who may consider specialising in these areas, post-graduation.

Keywords: Mental health, addiction and intellectual disability; student nurses; career preferences in healthcare

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Unitec, Te Pūkenga, Private Bag 92025  
Victoria Street West, Auckland 1010  
Aotearoa New Zealand



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