Reviewer's report

Title: Recognising the differences in the Nurse Consultant Role across context: A Study Protocol

Version: 3 Date: 17 June 2014

Reviewer: marie hutchinson

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript. The proposed study addresses an important issue, particularly in the Australian nursing context. As a published study protocol the paper requires further detail and clarity in sections. My suggestions to strengthen the paper are as follows:

- The background section could be strengthened by a more complete reference to what is known about Consultant roles. Whilst I would agree the Nurse Consultant role in Australia requires further empirical investigation, there is a sizeable body of evidence emanating from the UK that the authors have overlooked in scoping what is known about the Nurse Consultant role and its contribution to organisational and patient care outcomes.

- Further, the authors draw a distinction between nurse consultant and practitioner roles with little attention to the similarities in these roles across international jurisdictions. (major)

- No attention has been given to the complexity of advanced nurse practice titles and roles. (major)

- Similarly, it is not clear from the paper what the role and scope of the Australian CNC is, or how this might compare to other advanced practice roles both in Australia and internationally. (major)

- The pillars of CNC practice identified through reference to the NSW Award could usefully be compared to guidelines from the UK that define the scope and practice of the nurse consultant. (minor)

- The authors draw a distinction between the Nurse Practitioner and Nurse Consultant which reflects the Australian landscape. This interpretation is not necessarily an accurate summation of roles in other jurisdictions. This is an important point as the authors employ evidence from the UK and Australia somewhat interchangeably. While titles are similar in these countries the role and function of the Consultant is different in many instances to that of the Australian CNC. (major)

- I would also encourage the authors to adopt a more contemporary framework and interpretation of the differences and similarities in advanced roles. The 1997 framework (page 4) chosen which characterises the APN role as uni-dimensional (NP) or multi-dimensional (NC) is not borne out in recent systematic reviews (see for example the reviews by Jokiniemi et al, 2012; Hutchinson et al 2014; and the
SCAPE report, Ireland). (major)

Page 5. The comment beginning on line 86 “The nature of the Nurse …” The authors need to be clearer here whether this comment is specific to Australia. Internationally there is evidence of patient and organisational outcomes attributed to Consultant roles in their various forms.

The UK studies cited in the paragraph commencing on line 93 are a little outdated.

Page 7. The authors note there has been no differentiation between the nature of the role in metropolitan or rural contexts. The reasoning as to why there should be consideration of any difference in these contexts requires unpacking as this may not be obvious to an audience outside of Australia. (major)

Section: Aims and Design of the Study

• The dot points under aims appear to belong in the section sample and data collection as these points describe the data collection or analysis processes. (minor)

• The points under the Design section simply summarise points from the literature describing the nature of mixed methods research rather than clearly describing the design of the study or how the features of mixed methods listed relate to the study design. (minor)

Section: Research framework

• The section on realistic evaluation provides a general overview of this research framework. I found it difficult to distil from this section specific feature of realistic evaluation that were being utilised in the design or conduct of the proposed study. (Major)

• Similarly, page 10 & 11 provide general statements rather than specifics of the research protocol. (minor)

Section: Sample and data collection - overall this section lacks sufficient clarity for a study protocol (sufficient detail to allow replication or comparison)

• Detail is required on the expected sample size and its adequacy. (Major)

• The abstract notes that a validated tool will be utilised, there is no detail of this tool in the data collection section. (Major)

• The data collection section also notes that the survey will be derived from the literature. These appear in the description of the design and data collection, a clearer description of these constructs would assist in understanding the type of model the authors are proposing to model. (Major)

• This section makes reference to a variety of outcome and process measures – no detail is provided on how or what type of data will be collected (Major)

• This section repeats much of the discussion canvassed in the previous section on aims and design and should be refined to remove duplication (minor).

Section: Data Analysis

• The planned analysis is ambitious for a single study. Do the authors intend to
use a split sample to allow for the factor analysis and path modelling? Will the sample be sufficient for this? (Discretionary)

- There is nothing in the methods section about deriving a theoretical model that will be tested through path analysis. (Discretionary)