Does the dietetic educator workforce have enough meat on its bones? A professional profile of the dietetic educators preparing Australia’s future dietitians

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The surge in demand for dietetic programs offered in Australian universities has resulted in a simultaneous increase in the number of dietitians required to work in this sector. However, as a profession which is not registered under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), the size, skills, experience and areas of specialisation of the Australian dietetic educator workforce remains largely unknown. Benchmarking, strategic planning and addressing gaps in the workforce responsible for preparing dietitians of the future cannot advance with a lack of workforce data to inform analysis of the current situation. The aim of this study was to profile the professional attributes of the academic dietetic educator workforce in Australia to inform strategic planning for future dietetic practitioner preparation. A cross-sectional survey was electronically distributed to dietitian academics contributing to the education of students in dietetics programs at Australian universities (n=150). Subjects were asked to complete and return their professional profiles from which the data was collated into SPSS for statistical analysis. Responses were received from dietetic educators (n=93) at all of the 18 universities currently offering dietetics programs across Australia (RR=62%). Forty percent of respondents held PhD-level qualifications in dietetics while one third (32%) held graduate certificate qualifications in education. Around half (51%) of respondents cited clinical dietetics as their main area of practice specialisation and the largest proportion (40%) of respondents had 1-5 years’ experience as a dietetic educator. Of the 93 respondents, one dietetic educator indicated that their main area of specialisation as a dietetic researcher was in rural health. The dietetic educator workforce is largely comprised of dietitians with clinical dietetic experience who have been in dietetic education for a relatively short period of time. The proportion of dietetic educators with practice or research expertise in rural health is insignificant. Academic dietetic educators are key influencers in shaping the career intentions of the rapidly growing dietetic workforce they are responsible for preparing. Strategies are required to assess and build the capacity of the dietetic educator workforce to ensure that dietetic preparation effectively matches future dietetic practice and that the nutrition-related health needs of populations are being effectively served across all workforce sectors and geographical locations.