



Student exchange for nursing students: Does it raise cultural awareness? A descriptive, qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

With free movement for citizens within the European Union and with distant parts of our globe becoming more accessible, cultural awareness and cultural competence are becoming important skills for nurses. Internationalisation and raising awareness of other cultural contexts are essential elements in Swedish higher education, thus explaining the variety of student exchange programmes that are available. The aim of this study was to explore Swedish nursing students' perceptions of student exchange and their experiences. Data were collected through group interviews and then analysed following the principles of content analysis. Our analysis resulted in three categories: *Preparing to go abroad*, *Reasons for going abroad* and *From expectation to experience*. Cultural aspects and cultural awareness were emphasised as strong motivational factors, both personal and professional, behind participation in student exchange programmes. Information was also highlighted as a crucial means of reaching potential students as well as the power of knowledge through personal experience. This study highlights the importance of student exchange in expanding the individual student's personal and professional horizons. It also stresses the importance of including a transcultural nursing element in nursing curricula.

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Introduction

The world is becoming smaller and now, more than ever before, cultural competence and cultural awareness are vital skills in the nursing profession (Cowan and Norman, 2006). A changing society with free movement for citizens within the European Union, distant parts of our globe becoming more accessible and an increasingly multicultural population, are factors that are influencing healthcare, highlighting the need for culturally based knowledge among health professionals (Sairanen et al., 2013). Despite 19.6 per cent of the Swedish population having a different background than a Swedish (Statistics, 2010), findings from research studies (Gebru, 1997; Momeni et al., 2008) indicate that nursing students lack the knowledge needed to meet fully the demands that are likely to be presented by multicultural societies, i.e. cultural competence.

According to Jirwe (2008), cultural competence in nursing is about the ability to care for patients while taking into account their cultural background. In the present study, cultural competence is

viewed as comprising a set of skills and behaviours that enable a nurse to work effectively within the cultural context of a client/patient (Papadopoulos, 2006). In response to the increase in demand for cultural competence in nursing, a variety of theoretical models have been developed (Purnell and Paulanka, 1998; Brink, 1999; Giger and Davidhizar, 2007), of which Leininger played a central role through the theory of 'cultural care diversity and universality' (Andrews and Boyle, 1999). The criticism of Leininger's model is that it does not take into consideration variations within cultures, such as disability, socioeconomic status, gender, age, religion or education, that influence the way in which people express their cultural orientation (Boyle, 1999; Lipson, 1999; Meleis, 1999). Camphina-Bacote's model (2002) initiates phases that include cultural awareness and requires healthcare professionals to acknowledge cultural competence as an ongoing process rather than an endpoint. Both these models can be used in nursing education, either as concrete teaching guides and/or as a means of developing curricula that support cultural competence among nursing students (cf. Marcinkiw, 2003).

In Sweden, internationalisation and awareness of other cultural contexts are key elements in higher education and are emphasised in the Swedish Higher Education Act (SFS, 1992:1434). To facilitate internationalisation and cultural awareness, a variety of student exchange programmes are also available. Despite this, cultural

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competence in Sweden is a relatively new area of concern for nurse educators and there is limited knowledge and understanding of these skills (Jirwe, 2008). To explore the accuracy of Jirwe's (2008) findings, this study was preceded by a brief scoping review of nursing curricula. This offered a strong correlation with Jirwe (ibid) by revealing a fragmented, non-consistent approach to the concept. Research findings (Momeni et al., 2008; Petit dit Dariel, 2009) imply that this is not just a Scandinavian problem. European nursing curricula in general are still falling short as they tend to lack detailed transcultural nursing content.

One beneficial strategy for developing culturally competent nurses would appear to be the possibility of studying abroad as part of their training (Kokko, 2011). Greatrex-White (2007) suggests that studying abroad deserves more attention in the training of nurses and beyond. The concepts of global communities and a global economy will require employees of the future to have broader experience and understanding of different cultures. Enskär et al. (2011) and Reid-Searl et al. (2011) have highlighted that our knowledge in this area, including student experience of international exchange and the outcomes of such programmes, is relatively limited. Consequently, when developing a nursing programme that actively supports nurses in becoming culturally competent, it is important to take on board the views of the students. Available research reveals positive influences. In a literature review by Button et al. (2005) findings showed that nursing students who had participated in an exchange programme showed a better understanding of cultural differences and grew both on a professional and personal level. The study by Green et al. (2008) also found that students acquired a better understanding of cultural differences. Tabi and Mukherjee (2003) state that the positive effects of a student exchange programme for nursing students seem to extend far beyond the period of time they spend abroad. The opportunity to study abroad expands horizons as it promotes knowledge of a diversity of values, beliefs and practices in a person's education (ibid). Others confirm that students who study abroad reveal a greater change in their intercultural communication skills than students who remain on campus (Rundstrom Williams, 2005; Johns and Thompson, 2009). Available studies thus imply that nursing students need to experience diversity if they are to embrace it and learn from it. Our literature review indicates that leaving cross-cultural and/or transcultural issues and experiences until the students have qualified would be far too late. However, to develop a curriculum based on sound theoretical models, such as Camphina-Bacote's model (2002), it needs to be underpinned by empirical knowledge. This study thus aimed to explore Swedish nursing students' perceptions and experience of student exchange.

Design

A qualitative, descriptive design (Polit and Beck, 2012) was adopted to understand the perceptions and experiences of student exchange from the informant's point of view (cf. Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Data were collected through group interviews (Carey, 1994; Morgan, 1997) and the subsequent analysis was inspired by Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) description of content analysis.

Study context

The study was performed at a university college in South East Sweden. In Sweden, the training of registered nurses (RNs) is the responsibility of the state and is government-funded. Nursing, with the main subjects caring and nursing science, is a three-year programme (180 ECTS credits). The nursing programme comprises both theoretical and clinical modules and leads to a BSc in Nursing

Science. Within the programme, students are offered the opportunity to participate in student exchange through academic networks in the Nordic countries and the European Union as well as bilateral agreements with non-European HEIs. In the established networks, scholarships are available to finance the exchange. The School offers a university course; Intercultural Perspective on Health Care (7.5 ECTS credits), for nursing students who want to develop and understand cultural competence and for nursing students who intend to participate in the exchange programme, i.e. those aiming to go abroad. Each year, around 13 of the 500 students on the nursing programmes take the opportunity for a student exchange in the Nordic countries, Europe and countries outside the European Union. Students' time abroad can vary between some weeks up to 12 weeks and they are mainly staying in student accommodation.

Recruitment and informants

In this study, a purposive sample (Polit and Beck, 2012) was used. The recruitment targeted students ($n = 11$) intending to go abroad (pre-exchange study phase) and students who had been abroad (post-exchange study phase) as a part of the college's exchange programme (Table 1). According to Polit and Beck (ibid), it is important to have as varied a mixture as possible. Consequently, this study included people of different ages and both genders although ensuring that none of the informants had an educational relationship with the researchers. Students were invited by means of an information letter handed out by one of the researchers (DB). All students intending to take part in a student exchange programme or who had been on a student exchange in spring 2011 agreed to participate ($n = 11$). However, two students failed to attend the scheduled group interview, leaving nine students to participate in the interviews (Table 1).

Data collection

In this study group interviews were selected to encourage meaningful discussions (Morgan, 1997). Group interviews also have the advantage of generating considerable quantities of data and the interaction between participants may disclose different opinions and new areas for discussion (Reed and Payton, 1997). During the group interviews, the discussions focused on the students' their perceptions and experiences of student exchange, i.e. "Can you please tell me about your perception or experience of a student exchange". A general probing question was used whenever clarification was needed during the interviews (Polit and Beck, 2012). The group interviews were performed at a place and time chosen by the students. Each interview lasted approximately 40 min and was conducted in Swedish. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and quotations were translated into English.

Table 1
Characteristics of the participants.

Code	Age	Gender	Year of education
A	20	♀	1
B	19	♀	1
C	28	♀	1
D	27	♀	1
E	28	♀	1
F	23	♀	1
G	23	♀	1
H	32	♀	3
I	27	♂	3

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