



Focus Article

Exchanging expertise, theory and practice at Master's level healthcare education between Russia and Finland – experiences from an intensive course in St. Petersburg

Hanna Hopia^{a,*}, Leena Liimatainen^a, Natalija Victorovna Turkina^b, Anton Filenkov^b

^a School of Health and Social Studies, JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Keskussairaalan tie 21 E, 40620 Jyväskylä, Finland

^b Faculty of High Nurse Education, State St. Petersburg Medical Academy, Health Ministry of Russian Federation, St. Petersburg, Russia

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to raise discussion on the internationalisation possibilities of master's students who study while working. The objective of the article is to describe and share experiences on how to make the development of students' internationalisation competence possible through collaboration with representatives of different cultures during a one-week intensive course. Internationalisation is an essential component in the competence-based curriculum of master's level social and healthcare education. On the other hand, it has been a difficult task for adult students to enhance their internationalisation competence when they pursue studies alongside work. In addition, internationalisation in master's level education has been a key feature both in Finland and in Russia. An intensive course is one educational method to share students' existing professional know-how in an international multi-professional student group and to enable adult students' mobility. This paper describes a one-week intensive course which was carried out in St. Petersburg, Russia in autumn 2008. The course was evaluated by the adult students and their teachers participating in the course. The intensive course increased the degree of transparency and compatibility between higher education and advanced professional education qualifications gained in postgraduate healthcare education in the partner organisations. It seems that an intensive course is a good pedagogical method for enhancing the internationalisation competence of adult students.

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Background

The national higher education systems in Europe have considerable differences in terms of, e.g., study periods and degree structures and contents. Harmonisation would make the systems more attractive to students coming from outside Europe and would also increase mobility and cooperation within Europe (Zhao and Wildemeersch, 2008). In their meeting in Bologna 1999, the European Ministers of Education signed a joint declaration on the European space for higher education to be completed by 2010. The aim was to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education (European Commission, 2009). Also Finland and Russia joined the Bologna Convention, Finland in 1999, and Russia in 2003 (Makarova and Solomennikov, 2008). Consequently, internationalisation and the quality of education are major challenges in health and social care higher education in Finland and Russia.

The aim of this article is to raise discussion on the internationalisation possibilities of master's students who study while working. The objective of the article is to describe and share experiences on how to make the development of students' internationalisation competence possible through collaboration with representatives of different cultures during a one-week intensive course.

The definitions of the abbreviations used in the article can be found in Table 1.

The context of the intensive course is the long term cooperation between the School of Health and Social Studies of JAMK University of Applied Sciences (JAMK) and the Nursing Department of the International Academy of Sciences of the Higher School of the St. Petersburg Mechnikov State Medical Academy (SPSMA). During reciprocal visits, JAMK and SPSMA have not only become acquainted with the differences but also the common development challenges between Finland and Russia in the field of nursing, healthcare systems and higher education.

In the field of nursing and healthcare, the internationalisation of professional master's level and postgraduate adult students is a topical

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +358 400 989 446.

E-mail address: hanna.hopia@jamk.fi (H. Hopia).

Table 1
Definition of abbreviations.

Abbreviation	Definition
JAMK	JAMK University of Applied Sciences Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulu
SPASMA	St. Petersburg Mechnikov State Medical Academy
CIMO	Centre for International Mobility
FIRST	Finnish–Russian Student Exchange Programme
EQF	European Qualification Framework
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System

development challenge. This is shown in the teaching method and curriculum development in, e.g., Australia (Wallace and Hellmundt, 2003), in the United Kingdom (Law and Muir, 2006), and in several other European countries (Zhao and Wildemeersch, 2008). The internationalisation of higher education institutions can be interpreted narrowly, in which case it may only refer to student and teacher mobility between different countries, or studies in a foreign language in the students' own country. In this article, internationalisation in the higher education sector refers to a process in which the international and intercultural concepts are integrated into education. The intensive course implemented as a joint effort of two countries is one example of how the international and intercultural competences of students and teachers can be enhanced as part of formal education.

Both in JAMK and SPASMA, the professional master's and postgraduate programmes are designed for professionals who usually complete the studies part-time alongside work in 2–3 years. The mode of study is adult pedagogy and integration of studies and work. Education is implemented through flexible modes of learning, and the students' workplaces are closely involved in the pedagogical implementation of the education. The degree is demanding, workplace-oriented expert education. This is why the students are not usually able to complete long exchange periods abroad, and, therefore, new innovations and pedagogical methods are needed for internationalisation.

When both Russia and Finland joined the Bologna Convention, the Bologna Process and CIMO's (Centre for International Mobility) Finnish–Russian Student Exchange Programme (FIRST) opened new possibilities to enhance academic mobility, mutual recognition and development of nursing studies, and quality of education between the partner organisations. Funding for an intensive course was applied for from the Finnish–Russian Student Exchange Programme (FIRST) administered by the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO). Funding was granted for the implementation of an intensive course of five ECTS credits at the Mechnikov State Medical Academy in St. Petersburg in autumn 2008, and for teacher exchange between the partner institutions in 2008–2009.

The intensive course carried out in St. Petersburg was based on a systematic, goal-oriented and long term cooperation, separate funding from CIMO, and the principles of the Bologna Process (recognition of studies in partner organisations/ECTS) and of the European Qualification Framework describing the learning outcomes in master's programmes at a broad level.

This article describes the intensive course: aims, main contents, learning methods, and evaluation by the Finnish students on how the course affected their internationalisation competence and professional know-how. The article also contains a description of the experiences of the teachers who designed and implemented the course concerning expertise exchange between Russia and Finland.

International education and inter-professional learning

Internationalisation in education is a multifaceted phenomenon (Law and Muir, 2006). Teachers and students may have different

ideas of what internationalisation is, how it affects education, and what the aims are. Svensson and Wihlborg (2007) studied the conceptions of nursing teachers on internationalisation. Teachers mostly connected internationalisation to their teaching and did not see it holistically. For instance, exchange programmes were seldom mentioned as part of the internationalisation process (Svensson and Wihlborg, 2007). Also students may have a very fragmented conception of the internationalisation of education (Wihlborg, 2004; Ivakhnenko, 2008). According to Wihlborg (2004), part of the nursing students have an atomistic conception of the international aspects of their education, and according to the results obtained by Ivakhnenko (2008), slightly over half the Russian higher education students who answered the questionnaire were not aware of the Bologna Process.

Some research knowledge on the usefulness of international studies for the professional development of bachelor's level students of social and healthcare is already available (Leh et al., 2004; Hosio, 2008; Kinsella et al., 2008). According to Hosio (2008), practical training abroad promoted Finnish nursing students' understanding of foreign cultures, enhanced their self-assurance, self-confidence and stress tolerance, and motivated them to work abroad after graduation. Some information is also available on postgraduate level exchange programmes and experiences of their participants (e.g., Roy and Linendoll, 2006; Evans, 2007). As to master's level expertise exchange or joint intensive courses between two or more countries, very little information exists. In fact, internationalisation has only become an important issue during the past few years (Ogilvie et al., 2007). Internationalisation and its promotion are, however, extremely important in social and healthcare studies today, as the problems of healthcare and rehabilitation are worldwide (Broberg et al., 2003; Wimpenny et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2006).

Participation in an international group of social and healthcare professionals is a good opportunity to learn multi-professional working methods. In the field of social and healthcare, this kind of learning has been described with different terms, such as inter-professional learning or multi-professional learning (Claire et al., 2005). Begley (2009), however, makes a difference between these terms. According to her, in addition to teaching shared contents, the term "inter-professional" especially refers to creating interaction between professionals (Begley, 2009). Along with internationalisation, inter-professional learning is, therefore, an important challenge in social and healthcare education in Europe (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2007). There is little information available on the effect of inter-professional learning on, e.g., patient care (Claire et al., 2005). Inter-professional learning and teaching should be included in the curriculum right at the beginning of the studies to plant a positive attitude in the students towards working with various kinds of professionals (Coster et al., 2008).

Internationalisation competences and European Qualification Framework

The competences based on higher education require competence-based curricula and learning outcomes that are in line with the students' professional profiles. Competences are understood as wide-ranging combinations of know-how – composites of knowledge, skills and attitudes possessed by an individual. Competences illustrate a person's proficiency, capacity and ability to perform in professional tasks. Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences have decided to make a distinction between programme-specific or subject-specific and generic competences (Generic Competences of Polytechnic Graduates, 2008). The objective has been to create competence categories that are clearly distinguishable and easy to evaluate as learning outcomes.

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