



Review of transnational nursing education programme curricula: process, findings, and recommendations



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ABSTRACT

Background: The University of Wollongong (UOW) delivers two Transnational International Programmes (TNEP) in Hong Kong (HK): a 1-year undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing (Conversion) degree and a 2-year postgraduate Master of Nursing degree. A curriculum review of these programmes has been undertaken to ensure the quality of the programme remains consistently high and competitive in an international environment.

Aim: The aim of the Curriculum Review Project was to utilise the experience of expert academic staff to review the TNEP curricula delivered by an Australian University in Hong Kong (HK) to ensure it met contemporary needs of students, the university, and the Hong Kong Authority.

Methods: The curriculum review projects followed a qualitative research methodology. Thematic analysis was undertaken utilising Braun and Clarke's six-phase method (2006), as this method facilitated an inductive semantic approach where themes are strongly linked to the data and sourced from the explicit meaning of the discourse within the interview (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results: In total, there were 6 participants who were all permanent academic staff members within the School of Nursing at the UOW. The results of this project have been reported within a strengths, weaknesses, opportunity, and threats (SWOT) framework. Participants recognised the value and challenges to both individual students and the broader nursing profession in HK. Overall, there was a perception that being involved as an academic staff member in a TNEP developed both their subject knowledge and teaching skills.

Conclusions: This project has demonstrated that the TNEP makes an important contribution to the nursing profession in HK, while also facilitating the growth and development of academic staff at UOW.

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1. Introduction

Educational approaches that facilitate cultural understanding and promote capacity building within a global knowledge economy are in high demand. Within this context, the University of Wollongong (UOW) has strategic directions for becoming an international university of choice. One such strategy is expanding its transnational education programmes (TNEP's) on offer (University of Wollongong (UOW), 2013, 2014). The need to ensure the quality of these programmes remains consistently high, with competition obvious by the rapid growth in both supply and demand of transnational education programmes (Smith, 2010; Ziguras and McBurnie, 2008).

Transnational education is the production and delivery of education programmes, by a higher education provider, for students living in another country (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) (2005)). Alternate terms for transnational education include offshore

education, cross-border education, borderless education, and international collaborative education (Archer, 2011; Smith, 2010). These types of programmes offer students the opportunity to study locally while gaining an internationally recognised qualification.

The Curriculum Review Project (CRP) coincided with the culmination of the Transnational Nursing Education Programme (TNEP's) 4-year contract of delivery in HK (2010–2014), plus it met the UOW quality governance strategies for review. In establishing a new contract for 2015, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (2014) and the Qualifications Framework, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKCAAVQ), 2015) were used for an intensive review of the curricula for the TNEP. The CRP was a qualitative exploration of the perceptions and experiences of academics involved in the delivery of the TNEP, identifying opportunities for strengthening the TNEP to align the TNEP with the UOW International Strategic Plan 2013–2018, ensuring that viability, sustainability, and quality were met.

The aim of this paper is to present the findings from a project that evaluated the curricula of an Australian-Accredited TNEP. This programme, delivered in Hong Kong (HK) by academic staff from the

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UOW School of Nursing (SN) used a “fly in and fly out” approach to teaching. Using a qualitative approach, the aim of the CRP was to review the curricula of the TNEP to ensure they met contemporary needs.

2. Background and Literature Review

The UOW SN has successfully delivered the TNEP in HK since 2006, in addition to providing nursing education programmes for its local population across southern regional New South Wales, Australia. This programme comprises a 1-year undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing (Conversion) (BN (Conversion)) degree and a 2-year postgraduate Master of Nursing (MN) degree, the school's TNEP has grown into a valued international partnership for UOW. Learning associated with the BN (Conversion) aims to broaden the knowledge and skills acquired by students from prior nursing studies. Most students enter the BN (Conversion) with a diploma-level qualification. By contrast, the MN prepares nurses for senior roles in nursing and health care management. Approximately, one hundred students residing in HK graduate from the two-degree programmes as a result of the TNEP each year.

A core assumption of TNEPs is that despite socio-cultural and geographic differences, courses will be of equivalent quality and standard to those delivered locally in Australia. At the same time, the programme must be “sensitive to the educational, social, cultural and legal context of the countries in which they are delivered” (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, AVCC, 2005, p.16). This form of education represents an evolutionary development in higher education (Chen, 2015) with transnational education in nursing a rapidly growing industry. Increasing demand for highly skilled nurses stimulates this industry (Baumann and Blythe, 2008; Waterval et al., 2014; Grootjans and Newman, 2013).

Quality TNEPs offer benefits for both the university and the student. Universities that provide these quality programmes contribute to the global knowledge economy enhancing both reputation and profile in a foreign country (Tayar and Jack, 2013) leading to greater business opportunities and prospects for collaboration (Alam et al., 2013). For the nursing student, TNEPs offer opportunities for them to increase skills and advance their practice (Baumann and Blythe, 2008). In countries, where nursing education is offered as a hospital-based certificate or diploma, completing a TNEP enables nurses to upgrade their qualifications (Allison and Stevens, 2006). Other advantages include the opportunity for students to study in their own country, significantly reducing stress and financial costs associated with studying in a foreign country. Graduating with advanced qualifications from a foreign university provides nurses with employment opportunities that may not be readily available in their own country.

In the competitive transnational marketplace, quality is a prized commodity; however, with the benefits and opportunities, transnational education also presents challenges. The potential for quality to be compromised for commercial ends is a constant risk (Ziguras and McBurnie, 2008). To mitigate this risk, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) developed a voluntary framework for global cooperation (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, 2005). When applying this framework, major providers should regularly audit and carry out quality control mechanisms.

Specific challenges for TNEPs include providing academic support such as supporting students with their academic literacy and helping them to work through language differences. Ensuring course content is relevant to the student's cultural context, and managing differences in clinical practice requirements between the home and host countries are also recognised challenges (Waterval et al., 2014). Strategies employed to address these challenges have included employing local (in-country) academics to deliver the course content and to provide support and counselling for students (Fernandez et al., 2014). Developing strong relationships with the host country's nursing leaders and involving them in developing and reviewing course content also ensures

that programmes are relevant to the students' clinical practice (Mok and Xu, 2008). As with any other educational programme, upholding the quality of the transnational education programme is important. Currently, however, there are no international governing bodies that specifically oversee the quality of nursing TNEPs (Baumann and Blythe, 2008).

3. Method

This project utilised a qualitative research methodology, qualitatively exploring the perceptions and experiences of academics involved in the delivery of the TNEP incorporated a review of current evidence, interviews with academics, and workshopping ideas with these same participants. Current evidence related to the delivery of TNEPs and literature about similar BN (Conversion) and MN degree courses delivered by English-speaking nations in Asia was sourced. A web-based search of comparative programmes followed by a comprehensive literature review informed all aspects of the CRP.

A convenience sample of academic staff that have direct involvement in delivering either the BN (Conversion) or MN in HK were interviewed. Participants were provided with information sheets and written consent was obtained at the first interview. A schedule of opening questions—based on the aims of the CRP informed by previous qualitative studies—were used as triggers for discussions with participants. The confidential individual interviews were conducted over a 6-month period in 2014 with the participants with eight participants. Interviews were led by the CRP leaders who were also members of the TNEP. The interviews were audio-recorded and sound files transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed from the transcript.

Analysis of the data generated from the interviews began as soon as interview transcripts had been transcribed and were made available. This enabled the interviewers to ask questions in follow-up interviews that probed ideas that were relevant to the aims of the study. Thematic analysis was undertaken utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006), as this method facilitated an inductive semantic approach where themes are strongly linked to the data and sourced from the explicit meaning of the discourse within the interview (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The steps include familiarising yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To strengthen the analytical process, a seventh step was added to the analysis process by overlaying the themes into a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis framework, a commonly used evaluation and quality improvement framework in the health care sector (Harrison, 2010, p. 92). Themes inductively derived from analysis of interviews were matched to each of the SWOT categories (Harrison, 2010, p. 92).

To ensure completion of the data, preliminary findings and recommendations were presented back to participants in the form of a workshop. The 4 h workshop, facilitated by project leaders was a means to achieve consensus and to validate the findings generated by participants. The workshop approach contributed to the trustworthiness of the project where Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Wertz (2011) have advocated, validity should be judged by fit, relevance, workability, trustworthiness, and modifiability with the aim of establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity (Polit and Beck, 2012).

4. Findings

Themes presented below are categorised using the SWOT framework with ideas generated from the thematic analysis of data collected in the interviews using.

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