

# Studying abroad: Exploring factors influencing nursing students' decisions to apply for clinical placements in international settings<sup>☆</sup>



Arlene Kent-Wilkinson<sup>a,\*</sup>, Marie Dietrich Leurer<sup>b</sup>, Janet Luimes<sup>a</sup>, Linda Ferguson<sup>a</sup>, Lee Murray<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada

<sup>b</sup> College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan, Regina, SK, Canada

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## SUMMARY

**Background:** For over 15 years the College of Nursing at the University of Saskatchewan has facilitated study abroad clinical placements in a number of countries to enhance student learning. Nursing students often find their study abroad experience to be a defining moment in their educational program, and in their personal and professional growth.

**Objectives:** The main objective of this research was to explore factors influencing nursing students' decisions to study abroad.

**Design:** A descriptive longitudinal design study was conducted using an online survey.

**Settings:** The Study Abroad Survey was distributed to all undergraduate and graduate nursing students, in all years of all programs, at all sites of the College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan in Saskatchewan, Canada.

**Participants:** A total of 1058 nursing students registered in the 2013–2014 academic year were surveyed.

**Methods:** The data were collected using an online survey administered by Campus Labs™ (2014).

**Results:** Students indicated that their interest in study abroad international experiences was high (84%), with many perceived benefits, but barriers to participation were also high for these students. Financial barriers topped the list (71%), followed by family responsibilities (30%) and job obligations (23%).

**Conclusion:** The research highlights the factors behind student decision making related to international placements, and provides the basis for improvements to the College of Nursing's International Study Abroad Program (ISAP). Previous travel and international service learning, resulting in increased perceived value of a study abroad experience may prove to be the more significant factor influencing decision making, rather than financial barrier.

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## Introduction

An accelerated pace of globalization, an expanded emphasis on international health concerns, and the need for culturally competent care to increasingly diverse populations are some of the reasons why international clinical placements to enhance student learning have been part of the curriculum offerings at the College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan since 1998.

Students often find their study abroad experience to be a defining moment in their nursing program. Studying abroad truly is an unparalleled opportunity to experience nursing practice and health care systems in a different country, to become immersed in a different culture, to grow professionally and personally, and to gain a more global view of health and health care. Towards this end, in September, 2013, a formal Study Abroad Survey of nursing students at the College of Nursing was conducted with the following objectives: (1) explore the learning

needs of students with regard to study abroad; and, (2) determine factors influencing students' decisions to participate in study abroad experiences. In this paper, we discuss the approach to the study and the key findings in an attempt to understand the factors behind student decision making related to international clinical placements. In addition, we discuss strategies to address the barriers that prevent student participation in these enriching international learning experiences.

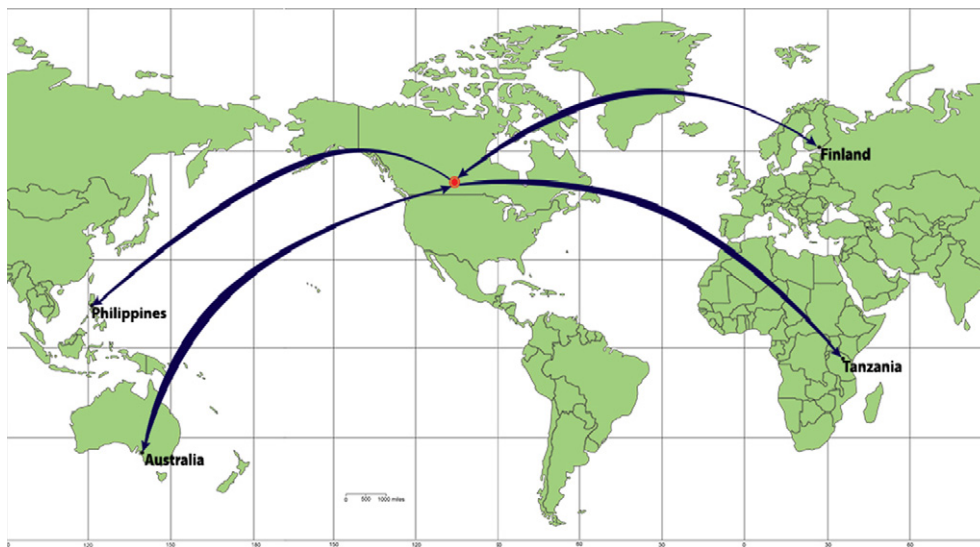
## Background/literature

“Study abroad refers to a broad range of credit-granting programs, courses and learning experiences that take place internationally” (University of Saskatchewan, 2014f). At the College of Nursing, study abroad clinical placements for undergraduate students have been facilitated through the International Study Abroad Program (ISAP) to developed countries such as Australia and Finland and to a variety of emerging countries such as India, Mozambique, Niger, South Korea, Tanzania, and the Philippines. Currently, the ISAP offers clinical placements in the undergraduate program to Australia, Finland, Tanzania and the Philippines (See Fig. 1: Map of current International Study Abroad Program). Since 1998, 278 nursing students

<sup>☆</sup> All authors are members of the International Research Group (IRG), and all are faculty at the College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan, in SK, Canada.

\* Corresponding author at: 104 Clinic, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 2Z4, Canada. Tel.: +1 306 244 4117x966 6897.

E-mail address: [arlene.kent@usask.ca](mailto:arlene.kent@usask.ca) (A. Kent-Wilkinson).



(University of Saskatchewan, 2014c)

\*Single arrow indicates one way exchange

\*\*Double arrows indicate reciprocal exchange

**Fig. 1.** Map of Current International Study Abroad Program (ISAP), College of Nursing 2013. (University of Saskatchewan, 2014c). \*Single arrow indicates one way exchange. \*\*Double arrows indicate reciprocal exchange.

have had clinical placements abroad through the ISAP at the College of Nursing. Typically ten percent of the students have applied to the ISAP for a 5–6 week international clinical experience during their senior nursing practicum. The estimated cost for each outgoing student to participate in study abroad experiences was \$5,000–10,000 depending on the country and length of stay. Reciprocally, only a small number (44) of international nursing students have had clinical experiences at this university in Canada, possibly due to the travel costs and complexities of obtaining study visas for clinical placements.

#### Relevant Nursing Research

In the past decade, there has been a surge in nursing research exploring the benefits of study abroad experiences. The recent research summarized below focuses on the multiple benefits of study abroad for students including: aiding in the development of cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, and cultural safety; personal and professional growth; development of global citizenship; and, impact on future practice.

The results of a literature review by Kokko (2011) from Finland indicated that study abroad has a positive influence on the development of cultural competence in nurses. Three main themes were apparent during the process of developing cultural competence including increased cultural knowledge, enhanced personal growth, and impacts on student's nursing practice. Similarly, Kelleher (2013) in Ireland conducted an integrative review of the perceived benefits of study abroad health care experiences for nursing students and found participating students accrued benefits "including various forms of personal and professional growth, cultural sensitivity and competence, and cognitive development" (p. 690).

Study abroad outcomes have been examined both during and after the learning experience. Aseno et al. (2013) in Canada examined the experiences of undergraduate nursing students during a study abroad placement in Zambia. Their research revealed "an unfolding of learning for students across the period they were abroad, from an initial period of adjustment, to connections and relational learning as they became more accustomed to the setting, to a final time of thinking more deeply about ethics and longer term significance of their experience" (p. 230). Kent-Wilkinson et al. (2010) explored the perceptions of Canadian students

following their experiences in rural Australia to assess their learning immediately after their study abroad experience. Students reported a greater understanding of the Aboriginal people they work with in Canada through their experiences with the Indigenous people of Australia. Ruddock and Turner (2007) from Denmark and Australia found that having an international learning experience as part of a nursing education program promoted cultural sensitivity in nursing students.

A summary of other benefits of study abroad cited in the literature include a broader understanding of the social determinants of health and their impact on health care delivery systems (Egenes, 2012; Kent-Wilkinson et al., 2010; Kokko, 2011); first-hand experiences of issues or factors that influence health and social inequities (Kulbok et al., 2012; Smith and Curry, 2011); increased awareness of global health issues and the development of global citizenship (Mill et al., 2010; Kulbok et al., 2012); increased cultural awareness and the development of cultural competence/safety (Aseno et al., 2013; Bentley and Ellison, 2007; Kelleher, 2013; Kokko, 2011; Ruddock and Turner, 2007; Smith-Miller et al., 2010); professional and personal growth (Kelleher, 2013; Kollar and Ailinger, 2002; Zorn et al., 1995); increased cognitive development (Kelleher, 2013); and long term positive impact on nursing practice (Kollar and Ailinger, 2002; Smith and Curry, 2011; Zorn, 1996).

While research suggests study abroad placements are an effective learning experience, the majority of literature on the benefits and barriers of international placements has been conducted during the study abroad experience or after the students returned home. There is a gap in research exploring the perceptions of nursing students who may be considering a study abroad opportunity including what they perceive as the benefits and barriers, and their preferences with regard to such a potential learning experience. Knowledge of factors influencing student decisions to study abroad is important, as addressing such factors may enhance study abroad opportunities. To address this research gap, the authors implemented a Study Abroad Survey to explore factors influencing nursing students' decisions with regard to applying for clinical placements abroad.

#### Methods

An online Study Abroad Survey was developed in March, 2013 and administered in September, 2013, utilizing a computer survey program

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