



Review

International clinical placements for Australian undergraduate nursing students: A systematic thematic synthesis of the literature



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SUMMARY

Objectives: International clinical placements provide undergraduate nursing students with the opportunity to experience or practice nursing care in diverse countries, settings, and cultures. This systematic review aims to ascertain the current knowledge on international clinical placements offered by undergraduate nursing programs in Australia. It seeks to explore three questions: (1) How have previous experiences of nursing students' international clinical placements been described? (2) How have participants and stakeholders determined if the placement has been successful? And (3) What benefits or challenges have been identified by stakeholders as a result of participating in international clinical placements?

Design: A systematic thematic synthesis was undertaken.

Data Sources: A search of electronic databases including CINAHL, Proquest Central, Scopus, PubMed, and Health Collection was undertaken between September and October 2014.

Review Methods: Key terms including 'international clinical placement', 'study abroad', 'international exchange', 'nursing', and 'Australia' were used to identify articles that appeared in peer-reviewed English language journals and that explored international clinical placements offered to undergraduate nursing students by Australian universities.

Results: Eight studies were identified that meet the inclusion criteria, and through thematic analysis, five key themes were identified including developing cultural awareness and competence, providing a global perspective on health care, translation of theory to practice, growing personally through reflection, and overcoming apprehension to successfully meet the challenge. A comparison search of literature from Canada and the United Kingdom revealed that similar themes occurred internationally.

Conclusions: Although personal successes were identified by students undertaking international clinical placement, further research is required to identify all stakeholder experiences including those of the educators, the educational institutions, and travel providers supporting these placements and the communities where the placements take place.

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Introduction

The increasing emergence of globalization as an economic, educational, and research priority has seen tertiary education institutions place a greater emphasis on preparing their students to work in multi-cultural and international settings. Given the impact that the diverse cultural makeup and current global climate can have on community health at all levels, the incorporation of components of international health and cultural competence is an important consideration for nursing programs and educators. Whether preparing nurses to either care

for an increasingly culturally diverse patient population in their own countries or for a career path that may potentially cross international borders, achieving quality health care within this framework requires nurses to be culturally competent (Jeffreys and Smodlaka, 1999). The process of developing cultural competence must begin within their nursing education; however, moving students from a theoretical knowledge of culture into an applied practical competence can be seen as a challenge. A possible solution to this ongoing problem is to provide students with the opportunity to undertake international clinical placements (ICPs).

Background

The need to provide students with opportunities to develop cultural competence has resulted in educational institutions offering ICPs for small numbers of students, to enable them to experience living and

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practicing within a different cultural environment. Different models of ICPs have been used within undergraduate nursing programs and range from short observational style practicums to longer-term clinical exchanges. Placements have involved students traveling to both developed and developing countries to provide students with experience in a diverse range of settings from primary health care and health promotion (Ailinger et al., 2009; Hu et al., 2010) to mental health nursing (Singh et al., 2009), and to observe the differences in health care systems and how they are impacted by differing political, social, economic, and cultural influences.

This systematic synthesis of the literature forms part of a larger research project that aims to develop a deeper understanding of how multiple stakeholders assign meaning and value to the successful development and outcomes of ICPs with a particular focus on those placements being undertaken in the Asian region. Gaining a greater insight into the range and scope of activities currently being undertaken in this area is particularly relevant considering the rise of Asia as an emerging economic powerhouse, and as the need to broaden and deepen our links with our regional neighbors grows (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). In response to the aims of this project, this review was undertaken to ascertain the current knowledge on international clinical placements completed by Australian undergraduate nursing students in recent years and consequently sought to answer a number of questions: “How have previous experiences of nursing students’ International Clinical Placements been described?” “How have participants and stakeholders determined if the placement has been successful?” and “What benefits or challenges have been identified by stakeholders as a result of participating in International Clinical Placements?” It is hoped that through asking these questions, a picture will begin to emerge of how we currently view ICPs and highlight the gaps in our knowledge of this important area of undergraduate nurse education.

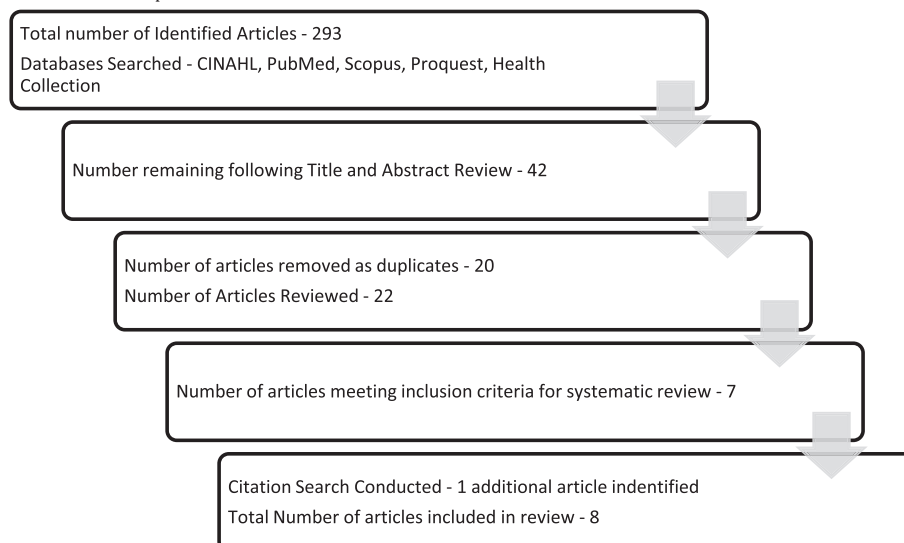
Methods

A search of published literature was undertaken between September and December 2014 using databases that are recognized as containing extensive health, nursing, and education references including CINAHL, ProQuest Central, Scopus, PubMed, and Health Collection. The search included the terms ‘international clinical placement’, ‘study abroad’,

‘international exchange’, ‘nursing’, and ‘Australia’. The resulting search literature was also reviewed for alternate key terms that may elicit further relevant titles. Terms such as ‘international immersion experience’, ‘cultural immersion experience’, and ‘international health care experience’ were evident in the literature, however, appeared more relevant to studies undertaken in North America and yielded no new results in the Australian context. Inclusion criteria were limited to peer-reviewed research articles in English language journals related to ICPs offered by Australian universities for undergraduate nursing students. It was decided to only include those articles that have undergone peer-review process, although it is possible that narrative or commentary-based articles, unpublished thesis, or other ‘grey’ literature may shed light on this experience. However, due to the difficulty of establishing the validity of these sources, they are not included in this review. Articles were limited to those published after 1990; however, following review of all articles, none published prior to 1997 met the inclusion criteria for this review. The search yielded a total of 290 possible articles (Table 1 provides further detail of the literature retrieval process), yielding a total of seven articles that met the inclusion criteria. Careful examination of the reference list of each of the final seven articles failed to uncover any new peer-reviewed studies. A cited reference search was conducted of the original seven articles for subsequently published papers that resulted in the addition of an eighth article to the synthesis.

A thematic synthesis approach was used to organize the data presented in the included articles. Due to the largely qualitative nature of the articles included in this review, which are drawn from data that are not intended to be generalizable and is not without bias, an approach was required that would take into account the interpretive nature of the studies (Bearman and Dawson, 2013). A key strength of thematic synthesis is its ability to allow for conclusions that are based on common elements or themes drawn from multiple divergent studies (Lucas et al., 2007). Articles were summarized with information collected on aim, research design and methodology, limitations and key findings; an overview for each article is included in Table 2. Initially, line by line coding was conducted on the results section of each article using NVivo 10 (QRS International, 2014) to support the process. Initial codes were then explored with frequently occurring codes developed into themes. These themes were then viewed through the lens of the research questions posed as part of this systematic review. This approach allowed the creation of analytical themes and translation of concepts

Table 1
Literature retrieval process.



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