



Professionalisation of gerontological nursing – The development of an international online gerontological master degree programme

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SUMMARY

Due to demographic changes and the growing demand for a nursing workforce in the gerontological field adequate nursing curricula are required. This paper describes the development of the international online gerontological master degree programme GEROM. Health and nursing science institutions from six European countries are collaborating in this EU-project. The project milestones as well as the study programme architecture are introduced. Furthermore, the evaluation concept is illustrated. Collaboration across the partners is affected by some problems; varying accreditation procedures and cultural differences inhibit the implementation of a joint degree. Institutional commitment and communication between the partners are essential for a successful process.

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Background

The well known demographic changes pose a challenge for our society as a whole, but especially for the healthcare system. Austria, as many other European countries, is facing an ageing population. In 2008 17% of the Austrian population was aged 65 plus; this percentage is estimated to increase in the next decades: by 2025 about 21% of the population will be 65 years of age or older and by 2050 the proportion will reach 28% (Statistik Austria, 2009). Therefore, older people are supposed to be the “core business of health care” (Burbank et al., 2006, p. 91). This leads to a great demand for a nursing workforce, most notably in the gerontological field (Mackin et al., 2006; Plonczynski et al., 2007).

In Austria, about 60,000 to 80,000 nurses are working in the healthcare system; detailed information cannot be provided due to the fact that registration is not obligatory (ÖBIG, 2007). Systematic reporting on the situation of Austrian nurses started in 2006 with the publication of the first Austrian nursing report (ÖBIG, 2006). The increasing need for nurses is amplified by an almost constant number of graduates in Austria. Especially in nursing homes and in mobile care units the staff shortage is striking (ÖBIG, 2006). Caring for old, terminally ill persons is a major stressor (Jenull and Brunner, 2008). Nurses who are working with the elderly are also burdened by the confrontation with confused patients who are perceived as hostile, egoistic and uncooperative (Jenull et al., 2009). Plonczynski et al. (2007) argue that gerontological issues are often missing in nursing

curricula. This fact can be interpreted as a reason for the mentioned work strains; adequate trainings which aim at gaining understanding for the ageing process and at handling challenging care situations have not been implemented yet in a satisfying way. In addition, caring for older people is not appreciated sufficiently in our society (Escober et al., 2007). Therefore, gerontological nursing is not considered to be an attractive occupation (Herdman, 2002).

The Bologna process offers the unique opportunity to remedy this shortcoming. In June 1999 the Bologna declaration was signed by the European higher education ministers (European Ministers of Education, 1999). It aims at harmonizing higher education across Europe to enhance comparability as well as students', staff and workforce mobility. Nursing education in Europe is characterized by heterogeneous conditions: diverse study programmes and degree structures as well as a lack of master's and doctoral nursing programmes inhibit the academic development of nursing (Zabalegui et al., 2006). In some countries, such as Austria, nursing education is still offered predominantly on the secondary level (Spitzer and Perrenoud, 2006). Thus, developing internationally oriented nursing study programmes which are created in collaboration of different European countries (Law and Muir, 2006) is a demanding task.

Following the Bologna process the EU-project GEROM is dedicated to the development and implementation of an internationally oriented online gerontological master degree programme. There are already some European initiatives which are dealing with the creation of master programmes for gerontology: for example, the EuMaG-programme (European Masters in Gerontology; <http://www.eumag.org/>; van Rijsselt et al., 2007) is a two-year part-time programme consisting of different modules (e.g. health gerontology, social gerontology). The core contents of the curriculum are provided via face-to-face lectures at the collaborating EuMaG universities, web-

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based learning is used additionally. The Nordic Master's Degree Programme in Gerontology (NordMaG; <https://www.jyu.fi/sport/laitokset/terveys/en/Nordplus/nordmag>) is offered by three Nordic universities (Finland, Sweden, Iceland) and it is also organized predominately in terms of face-to-face lectures. Contrary to these programmes, GEROM uses a mainly virtual learning environment. Therefore, our vision is to make the curriculum easily accessible for students all over Europe. Due to budgetary shortages and due to the need for internationally oriented educational programmes elearning culture will become increasingly important in the future (McVeigh, 2009). Flexible and self-directed learning is supported (Johnson et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 2009) following the idea of life-long learning (Haigh, 2004) and additionally students can improve their skills regarding the use of new technologies (Kiteley and Ormrod, 2009).

This paper describes the development of the study programme GEROM. It focuses on the project's milestones as well as on the evaluation concept. Barriers and potential solutions to resolve them in the ongoing project are discussed.

Development of the study programme GEROM

The project GEROM was started in October 2007 and it is embedded in the Lifelong Learning Programme funded by the European Commission. Health and nursing science institutions from six European countries, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Ireland, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, are collaborating.

The target group of the study programme is the nursing workforce caring for older people, but GEROM also incorporates a possibility for further education for other health professionals who are working with older people. So the majority of the students will be part-time students. To enhance the compatibility of job, family and education and to ensure access to the study programme for people from all over Europe GEROM is designed as a blended learning study programme. Blended learning – the integration of elearning and “traditional” face-to-face lectures (Akkoyunlu and Yilmaz-Soylu, 2008) – is an innovative teaching and learning approach. The online materials of the study programme comprise various contents such as texts, case studies, podcasts, scenarios or self assessments. The participation of the students and the interaction between students and lecturers are important aspects within the teaching and learning process (McCord and McCord, 2010), and they are enhanced by the implementation of chats and videoconferences. Besides the different learning options which are offered in the educational setting, students must translate their learning experiences in the workplace setting in the sense of active learning (Dewing, 2010). Furthermore, our teaching strategy is oriented towards problem based learning (Vitrup and Davey, 2010): it is a learner centered strategy which enables the students to think critically, to analyze information adequately and to decide on this basis. The study programme GEROM should not only provide contents reflecting the current state of knowledge in the gerontological field, rather it aims at teaching students how to gather and manage information in order to solve practical problems. To promote discussion and shared reflection of the contents we plan three intensive face-to-face phases which will last for 1 week in each case. These “intensive weeks” will take place in Austria, Finland and United Kingdom.

At the beginning of the project we carried out a literature search focusing on developments and trends in computer-aided gerontological education. As a result we prepared a “state-of-the-art report” on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in educational programmes within the gerontological field; this report presents the basis for the next step, the development of the study programme (cf. EACEA, 2008). First of all, we framed a common understanding of ageing: we understand ageing as a complex process which is influenced by personal and environmental factors (Clarke and Nieuwenhuijsen, 2009). Beside the recognition of functional loss

in old age, we emphasize the need to promote the older people's resources following the salutogenetic approach (Antonovsky, 1979). Furthermore, the interaction between health professionals and older people must be considered: The conceptual framework proposed by Nolan and Mock (2004) focuses the integrity of the older person which is not only influenced by interactive patterns, but it is also determined by organizational factors (e.g. culture of the organization, mission and vision) and cultural values. The latter aspect underlines the importance of transcultural nursing to meet the needs of culturally diverse people (Narayanamy and White, 2005).

The contents of the study programme GEROM are in line with recommendations regarding master's education in nursing (e.g. Radzyski, 2005). GEROM pursues the following outcomes: the students should

- know the demographic changes' impact on the health care system,
- gain knowledge in public policy and in theories of ageing,
- be capable of evaluating and improving care for older persons,
- broaden their skills in management and leadership,
- have an extensive understanding of the application of new information and communication technologies,
- be able to provide culturally sensitive care as well as to develop and apply ethical principles,
- recognize the resources of older persons and develop interventions which promote those resources,
- apply research methods in the gerontological field to enhance the quality of care.

Table 1 illustrates the modules of the study programme which were designed in order to achieve the mentioned outcomes (cf. EACEA, 2008). For each module we developed a module description containing the respective outline of the contents, the aims and learning outcomes. Following the standards of the Conference on Master-level Degrees (The Bologna Process Final, 2003) the two-year study programme will carry about 120 ECTS (study effort hours).

To give an example, we would like to elaborate on the Austrian module “Leadership and Management”: it emphasizes management concepts and tools and their implications for the gerontological field. For example, interface, innovation management and disease management are discussed. Developing innovative services in the field of gerontology is an important future challenge and is addressed in the module. Meeting this demand interprofessional collaboration and teamwork are essential. Furthermore, managing institutions, agencies, and families which take care for the older people requires knowledge in the area of organizational and personnel development: personnel planning, educational planning, employee motivation or team development are crucial for high-quality working conditions and job performance. These aspects can be evaluated using concepts and tools of quality management. Models of evaluation and quality assurance are introduced and discussed using practical examples from the gerontological field. On completion of this module the students should be able to

- critically analyze management concepts and tools,
- implement them in the gerontological field,

Table 1
Modules of the study programme GEROM.

| Module | Responsible partner |
|---|---------------------|
| Module 1. Global context of ageing | Slovenia |
| Module 2. Theoretical bases of ageing | Ireland |
| Module 3. Research and innovation | United Kingdom |
| Module 4. Informatics | Slovenia |
| Module 5. Ethical issues in the care for older people | Ireland |
| Module 6. Leadership and management | Austria |
| Module 7. Positive ageing | Ireland |
| Module 8. Ambient assisted living | Bulgaria |
| Module 9. Dissertation | United Kingdom |

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