



Original research

Flexible learning: Evaluation of an international distance education programme designed to build the learning and teaching capacity of nurse academics in a developing country



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ABSTRACT

The professional development of nurse academics has been high on the agenda in many of the Asia-Pacific's developing countries including Vietnam. In collaboration with the Vietnamese Nurses Association, an Australian university designed and delivered a distance learning programme (DLP). The DLP sought to build academic capacity with a specific focus on the skills required to develop, implement and deliver a new national nursing curriculum. This paper will describe the design and delivery of the DLP as well as report on programme evaluation survey findings. Of the 175 surveys administered 112 were returned yielding a response rate of 64%. The majority of Vietnamese nurse academics identified all DLP modules as 'very well' designed and easy to learn from (range 63.9%–84.2%). Predominantly, academics also found the module content to be 'of great use' to their professional practice (range 73%–89.5%). Asked specifically about the benefit of the DLP online discussions, 106 (95.5%) participants stated they found the online discussions to be of use. An explanatory comment was also requested to explore this question and responses yielded three themes: 'networking and collaboration'; 'acquiring new knowledge'; and 'improving English'. When asked if they had changed their academic practice as a result of DLP participation, 105 (94.6%) academics stated they had – change was focussed on student centred learning and building a staff community of practice. While these study results indicate the DLP to be successful, it will be how Vietnamese academics utilise and build these skills which will measure the real success of the programme in the future.

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1. Introduction

The professional development of nurse academics has been high on the agenda in many of the Asia-Pacific's developing countries including Vietnam. In 2002 the Vietnam Nurses Association developed a national action plan for strengthening the nursing and midwifery services within Vietnam. This plan focussed on seeking ways to upgrade both undergraduate and postgraduate nursing education. Further, with nurse education in Vietnam primarily

delivered by medical doctors, the plan also sought to increase the number of nursing academics nationally, and to increase nursing input in the delivery of nursing programmes. Influencing government bodies to consider a review of national nurse education, the Vietnam Nurses Association were involved with the employment of many new nurse academics across Vietnam and the consequent move away from medical doctors providing nursing education. However, this rapid influx of new nursing academics saw an academic body who were predominantly inexperienced in educational practices as well as learning and teaching design. In an attempt to strengthen Vietnamese teaching practices and build academic capacity in nurse education, the Vietnam Nurses Association sought international assistance.

A collaborative partnership was established between the Vietnam Nurses Association and the Queensland University of

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Technology (QUT) School of Nursing in Australia in 2007; the intention of this partnership was to provide support to Vietnamese nurse academics to implement and drive educational reform activities. To further this partnership and facilitate Vietnamese nurse training and development, The Atlantic Philanthropies group awarded a AU\$6.3 million grant to QUT in 2008 (Chapman et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2012). The key objective of the Vietnam Nurses Association QUT partnership was the development of a new four-year undergraduate nursing curriculum frame for national implementation. To build the academic capacity required to underpin this new curriculum and to progress the learning and teaching needs of Vietnamese nurse academics, QUT designed and delivered a distance learning programme. The Distance Learning Programme was intended to assist Vietnamese nurse academics to develop teaching practices that were not only congruent with contemporary thinking about teaching and learning, but also to facilitate student nurse attainment of nursing competencies (Chapman et al., 2013). The Distance Learning Programme design also recognised the importance of Vietnamese nurse academics building a national learning community and becoming committed to perpetuating a sustainable model of academic training and professional development. To assist with this the Distance Learning Programme utilised asynchronous online discussion groups. While moderated by QUT academics, the aim of the online discussion groups was to encourage the more experienced Vietnamese academics to educate their more recently appointed peers and enable the exchange of knowledge and experience (Lewis et al., 2012).

2. Literature review

Distance education has known benefits such as fostering interaction and collaboration among learners thus creating a true learning community, providing more flexible access for students, increased viability of specialist courses and flexible content which can be modified to suit work-based learning needs (Hudson, 2014; Schnetter et al., 2014). Not surprisingly then, distance education has become a key strategy to achieve higher levels of academic capacity and competence and professional knowledge development for nurse academics residing and working in developing countries (Chapman et al., 2013). Despite the perceived benefits of distance education and its uptake of online teaching strategies including 'asynchronous online discussion groups', creating a successful learning experience remains challenging (Hsu and Hsieh, 2014). Providing high quality learning experiences for distance learners not only requires consideration of access and accessibility of learning experiences, familiarity with diverse groups of learners and an awareness of what is possible within a given context; it now also involves thinking critically about trends that are shaping and driving more complex learning environments (Fitzgerald et al., 2013; Schnetter et al., 2014). Current trends in the area of distance education indicate a shift in pedagogical perspectives and theoretical frameworks, with student interaction at the heart of learner centred constructivist environments (Abrami et al., 2011).

Distance education programs are evaluated from a student perspective by considering access, quality of content and teaching effort, and their own performance and reward, however, pedagogy is also a relevant factor in determining student satisfaction with distance education (Diebel and Gow, 2009). The student can manage the challenges of web-based learning, but the most important predictor of student satisfaction is excellence in pedagogy, irrespective of technology (Dorrian and Wache, 2009). Regardless of whether the distance education program is delivered into a low or high tech environment program pedagogy needs to be rigorous and relevant. The challenge for educators is to determine effective pedagogy, communication and interaction opportunities,

and support services so that students realise their intended learning outcomes, but also enjoy satisfying learning experiences as they transition from traditional instruction methodologies to distributed, distance learning environments (Cant and Cooper, 2014).

Studies suggest that a distance education pedagogy, which will satisfy students, is theoretically grounded in Social Constructivism (Dorrian and Wache, 2009). The social constructivist perspective is increasingly being used to design and develop eLearning experiences as the educational environment is shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred learning and teaching (Kala et al., 2010). Distance educators acknowledge the need to foster social interaction for the purpose of knowledge construction as it is the defining feature of constructivist pedagogies (Abrami et al., 2011). Learners who perceive involvement and high levels of interaction among participants report higher levels of satisfaction with the distance education program (Schnetter et al., 2014). A large volume of research has found that quality interaction and subsequent social presence can be supported in both synchronous and asynchronous models of online distance education (Anderson and Dron, 2011; Hsu and Hsieh, 2014; Kala et al., 2010).

Online learning is more complex than simply providing learning opportunities online – it requires the building of learning communities using discussion boards to help scaffold course content and build in opportunities for interaction (Lauder et al., 2011). The use of a variety of electronic technologies, not only discussion boards but blogs, email and video streaming enhances active learning and social interactivity among students, providing for user-created content and supporting collaborative learning (Kala et al., 2010; Hsu and Hsieh, 2014). Communication resources such as discussion boards can foster collaboration between student-student, student-teacher and student-content anytime (asynchronous) from anyplace through the online course providing possibly the most important function of distance learning support (Abrami et al., 2011; Kala et al.). Additionally, asynchronous online discussion groups can be implemented to foster informal professional networks among student cohorts encouraging collegial support, which may further promote educational reform in developing countries (Lewis et al., 2012). Asynchronous communication has now become the dominant mode of online communication and instruction as it creates a greater sense of reflection in student communications thus shifting the focus of learning from individual to social group learning and development (Lauder et al.).

This paper will describe the design and delivery of a Distance Learning Programme for international nurse academics as well as report on programme evaluation findings (the QUT Distance Learning Programme). Specifically it will examine the Vietnamese nurse academic's satisfaction with the pedagogical structure of the Distance Learning Programme and the suitability of programme content to assist in building academic capacity and facilitating change. Given this, the study posed the following research questions:

1. How did the Vietnamese nurse academics engage with the QUT Distance Learning Programme?
2. What was the satisfaction of Vietnamese nurse academics with the pedagogical structure of the QUT Distance Learning Programme?
3. How helpful was the QUT Distance Learning Programme in facilitating Vietnamese nurse academics to evaluate and/or change their practice?

2.1. Distance Learning Programme design

In an effort to meet the needs of Vietnamese nurse academics

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