



The acculturation, language and learning experiences of international nursing students: Implications for nursing education



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ABSTRACT

Background: International or foreign students are those who enrol in universities outside their country of citizenship. They face many challenges acculturating to and learning in a new country and education system, particularly if they study in an additional language.

Objectives: This qualitative inquiry aimed to explore the learning and acculturating experiences of international nursing students to identify opportunities for teaching innovation to optimise the experiences and learning of international nursing students.

Methods: Undergraduate and postgraduate international nursing students were recruited from one campus of an Australian university to take part in semi-structured interviews. A purposive and theoretically saturated sample of 17 students was obtained. Interviews were audio-recorded and field notes and interview data were thematically analysed.

Results: *Expressing myself* and *Finding my place* were the two major themes identified from the international student data. International nursing students identified that it took them longer to study in comparison with domestic students and that stress negatively influenced communication, particularly in the clinical setting. Additionally international nursing students identified the need to find supportive opportunities to speak English to develop proficiency. Clinical placement presented the opportunity to speak English and raised the risk of being identified as lacking language proficiency or being clinically unsafe. Initially, international nursing students felt isolated and it was some time before they found their feet. In this time, they experienced otherness and discrimination.

Conclusions: International nursing students need a safe place to learn so they can adjust and thrive in the university learning community. Faculty and clinical educators must be culturally competent; they need to understand international nursing students' needs and be willing and able to advocate for and create an equitable environment that is appropriate for international nursing students' learning.

1. Introduction

The premise of this paper is that language acquisition and education acculturation are major challenges for international nursing students in achieving optimal student learning (Lum et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2008). Students who do not have a full grasp of the language and/or the new education culture will not progress as well as those who do. Together these factors have the potential to impact the student experience of education, student learning outcomes, graduate attributes and consequently the quality of the practice of the novice registered nurse. Tertiary education institutions, nurse academics and nurse educators need to develop strategies that address these major challenges to provide a safe place for students to learn, explore nursing knowledge and practice nursing safely (Crawford and Candlin, 2013; Shaw et al.,

2015).

2. Background

Worldwide, students travel to further their education for secondary and/or tertiary educational experiences and qualifications. In the tertiary education sector, students who enrol in universities outside their country of citizenship, in either on-shore or offshore programs, are known as 'international students' (Arkoudis et al., 2012). International students have also been described as, 'foreign', or 'overseas' students. For the purpose of this discussion, they will be referred to as 'international' nursing students. Students native to the country of education will be referred to as 'domestic' students.

Globally, international student education is recognised as a major

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revenue raiser by universities and governments alike (Deloitte Access Economics, 2013; Group of Eight, 2014; Universities UK, 2015). Shortcomings in the Australian education of international students have been identified in response to fluctuations in student enrolment (Bradley et al., 2008). As competition for the international student dollar has increased the focus has been on improving the quality of the student experience from a variety of perspectives including language proficiency (Arkoudis et al., 2014; Heng, 2012), and education acculturation (Hickey, 2015; Shaw et al., 2007).

Proficiency in the language of instruction is important as communication is more than words. It is how the words are used within the language; the mode of language communication for example spoken, written and electronic; the context of use; and the manner of the language communication for example jargon, colloquial or formal (Wang et al., 2008). There is a variety of language proficiency definitions but no agreed definition (Arkoudis, 2014). Importantly, in Australia to work in the health professions, a Level 7.0 in each of the four components of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS); listening, reading, writing and speaking; is required (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, 2015). These requirements are similar to requirements for enrolment in university health programs although there may be slight variations, such as an overall IELTS (Academic) of 7.0 including no component less than 6.5. Nevertheless, students who meet the required pre-requisites still encounter language issues throughout their program of study (Lum et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2008). Academics who teach international nursing students have attempted to address English proficiency with varying degrees of success (Boughton et al., 2010; Glew, 2013).

Acculturation refers to the process whereby an individual, or group, adopt or adapt cultural traits of another group which may then result in new or blended cultural patterns/behaviours (Hickey, 2015). Acculturation of international students refers to international nursing students adopting beliefs and adapting behaviours of the new education culture in order to progress and succeed in their education program. To a certain extent, all students beginning studies require some support as they transition to university (Urquhart and Pooley, 2007), and acculturate to the new university context. For example, students from secondary education are confronted with new structures, support mechanisms, educational standards and academic expectations when they enter university education. International nursing students further adapt to different socio-cultural and communication norms, a new and different education system, and possibly a new language (Choi, 2005). This obvious difference for international nursing students indicates, from a student equity perspective, that academic staff need to consider extra support for these students (Boughton et al., 2010; Gilligan and Outram, 2012).

Providing for international nursing students in a culturally competent manner supports the inclusion of these students within the new education experience to create a sense of belonging (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). Cultural competence and cultural humility (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998) indicate the ability of an individual to interact effectively across cultures and refers to the ability of individuals and organisations, including the nursing profession and health and educational institutions, to enact cultural safety (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2005). Cultural safety refers to the provision of an environment where all are respected and work together towards shared goals including that of learning (Ramsden, 1990; Williams, 1999). Cultural competence and cultural safety go hand in hand. This may of course be difficult to enact especially if all staff and students are not aware of the concepts or capable of enacting them (Berman and Paradies, 2010). Logically this means that without cultural competence and cultural safety international nursing students may experience both discrimination and racism in new social and education environments (Pettman, 1992; Sedgwick et al., 2014).

The impetus for the research project arose from concerns amongst staff at one Australian university campus that international nursing

student learning needs, across both undergraduate and post-graduate programs, were not being optimally met. Such concerns regarding the learning and teaching of international students have been evident in the literature for a number of years (Choi, 2005; DeLuca, 2005). Investigations have focussed on quality improvement (Glew, 2013), relationships between staff and students (Levett-Jones et al., 2009), and commencing student issues. Others explored international student experience and needs, for example Carter and Xu (2007) thematically analysed survey results of 123 nursing students, academics (n = 14), and community advisors (n = 4) identifying key international student support needs. The identified needs related to student retention, admission criteria, student screening and faculty support, highlighting the structural influences affecting the international student experience, but leaving room for further investigation of the student experience.

Adding to this perspective Wang et al. (2008) identified obstacles to learning, learning experience, coping strategies, and desired academic assistance in their investigation of the learning experience of 21 Taiwanese postgraduate nursing students at one Australian university. Others identified the communication challenges of international nursing students (Crawford and Candlin, 2013; Lum et al., 2015). The study by Crawford and Candlin (2013) explored the language needs of culturally and linguistically diverse undergraduate nursing students in a small action research study, this paper highlighted the potential for action research in this milieu. The identified strategies related to English language acquisition and the challenging requirements of the English language testing exam.

Overall the research regarding the learning of international nursing students is fragmented. Taking these perspectives into account our exploration of the literature indicated the need to further develop understandings of the experience of international nursing students in order to address their equity needs.

3. Methods

This qualitative inquiry aimed to explore the learning and acculturation experiences of international nursing students studying within a School of Nursing and Midwifery at one Australian university. It aimed to address the question “how do international nursing students experience learning within a School of Nursing and Midwifery?” The study informed a larger participatory action research (PAR) project that aimed to promote enhanced experiences for international students (Del Fabbro et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2015).

Data collection for this inquiry was designed to explore the student's experiences of learning and acculturation. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, reviewed by members of the research team, piloted with international nursing students then revised and finalised (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). A sample list of open-ended interview questions is provided to illustrate the initial lines of inquiry (see Box 1). Participants undertook one group or individual face-to-face interview on campus. The opportunity to participate in a small group interview was offered to accommodate students who did not wish to be interviewed alone.

Purposive sampling was undertaken (Palys, 2008) and invitations to volunteer were sent to those identified as meeting the sample criteria; namely international undergraduates enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing program and international postgraduates enrolled in Coursework or Higher Degree by Research nursing programs at one Australian university campus. International nursing students who responded to the written invitation to volunteer contacted the researchers directly and had an opportunity to discuss the research project before providing written consent to participate in the project.

Interviews, ranged from 30 to 60 min in length, were audio-recorded and interviewers made field notes during and after the interviews. Interviews were transcribed and researchers performed manual thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews and field notes (Basit, 2003). Analysis required systematically identifying and coding key

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