



Experiences of student midwives learning and working abroad in Europe: The value of an Erasmus undergraduate midwifery education programme

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ABSTRACT

Background: universities in the United Kingdom are being challenged to modify policies and curricula that reflect the changing global reality through internationalisation. An aspect of internationalisation is *study abroad* which the European Commission Erasmus exchange programme is just one means of addressing this. **Objective:** to explore the experiences of student midwives who are engaged in the Erasmus exchange programme and the effect it has on their learning and working in an international context.

Design: approval for the small phenomenological cohort study was obtained from two participating universities: the University of Malta and University of Nottingham. Data were collected from 13 student midwives from a total of five cohorts in the form of diaries to explore their experiences of learning and working in another country. Thematic analysis supported by Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software was used to identify five recurrent themes emerging from the data: the findings of which have served further in developing this programme.

Findings: students valued the opportunity of undertaking study and midwifery practice in another culture and healthcare system, extending their knowledge and development of clinical competence and confidence. For some, this was the first time outside of their home country and adaptation to a new environment took time. Support from their contemporaries, lecturers and midwife mentors however, was overwhelmingly positive, enabling the students to feel *'part of the local university / midwifery team'* By the end of the programme, the students recognised that they had become more independent and felt empowered to facilitate developments in practice when they returned home.

Implications for Education / Practice: this innovative development embracing internationalisation within the curricula has the potential to increase students' employability and further study within Europe and beyond. It can be used as a vehicle to share best practice within an international context, ultimately making a difference to the quality of care childbearing women, their babies and families experience worldwide.

Introduction and background

Although the United Kingdom (UK) is established as the most popular destination for international students, hosting 493,570 international students in the academic year 2013/2014, only 22,100 (1.2%) students of a total of 1,863,860 UK domiciled students went abroad to study, work or volunteer during their studies. In this cohort 24,005 students were studying subjects allied to medicine of which only 285 (1.2%) experienced study abroad (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2016). The report however, does not specify how many of these

285 students were undertaking midwifery programmes. In trying to establish the reasons that may deter students from the UK from going abroad to study, the British Council (2015) UK student data revealed the main issues were related to personal safety and access to quality healthcare, the difficulty of leaving their family, the financial burden compared to domestic elective placements and a lack of confidence in their language abilities. Goodman et al. (2008); Owen et al. (2013); Kumwenda et al. (2014); Kent-Williamson et al. (2015) also found that cost implications and lack of foreign language skills had an influence on healthcare students (from nursing, medicine and pharmacy) studying

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abroad. The number of students participating in the European Erasmus programme however, has steadily risen from 10,278 during 2007/2008 to 15,566 in 2013/2014: nearly a 7% increase year on year (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2016). Goodman et al. (2008), referring to pre-registration nursing programmes, emphasises that as UK courses are generally designed with very little time for study abroad this can be a further barrier, limiting the most linguistically able, mobile and enthusiastic student from engaging in such experiences.

It is well documented that the benefits of study abroad are wide ranging which include increasing cultural awareness and sharing best practice, ideas and values to promote a better understanding of different health care settings, policies and practices which in turn, contribute to personal and professional development (Lachat and Zerbe 1992; Button et al. 2005; Ruddock and Turner 2007). Furthermore, Casey and Murphy (2008) and Milne and Cowie (2013) purport that through these programmes, the confidence of students in delivering care to individuals from different cultures is increased. However Green et al. (2008) found there were marginal differences between UK and Swedish student nurses' experiences of studying abroad in respect of the varied support they received from the international placement providers. Ultimately, having acquired experience of learning and working outside of their home country is known to improve students' degree classifications (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2016) and add value to the employability and future mobility of the healthcare workforce from the perspective of employers and policy makers. Whilst there are many benefits associated with study abroad programmes for healthcare students, little data focuses on the experiences of student midwives and thus would indicate the rationale for this particular study.

The Erasmus /Erasmus Plus Scheme:

The European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus) relates to a European Commission exchange programme that was set up in 1987 to provide university students with the opportunity to study or work abroad in another university as part of their degree programme. This involves participating in lectures and practice settings in the host country. In 2014 the Erasmus programme was extended across all sectors of lifelong learning, including school education, further and higher education, adult education and the youth sector, offering exciting opportunities for UK participants to study, work, volunteer, teach and train abroad in Europe. This programme is to run until 2020 and is known as *Erasmus Plus*.

Currently there are 33 countries who engage with Erasmus / Erasmus Plus as shown in Table 1. To be part of Erasmus, universities within the member states are required to possess the *Erasmus Charter for Higher Education* from the European Commission. On this scheme, the placement abroad is for a minimum of 12 weeks and in some instances for purely theoretical degrees, this can be for an entire academic year. The students are paid a monthly grant of between €250 and €300 to contribute towards accommodation and living expenses for the duration of their time abroad, with an extra €100 per month

Table 1
Countries engaging in Erasmus Plus (British Council 2016).

Austria	Denmark	Hungary	Lithuania	Poland	Sweden
Belgium	Estonia	Iceland	Luxembourg	Portugal	Turkey*
Bulgaria	Finland	Ireland†	Macedonia	Romania	United Kingdom
Croatia	France	Italy	Malta	Slovakia	
Cyprus	Germany	Latvia	Netherlands	Slovenia	
Czech Republic	Greece	Liechtenstein*	Norway*	Spain	

* Non EU Programme Countries.

available for students who have additional needs. This is on top of any existing grants / bursaries or loans that are in place through their home university. There are no tuition fees and the student has access to all host university facilities as any registered student.

Where clinical practice is part of the exchange, then adherence to the Professional Body requirements is essential before an *Inter-institutional agreement between programme countries* is signed by the two universities. The UK Nursing and Midwifery Council [NMC] (2011) has issued requirements, guidance and advice regarding pre-registration nursing and midwifery education programmes to ensure that the safety of service users, students and staff is upheld outside of the UK. This includes that risk assessments have been completed and all identified risks addressed, audits of the learning environment have been undertaken to confirm adequate levels of supervision and mentorship and that planned experiences reflect the intended programme outcomes. In addition, it is expected that the student has at least one named mentor during the period of study (NMC, 2008), that they work within the scope of their UK approved programme and fitness to practise requirements complying with the midwifery education standards (NMC, 2009) and that they have adequate insurance against major risks: e.g. professional indemnity, personal health and travel and vicarious liability (NMC, 2011).

Context of the study

Midwifery exchanges between the University of Nottingham and the University of Malta began in 2011 with the agreement for four students from each university to exchange every year once the *Requirements, guidance and advice for learning outside the UK for pre-registration nursing and midwifery students* (NMC, 2011) and the *Standards to support learning and assessment in practice* (NMC, 2008) had been fulfilled. This included undertaking audits of the learning environment within the maternity unit in Malta to confirm the planned learning experience supported the intended programme outcomes and ensure there were adequate levels of supervision and mentorship (biennial educational audits were already in place at Nottingham) and providing training of midwife mentors in Malta and Nottingham on the requirements of the visiting student midwives' respective educational programme and assessment strategy. Erasmus study abroad exchanges were already well established within the undergraduate midwifery programme in Malta, whereas this initiative was very much in its infancy at Nottingham, with Malta being the very first university to engage with the Academic Division of Midwifery. The exchange was initially a challenge to organise in Nottingham as study abroad was not an integral part of the pre-registration curriculum and the 13 weeks Erasmus exchange had to be fitted in as an 'extra' (Goodman et al. 2008). In addition, due to the University of Nottingham running two midwifery education degree programmes each year (March and September) compared to the one programme in Malta, the Erasmus study abroad experience in Malta was offered twice a year to the Nottingham students to enable some degree of equity of opportunity between cohorts. Selection to the programme was made by an independent panel according to the University of Nottingham's School of Nursing, Midwifery and Physiotherapy study abroad criteria as places were highly competitive. The exchange took place in the *third year* of both midwifery education degree programmes: at the *beginning* of the year for the Nottingham students and *towards the end* of the year for the Maltese students as their programme lasted four years.

Aim of the study

To gain an insight into the experiences of student midwives' engagement in the Erasmus programme within two universities.

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