



How do we facilitate international clinical placements for nursing students: A cross-sectional exploration of the structure, aims and objectives of placements

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Nursing
Undergraduate
International clinical placement
Cultural awareness

ABSTRACT

Background: International clinical placements provide undergraduate students with a unique and complex clinical learning environment, to explore cultural awareness, experience different health care settings and achieve clinical competencies. Higher education institutions need to consider how to structure these placements to ensure appropriate and achievable aims and learning outcomes.

Objectives: In this study we described the structure, aims and learning outcomes associated with international clinical placement opportunities currently undertaken by Australian undergraduate nursing students in the Asia region.

Participants: Forty eight percent (n = 18) of the institutions invited responded. Eight institutions met the inclusion criteria, one of which offered three placements in the region, resulting in 10 international placements for which data were provided.

Methods: An online survey tool was used to collect data during August and September 2015 on international clinical placements conducted by the participating universities. Descriptive data on type and numbers of placements is presented, along with results from the content analysis conducted to explore data from open ended questions on learning aims and outcomes.

Results: One hundred students undertook 10 International Clinical Placements offered in the Asian region by eight universities. Variations across placements were found in the length of placement, the number of students participating, facilitator to student ratios and assessment techniques used. Five categories related to the aims of the programs were identified: 'becoming culturally aware through immersion', 'working with the community to promote health', 'understanding the role of nursing within the health care setting', 'translating theory into professional clinical practice', and 'developing relationships in international learning environments'. Four categories related to learning outcomes were identified: 'understanding healthcare and determinants of health', 'managing challenges', 'understanding the role of culture within healthcare' and 'demonstrating professional knowledge, skills and behaviour'.

Conclusions: International clinical placements in the Asia region appear to vary greatly from one education institution to the next with no clear consensus from either this study's findings or the literature on which structure, support and assessments lead to greater student learning.

1. Introduction

International clinical placements undertaken in undergraduate nursing programs provide the opportunity for authentic, complex and dynamic learning environments that encourage and foster students' cultural awareness. The importance of developing an understanding of culture when delivering health care and the positive impact this can have on outcomes is reflected in the Standards of Practice and Codes of Ethics for nurses globally. In Australia, registered nurses are expected to respect all cultures and experiences and recognize the importance that

culture, and history have in promoting health and wellbeing for individuals and communities (NMBA, 2016). Similar sentiments are also expressed in other countries such as in Canada, where 'nurses work with persons receiving care to take into account their values, customs and spiritual beliefs, as well as their social and economic circumstances without judgment or bias' (Canadian Nurses Association, 2017, p12). In the United States 'a fundamental principle that underlies all nursing practice is respect for the inherent dignity, worth, unique attributes and human rights for all individuals' (American Nurses Association, 2015, p1); and in the United Kingdom 'nurses make sure that those receiving

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care are treated with respect, that their rights are upheld and any discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards those receiving care are challenged' (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2015, p4). The consensus in the national and international literature that nursing students should have knowledge of global health systems and be able to provide culturally competent care within increasingly multicultural communities at home and abroad is evident (Browne et al., 2015). It is therefore imperative that undergraduate nursing programs embed both theoretical and clinical learning opportunities for students to develop cultural awareness at all stages of their degree.

Developing graduates who are global citizens capable of meeting the above standards, requires a commitment to internationalizing curricula to enable the preparation of students who become ethical and responsible human beings, as well as competent professional practitioners (Leask and Bridge, 2013). A person's worldview is framed by our own set of cultural assumptions and attitudes, which may not be recognizable at a conscious level unless we are provided with an opportunity to explore these assumptions (Stone et al., 2014). International clinical placements have the potential to provide students with a transformative learning environment that allows this exploration and can enable them to become more aware of their own attitudes towards culture, as well as being able to demonstrate, within clinical practice, the ability to recognize and provide culturally respectful nursing care (Geburu and Willman, 2010).

International placement opportunities involve nursing students travelling overseas to complete an element of their clinical education either individually or as part of a group. Such placements are variably described as short-term study abroad experiences (Maltby et al., 2016), study abroad programs (Brown et al., 2016) and international placement experiences (Schwind et al., 2013); and can vary in length, destination, number of participants, level of facilitation and learning outcomes (Phillips et al., 2017).

Attention to the design of international clinical placements is essential if they are to promote student-learning and encourage outcomes that achieve the culturally focused graduate attributes required in an increasingly global workforce (Leask and Wallace, 2015; Barker et al., 2010). To achieve this there should be clearly articulated aims, learning outcomes and support mechanisms that include strong facilitation, structured learning activities and appropriate assessment tasks aligned to intended learning outcomes. These supports, and the ongoing sustainability of such placements as valuable clinical practice opportunities, can best be achieved by embedding them within a curriculum, through awarding credit and maintaining strong linkages to theoretical content (M Emmott et al., 2010).

2. Background

Learning outcomes for international clinical placements, described in the literature have emphasized the observed benefits of promoting cultural awareness through challenging students in a culturally diverse environment whilst also assisting them to achieve clinical proficiency (Phillips et al., 2017; Maltby et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2012). Additionally, such placements are believed to provide nursing students with the opportunity to increase their knowledge of, and ability to, communicate across cultural boundaries; a skill that has important implications for their ongoing professional practice (Smith-Miller et al., 2010). These benefits are considered to have the potential to, develop in students, important graduate attributes such as leadership, teamwork, critical thinking and communication, which are essential elements of professional nursing practice (Canadian Nurses Association, 2017; NMBA, 2016; American Nurses Association, 2015).

Clearly articulated learning outcomes are not always evident from published accounts of international placement opportunities, which often focus on descriptive or narrative accounts by students, facilitators or educational institutions (Schwind et al., 2013; Browne et al., 2014; Emmanuel and Rands, 2010). This issue has also been described in

other health related programs such as medicine and occupational therapy (Barker et al., 2010; Nishigori et al., 2009) and highlights the need for placement opportunities that have not only clearly identified learning outcomes, but ensure those outcomes are realistic, achievable and linked to assessment.

Ensuring learning outcomes are achievable requires skilled supervision, and learning and assessment strategies that enable students to develop both professional and personal capabilities. A global review of the universal standards of practice for culturally competent care (Douglas et al., 2011) highlights the importance of teaching strategies that: provide for personal and professional growth, make interpersonal and intercultural connections, and increase the understanding of other cultures and people. The core principles of developing quality assessment in higher education including; assessment for learning, constructive alignment and fit-for purpose assessment (Jackel et al., 2017), should guide the creation of assessments that support these principles.

Similarly, supervision of students in clinical learning environments is also key to achieving desired learning outcomes (Kristofferson et al., 2013). Although as yet an understanding of this role in the specialised international placement environment has not been explored in the literature. The current gaps in the literature in articulating the structure, supervision, teaching and assessment methods that best support students' learning opportunities in international environments need to be addressed to assist educators and students alike to achieve the desired standards outlined by Nursing Boards worldwide.

To begin to address this gap a study aimed at understanding what constitutes successful international clinical placements in the Asian region for Australian undergraduate nursing students has been conducted. It is planned that this knowledge will then contribute to the development of a framework to guide higher education institutions in the creation and maintenance of international placements that are sustainable and successful for students, the university and the host communities. The Asia region was chosen for this study because of the Australian Government's emphasis on the importance of deepening links within this region, through expanded support for educational institutions aimed at encouraging student mobility in the region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2013). Despite the localized nature of the investigation the findings are presented in the context of the international literature to provide relevance for readers outside of Australia that conduct international student placements in host countries where the culture is significantly different from that of the student's home.

This study included two components; in depth semi-structured interviews with international clinical placement stakeholders, such as students, universities, program managers and local communities, and an online survey mapping current international clinical placement opportunities offered in Australia. Only the findings from the Australian mapping survey are reported here. This survey sought to describe the aims and learning outcomes that educational institutions assign to these placements to better understand how the structure of these placements may impact on meeting these outcomes. The study has received ethics approval from the Institutions' Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC 2014/055).

3. Methodology

An online survey tool was designed to collect demographic and placement data, as well as data on learning aims, outcomes and assessment methods that higher education institutions in Australia have incorporated into international clinical placement programs offered to nursing students. An invitation to participate in the on-line survey was extended to all higher education institutions with entry to practice nursing programs (N = 37) through an email sent to each University's Head of Nursing School or discipline in August and September 2015. The survey tool was designed to include questions on the structure of the placement, learning aims and outcomes, evaluation methods and

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