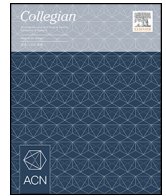




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## The experiences of Australian undergraduate nursing students of a clinical placement in Cambodia

Elizabeth Halcomb\*, Carolyn Antoniou, Rebekkah Middleton, Maria Mackay

School of Nursing, University of Wollongong, Northfields Ave, Wollongong, NSW, 2522, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** International clinical placements are being increasingly offered to expose students to different health settings internationally. Both nationally and internationally there is a need to build the primary health care nursing workforce to meet changing community needs. Exposure to specialty areas during clinical placement can impact career choices.

**Aim:** This paper explores the experiences of Australian undergraduate nursing students undertaking a primary health care clinical placement in Cambodia.

**Method:** This exploratory qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to gather experiential narratives. Eight Australian undergraduate nursing students from a single University in New South Wales, Australia participated in the study. Verbatim transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Results:** Interview data revealed four themes, namely; *Preparation for placement*, *Challenges*, *“The experience is so, so worth it”* and *PHC “it’s a lot more than words on a page now”*. Despite pre-placement preparation, students were challenged during the placement in ways that they never expected. These challenges saw them grow both professionally and personally from the experience. Additionally, exposing students to primary health care in practice helped to demonstrate the value and importance of this area of nursing.

**Conclusions:** International clinical placement experiences present undergraduate nursing students with unique challenges and facilitate both professional and personal growth. Enhanced appreciation of primary health care among participants has potentially positive implications as they enter the nursing workforce. However, future studies need to investigate the longer term impact of international placement experiences within the broader undergraduate preparation of nurses and into their future careers.

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### 1. Introduction

Quality undergraduate nursing education needs to prepare nurses not only to practice within acute care hospitals, but also expose students to the increasing number of settings in which nurses' work. As the world becomes increasingly connected and migrants move across the globe, nurses require an awareness of global health, including health disparities, service delivery and health priorities (Gower, Duggan, Dantas, & Boldy, 2017; Kent-Wilkinson, Dietrich Leurer, Luimes, Ferguson, & Murray, 2015). International clinical placements provide an opportunity for nursing students to not only practice their clinical skills, but also enrich their global perspective of health and health services and develop

cultural and global awareness (Ailinger, Molloy, & Sacasa, 2009; Burgess, Reimer-Kirkham, & Astle, 2014; Kelleher, 2013; Kent-Wilkinson et al., 2015; Tuckett & Crompton, 2014).

Clinical placement is an essential aspect of undergraduate nursing education as it links theory to practice (Shoqirat & Abu-Qamar, 2013), enabling students to increase competence and readiness for practice (Maharajan et al., 2017; The Department of Health, 2013). It is in the clinical environment that students are afforded opportunities to meaningfully contribute to the delivery of healthcare and to consolidate their own professional identity (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2011; Maharajan et al., 2017). Clinical placement also offers an opportunity to expose students to the realities and complexities of nursing and health service delivery.

### 2. Background

A large body of literature exists around undergraduate nursing clinical placements (Forber et al., 2016; Koch, Everett, Phillips, & Davidson, 2015). However, much of this literature focusses on the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [ehalcomb@uow.edu.au](mailto:ehalcomb@uow.edu.au) (E. Halcomb), [ctoldi@uow.edu.au](mailto:ctoldi@uow.edu.au) (C. Antoniou), [rmiddle@uow.edu.au](mailto:rmiddle@uow.edu.au) (R. Middleton), [mmackay@uow.edu.au](mailto:mmackay@uow.edu.au) (M. Mackay).

**Summary of relevance  
Problem or Issue**

- Clinical placements expose nursing students to the realities of clinical practice. In our changing world, nurses need to be prepared to deal with multicultural clients and the range of settings where nurses work.

**What is Already Known**

- The experiences of international clinical placements and their impact on appreciation of primary health care are not widely reported in the literature.

**What this Paper Adds**

- Evidence that international clinical placements can challenge undergraduate students to promote personal and professional growth, as well as enhance their understanding of the value and importance of primary health care nursing.

acute care setting (Peters, McInnes, & Halcomb, 2015). This literature does, however, demonstrate the impact of clinical placement on student development with students regarding these placements as being essential to their successful preparation as registered nurses (Bjørk, Berntsen, Brynildsen, & Hestetun, 2014; Edwards, Smith, Courtney, Finlayson, & Chapman, 2004). The literature often reports clinical placement as being the most influential aspect of the degree in terms of skills development and application, knowledge building and integration, professional socialisation and attitude development, and observation of care delivery by registered nurses (Bjørk et al., 2014; Edwards et al., 2004; Peters et al. 2015). The student experience is, however, influenced by the quality of the placement in terms of the environment, its opportunities for learning and the support received from both staff and facilitators (Killam & Carter, 2010; Jones, Lathlean, Higgins, & McMillan, 2009).

Despite the growing popularity of international clinical placement experiences (Tuckett & Crompton, 2014), there is considerably less attention paid to them in the literature (Browne, Fetherston, & Medigovich, 2015; Jones, Neubrandner, & Huff, 2012). This literature identifies how these international experiences promote both professional and personal growth within students as they develop an insight into the global delivery of health care beyond their own country (Browne et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2012). Given the impact of the quality of clinical experiences on learning outcomes (Killam & Carter, 2010; Levett-Jones et al., 2009), it is important that as we develop these international placements we seek to investigate students' experiences and explore the perceived effectiveness of the experience to ensure that learning needs are being met (Kelleher, 2013).

In addition to the professional development that occurs during clinical placements, positive clinical experiences influence the attitudes of nursing students towards more favourable perceptions of that area of nursing and students are more likely to view that area of nursing as a promising career destination (Cleary & Happell, 2005; Courtney-Pratt, Fitzgerald, Ford, Johnson, & Wills, 2014). Internationally, there is a need to grow capacity in primary health care nursing to meet the changing community health needs. Exposing students to a global view of primary health care nursing has the potential to not only develop their capacity as global citizens but also positively influence their future career decisions and assist in meeting nursing workforce demands.

**3. Methods**

**3.1. Aims**

This study aimed to develop an understanding of student's experiences of a two week overseas clinical placement in Cambodia. Additionally, the study sought to develop a greater understanding of the influence of a primary health care clinical placement on student nurse perceptions and potential future career choices of this area of nursing.

**3.2. Design**

This exploratory study used a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis to allow students experiences of international clinical placement to be heard.

**3.3. Sample & setting**

Participants were undergraduate nursing students from the University of Wollongong who had attended a 2 week clinical placement in North Eastern Cambodia during November/December 2015. The placement was offered by the University as an additional placement experience to the curriculum and organised via a professional international placement company.

Before attending the placement, students participated in two preparation sessions. These sessions were coordinated by the international placement company, as this was the School of Nursing's first overseas clinical placement. The sessions were delivered by experienced facilitators of international placement programs who had local knowledge of working with students in Cambodia. The sessions covered information on what to pack, the climate, cultural advice, personal care and safety, as well as preparing for the realities of primary care in a developing country.

Cambodia is a country of over 15 million people located in South East Asia and bordered by Vietnam, Laos and Thailand (National Institute of Statistics, 2017). Although it gained independence in 1953, Cambodia has significant issues with corruption, poverty, hunger and limited political freedom (National Institute of Statistics, 2017). Students were divided between two primary health clinics located less than one hour from Siem Reap in the northeast of Cambodia. Each of these clinics had a caseload drawn from a catchment area of local villages and farming communities. The clinic staff were principally nurses and delivered all aspects of care from midwifery, pharmacy, education, immunisation and emergency care. The students were accompanied by two Registered Nurse Academic Facilitators who were also members of the research team, as well as two interpreters.

**4. Data collection**

All students who attended the placement were contacted by the research team to participate in the interviews at a mutually convenient time. Telephone interviews were conducted due to the geographic dispersion of students. Interviews were all undertaken within six weeks of the students returning to Australia. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company. The interviewers also recorded field notes during and after the interviews. The interview questions had been developed from a review of the literature and consultations with experts in clinical nursing education (Box 1). The questions were reviewed after the first two interviews to ensure that they were appropriate. Given the small potential sample pilot interviews were not undertaken. Recruitment was continued until data saturation was achieved.

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