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The international focus – a neglected curriculum in global undergraduate nursing

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Abstract

International learning in undergraduate global nurse education is recognised for promoting essential cultural competence. This can be addressed both at university; through the increasing use of collaborative technology, and in practice, where the impact of international placements has promoted cultural sensitivity and outward student mobility. The authors debate the barriers that impede students' desire to take up international placements and review initiatives to promote a greater investment in this experience. The complexity and lack of transcultural principles that govern an international placement exchange have been addressed by one initiative to produce a robust pan-European quality audit process for clinical learning environments. In conclusion, the authors call for a greater and evaluated effort to increase global understanding and learning in the context of the COVID-19 response.

Although the requirement to isolate and localise has been part of the COVID-19 guidelines, nurse education has always benefitted from an outward facing educational approach. Comparing and contrasting our own health care systems brings an appreciation of

differences and possibilities in the wider, global context (Browne and Fetherston, 2018; Gosse and Katic – Duffy, 2020). An international focus is essential in nurse education to continue to advance knowledge and professional learning irrespective of culture. This paper questions why the take up of pre- COVID international placements for student nurses remained low and what strategies can be put in place to raise the profile of an international focus in the undergraduate curriculum.

The uptake and challenges of undergraduate nurse international placements

It seems that the potential of outward facing student opportunities is yet to be realised and in the UK this has been made evident. In 2015-16 nursing was one of the ten lowest subjects by mobility rates of 1.7 % compared with a 7.2% average across the overall student population of the UK (UUKi, 2018). The Go International ‘Stand Out’ campaign, recognising this issue, hoped to double the percentage of UK-domiciled students who study, work or volunteer abroad. Their aim was to reach 13.2% in 2020 to ‘create a new generation of global graduates, and a higher education culture in which international opportunities are an aspiration for all students’ (UUKi, 2018). Unfortunately, this aim was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Universities UK International and the British Council’s Student Perspectives on Going International (2015) surveyed 2,842 undergraduate students across 37 institutions. Despite the majority recognising a positive effect on personal development and career prospects, four barriers to these outward mobility opportunities remained: insufficient funding, fear of isolation and security, language skills and the impact on friendships and relationships. An educational culture, that promotes global programmes early in a course, was influential especially when adjoined to the necessary support systems to make it happen.

The phenomena of culture adaptation and shock; when students experience acute, cultural disorientation, can occur when learners are unprepared for the unfamiliar cultural norms and beliefs on their international placement. Often, they realise their own cultural identities which they might not have done before.

This points to the importance of effective preparation and promoting realistic expectations. Student outlets, such as a member of their own nursing faculty or regular, reflective engagement within the exchange group, can allow students to work through difficulties and positively experience a different culture. 'Allowing students, the time to debrief, and self-reflect is critical to process the experiences of learning from different cultures and health care system' (Gosse and Katic – Duffy, 2020, p.5). Browne and Fetherston (2018) concur with this view and promote the use of critical reflection through journaling or reflective papers.

Acknowledging the significance of an international learning experience

An important first step in raising the profile of internationalisation is a recognition of its unique significance to students' development. In a packed nursing curriculum, this is often far from the case with an emphasis on national as opposed to international priorities.

Students' personal accounts from across the globe reflect on how students have been transformed, both professionally and personally, through their international placement experiences. As with all placement experiences the potential for growth is astonishing (Morley et al., 2020) but the international context can accelerate this further. One of the characteristics of an extraordinary placement experience is a 'high stakes' learning situation - evident in international placements - where there is greater connection with students'

affective engagement. As students' resilience and adaptability are challenged so does the impact of the placement experience (Morley et al., 2020).

As a result of an authentic international learning experience, Universities UK International's Gone International (2018) found that in consecutive undergraduate cohorts outwardly mobile students had increased chances of a higher degree classification and to be employed post-graduation in a graduate level job. Gains were particularly evident with Black and minority ethnic (BAME) students, and those from a lower socio-economic background. With these students, their likelihood of employment and level of salary compared with non-mobile peers was increased. Asian students were 43.5% less likely to be unemployed than their peers who did not have an international experience. For nurses, these gains extend to reported increased clinical competence, confidence and independence as well as cultural sensitivity (CoD, 2017).

As interest in the global progress and management of COVID- 19 has increased, many nurse academics have noted the lack of an international presence in their curricula. A scoping literature review of internationalisation in nurse education in the last five years, found that cultural competence is recognised as a necessary skill set in nursing (Browne and Fetherston, 2018; Gosse and Katic – Duffy 2020). Long term, attention to cultural competence in nursing programmes is thought to provide students with deeper self-awareness with culturally diverse patients, colleagues and environments. In a post COVID world, the question is raised as to whether cultural competence will extend to a greater criticality of complex health issues in resource limited settings and go beyond the current definition.

A greater move towards international experience in the curriculum

The notoriously slow adoption of online learning in higher education has been accelerated by COVID - 19. With travel restrictions predicted to be in place for some time, creative solutions, and a greater attention to the focus and quality of live placements, may present answers. Without careful attention, COVID-19 may well impact not only on the practicalities, but also on student enthusiasm, for an international placement as part of their learning experience.

The quality of international placements is variable. In the international context, despite the compelling testimonies as to the transformative benefits of placements, Browne and Fetherston (2018, p.10) found that 'international placements appear to vary greatly from one education institution to the next with no clear consensus from the literature on what structure, support and assessments lead to greater student learning'. Pedagogies, such as guided reflection, and learning outcomes lacked the specificity and appropriate clinical supervision necessary for optimised practice and learning. Weaker aspects of international placements urgently need addressing to mitigate against the already challenging landscape of international student exchange in the COVID-19 era.

However, alternatives exist in the form of virtual learning. Collaborative online international learning (COIL) offers students the use technology to provide an experiential, international experience without travelling abroad. De Castro, Dyba, Cortez and Pe Benito (2018) found that online cross institutional student learning groups, examining their nursing practice from the Philippines and the USA, improved intercultural communication. Attention was needed to accommodate two university curricula, time zones and varying levels of internet access indicating the necessarily high investment in faculty collaboration and student preparation. For those unable to physically exchange it provides a potentially viable alternative.

Through individual projects, and the investment of initiatives such as Go International, creative and innovative pedagogic strategies are being embedded into curricula that are attracting students of all socio-economic backgrounds to participate (Council of Deans for Health, 2017). A variety of placements mitigates against some of the barriers that prevent students applying for placements abroad. Different lengths and locations of international placements across a nursing programme could widen the scope of inclusivity particularly when linked to travel bursaries and clear governance on the coordination of the experience. Capturing students' interest early in their courses, in conjunction with curriculum planning that allows for preparation, implementation and debrief of the international placement, is more likely to ensure success in their learning. Go International (2015) demonstrates that a short placement of up to two weeks can have an exponential effect on widening participation and opportunities such as this can address learning outcomes related to cultural awareness.

Recognition of new standards and a pedagogy of international placement learning

The challenge of maintaining standards and the quality of placements within home placements is multiplied in its complexity when working with international partners.

Consistent quality is critical to the success of nurse international placements. Nurses' roles and scope of practice does vary internationally which can be a confused environment for students to enter when going overseas. It is imperative that the quality of environments, and clarity of the local and national standards is clear, as inevitably students will be measured against their own country's professional benchmark standards.

Like many studies related to practice learning, students continue to need guidance and support to negotiate and make explicit their practice learning (Morley et al., 2020). This is

more evident in an alien environment of an international learning setting where the type of supervision required remains an under researched area (Browne and Fetherston, 2018).

Drawing attention to learning is often an essential part of coaching a learner in a practice. In the practice learning context, hidden and implicit learning needs to be raised to a conscious level in order for it to be recognised as learning by the student (Morley et al., 2020).

Effective partnerships are the lynchpin of successful transcultural teaching. By supporting collaborative learning across institutions, that benefits both students and academics, a global perspective in academic and practice learning is more likely. Gosse and Katic – Duffy (2020) stress the importance of ‘reciprocity’ in this process. The ERASMUS+ (EuROpean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) scheme has operated in Europe for over 30 years and provides an excellent example of institutional reciprocity. Students gain valuable international experience by undertaking a work placement, or part of their degree, in another country that is part of the scheme.

In its turn, this recognised exchange mechanism for European universities, provides a framework for professional bodies, such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council in the UK, to approve placements abroad in accordance with their own quality standards. This has, however, proved challenging and universities in Finland, Malta, Poland, Spain and the UK have worked collaboratively on the Supporting Internationalisation of Traineeships in the Healthcare Sector (HEALint) project to produce a robust pan-European quality audit process for clinical learning environments. An initial literature review demonstrated the complexity and lack of transcultural principles that govern an international placement exchange (Hall, Higgins, Narayanasamy and Feliciano, 2019). By raising confidence and investing in their quality processes, HEALint has supported future growth of international placements within

their partnership organisations (Hall et al., 2019). Ultimately this would ensure confidence in the learning environment and be a vehicle to expand more opportunities in Europe and beyond. The intention is to now train practitioners in the use of the audit tool as well as extending the project to the development of clinical digital audit tools that include medicine and professions allied to medicine.

The way forward

Despite these innovative examples, Browne and Fetherston (2018, p.3) continue to point to the 'current gaps in the literature in articulating the structure, supervision, teaching and assessment methods that best support students' learning opportunities in international environments.' As part of our own programmes of nursing study, we can make a difference to all students' exposure to global health issues at a time when sharing a global perspective has proven to be an imperative.

In the UK, the decision to leave the Erasmus+ scheme, and set up a new global exchange programme, the Turing scheme (Ali, 2021) has caused much consternation. In the UK (UUKi, 2018) 44.8% of all placements were through the Erasmus+. For those countries remaining in the scheme, there has been a recent substantial increase of funding to Erasmus + focusing on underrepresented student groups. This investment is not matched in the first year of funding for the new Turing scheme and, once international travel returns to normal levels, the new scheme has insufficient funding for students from non-traditional backgrounds (Ali, 2021).

Against the landscape of the pandemic, this paper calls for a reconfiguration of the place of internationalisation, and, the future of international placements, within undergraduate nursing curriculum. The importance of global nursing influences can be reflected in both the

academic and practice component of courses through taking a macro level perspective in the curriculum and a micro perspective on placement. Increasingly, the macro level can be experienced online (De Castro, Dyba, Cortez and Pe Benito, 2018) due to the acceptability of this learning medium in a post pandemic world. In the case of international placements, the need for creative evaluation and ongoing research is vital (Browne and Fetherston, 2018; Gosse and Katic – Duffy, 2020) to ensure that the right emphasis is placed on opportunity for all nursing students whilst mitigating against barriers that may prevent students planning for transformative, international development.

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