



## **A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION STUDY OF ERASMUS INTENSIVE PROGRAMS (IP) – A CONTRIBUTION TO TRANSCULTURAL NURSING?**

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This qualitative study set out to explore the main aspects of an Erasmus IP which contribute to student learning. One cohort of 45 IP students (n=8) completed a previously designed survey and the results used to inform interviews in a second cohort of 48 students from 9 institutions and 8 countries. Two sets of focus groups (FGs) were conducted and audiotaped. The first FGs were sorted by countries (and incorporated all participants). The second FGs consisted of a spokesperson from each of the first groups, meaning that this group was multinational. The results were transcribed verbatim. Thematic content analysis was performed by three researchers from different countries initially and joint agreement reached subsequently. The four main emerging themes were: transcultural nursing, transcultural experience, organization of the IP and student commitment. Subthemes revealed that in nursing, students learned that they had similar issues but different ways of managing these. The actual students' experience showed it to be rewarding, helped them to think more creatively and provided peer learning in informal settings. Improvements are suggested concerning practical organizational matters and a better match between lectures and the IP topic, however the formal learning was especially valuable to nursing students and the informal learning was clearly evident.

**Keywords:** Transcultural nursing, Erasmus Intensive Programs, Student evaluation, focus groups, International peer learning, Cultural competence.

### **Introduction**

The international dimension of higher education is becoming increasingly important as countries seek to learn from each other at national and institutional level. With advanced communications and technology, cheap travel and an increased international workforce, the world is becoming less national and more global in nature [1, 2]. Internationalization is an important aspect of

enhancing interpersonal understanding and multicultural cooperation and European universities seek to increase internationalization in their higher education institutions. With the advent of many migrant and refugee populations within countries and the ease of cross border working, it is essential for European health professionals' to develop their international and intercultural skills. It is therefore essential to the advancement of education, in whatever field, that a multicultural nation needs to think beyond local groups as a form of inquiry and into international and global issues [3].

International learning is of great relevance to higher education in general and more specifically to evidence-based practice in nurse education. In higher education, one of the most challenging developments is the emergence of a society that is global, networked and in which knowledge is the main economic driving force. With regard to nursing education, Montgomery et al [4] advocate that nursing research should be taught to broad populations of health care providers and utilised by nurses who provide direct care to patients. Montgomery and colleagues [4] call this the "ideal triad of research-based clinical practice", yet admit that the current state of practice is not ideal. Their article makes seven recommendations on strategies to promote global research and dissemination, one being to encourage creative global collaboration by educational institutions. They suggest:

*"Exchange programs expose nurses to other cultures, health care structures and practices, and may assist nurses to value their own contribution to the profession of nursing on a global level"*

(Montgomery et al, 2004:128)

The president of the National League for Nursing (NLN) refers to developed countries as 'global villages' and calls for an international agenda to examine current needs for international educational partnerships within the nursing profession [5]. Gaining knowledge about a specific field of study, language, and culture can contribute to quality in becoming a professional practitioner in a multicultural society. In terms of health care, many countries can learn from each other on sharing best practices in treating diseases, plus globalization can link patients from different countries, with the same diseases, to form world wide support groups[2]. Nurses are now confronted with a growing diverse patient population and varied peer group in which cross-cultural issues play an important role. For instance, cultural competence in health care professionals is one area to reduce health care disparities and improve the quality of care delivered to patients [6].

The issues of caring for a multicultural client group are not the only concern for the nursing profession; health and social care disciplines are increasingly becoming multicultural professions worldwide. In the UK this is in part due to nursing shortages that have led to a recruitment driven to employ overseas nurses [7] and in part due to the targeted recruitment drive to employ nurses from specific cultures in order to care for specific minority groups residing in the UK. Clearly, training and practical experience in transcultural nursing is an essential component of any pre-registered nurse training program.

Many nursing education institutions provide international exchanges and nurse education has provided this experience for many years [5, 8, 9, 4, 10]. This can assist development in more mature and empathic attitudes and behaviours towards diversity and differences in students' interpersonal interactions with foreign patients [10, 11]. These abilities, attitudes and skills are of

paramount importance to developing a therapeutic relationship, and ultimately effective and compassionate care, with patients in expanding multicultural health care system. Thus internationalization has now become an integral part of European universities core strategies (examples include the University of the West of Scotland; The University College of Oslo and Akershus; Erasmus Hogeschool Brussels, and the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria amongst others).

Students' mobility in Erasmus programs is one aspect of internationalization. This means that student nurses not only benefit from being taught transcultural nursing, but also from the experience of studying and working with student nurses from other cultures and countries. However as many students may not have the opportunity to go abroad for long periods of study, the Erasmus Intensive Programs (IP) are an ideal solution for such students. One IP example is *The Rainbow Network*, which consists of two weeks study in Europe offered on an annual basis to approximately five nursing students of nine participating European Higher Education Institutions and eight different countries. The purpose of this IP is to explore contemporary issues in nursing from a transcultural perspective, and to encourage mobility between students and teachers from participating countries within Europe. Another major objective of the IP is to enhance students' awareness of the transcultural nursing approach in order to deliver care for different groups of patients. The focus of 2013IP was Transcultural Nursing and Mental Health, in order to raise students' awareness for the need to deliver integrated care for adults with mental health disorders and co-morbid conditions. The Network consortium uses Leininger's [12] definition of Transcultural Nursing which is based on a humanistic-scientific study of people from different cultures with consideration to the ways nurses can assist people with their daily health and living needs [12].

### **Aims of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate this specific IP with regards to learning outcomes in the proposed topic, perceptions of transcultural nursing and the students' international experience during the program.

### **Materials and Methods**

The Rainbow IP consisted of one cohort of students (n=48) from eight countries and nine different institutions. Two days before completing the IP, students were asked to meet with students from their own country. Each national group was asked to discuss a set of questions designed by the researchers. From these groups, two main international focus groups (FGs) were formed consisting of a member from each institution/country where the results of the national questions had been discussed. The purpose of dividing them primarily in their own national groups FG was so that participants could express themselves in their own language first and later their spokesperson could share their peers' perceptions and opinions in the main FG. The FGs interviews were conducted on the last day of the IP, and took approximately 45 minutes each.

FGs were considered suitable for this piece of research as an approach where experiences and perceptions of people interacting in the same context are central [13, 14].

All students received information on the proposed evaluation in a common session. Time for specific questions was allowed during the meeting and an information sheet on the project was distributed. All participants were asked to sign a consent form to say they were willing to take

part in the first group meeting and a subsequent FG interview. They were also signing to say that the interviews could be audiotaped. Ethical care was afforded to the data. All data from the interviews were anonymized and careful steps were taken to guarantee confidentiality. Students were reassured that should they not wish to participate in the evaluation, they could refuse without having any detrimental effect on their participation in the IP. They could also withdraw from the study at any time. All students agreed to take part (n=48)

After both FGs took place, data was transcribed and revised by the three researchers in this project. Each researcher coded the FG transcriptions independently in order to maximize inter rater reliability and then agreement was reached using thematic content analysis [15] on Nvivo (V-9). Coding was refined subsequently by two researchers whom revised the initial coding and four main themes were identified.

## Results

The four main themes were; transcultural nursing, transcultural experience, organization of the IP and student commitment.. The four main themes and their sub codes are addressed below.

### Theme 1: Transcultural Nursing

#### *Different Ways of Managing Care.*

Discussion led students to discuss controversial issues when managing psychiatric patients in specific situations such as aggression. An example which raised fervent debate was the use of restraint in certain countries. This was seen by some students as an archaic and penalizing approach, while others considered it as part of normal daily practice. Students discussed other possibilities to manage the same problem with a different approach such as “one to one restraining techniques” or patients’ chemical management. This is one example of how different countries had diverse solutions to managing care and led to debate on the use of evidence based approaches.

#### *We are not so Different from Each Other.*

Although the whole international group seemed initially quite heterogeneous and varied, students realized by continuous comparison and common work that differences were limited. Students seemed to share a passion for care and the IP work gave them the opportunity to discuss essential transcultural issues applied in the different lectures resulting in surprise that many students felt the same way about some topics. They seemed to share common approaches and definitely showed more commonalities than divergent views on the approach to transcultural care.

#### *Holistic Thinking.*

Students enjoyed working with a comprehensive approach to patient care with the patient included in such care. This was patent in the students’ responses and applied to their practice at all times. Many students felt that as they had experienced difficulty being understood by their peers, they now developed a greater understanding for any future patients in their care who may have language difficulties.

## **Theme 2: Transcultural Experience**

With regards to the holistic transcultural experience, three main categories emerged that are presented next.

### *Rewarding Experience*

Despite certain difficulties, all students noted what a positive experience they had by participating in this program (both academic and social). They reported that the IP was beneficial for their studies, not only with regard to specific lectures, but also providing a forum for them to learn from peers on other skills such as literature searching and writing a scientific article, as well as teamwork and leadership skills. The group who got least benefit was the “local” group of students who felt isolated from the IP. This group did not stay at the hostel and they worked on a separate assignment which meant they did not benefit from the “international experience” as such.

### *Thinking Outside the Box.*

By actively working closely with other nationalities, students rapidly became aware of some differences with regards to patients’ management. Students found this a perfect opportunity to challenge their own values and beliefs and learned to consider other solutions to similar issues. Some interesting discussions challenged both students and lecturers during the IP.

### *Learning from Others.*

As noted earlier in this section, students constantly were challenged by different visions of what is “best practice”. They enjoyed this aspect of the IP despite initial reservations. It should be noted that participants were encouraged to take a non-judgmental approach at the start of the IP with first day presentations on cultural consideration. Although constructive discussions were present most of the time, there were also some constructive disagreements.

## **3) Theme 3: Organization of the IP**

There were some issues on the practical organization of the IP. The sub themes offer relevant points that provide evaluative feedback for future programs.

### *Feedback on Preparatory Work*

Participating students had to submit two pieces of written work prior to travelling to the IP. Some students felt that little feedback had been given to them and this was not a good start for them as they felt unprepared.

### *Curriculum Content*

Some participants found that the content of the program could have been more varied or included other topics of particular interest to students. In addition, several last minute adaptations needed to be in place and therefore changes were made to the original schedule. This led to some

students feeling disappointed in the changes. However students did accept that accommodating for 48 students was a challenge for the host institution. However, an interesting point made by the IP participants in the FGs related to the way in which the changes were communicated. One example being the use of email to inform students of changes, when students could not access their emails from the hostel.

### *Home Students*

In this IP, a subgroup was formed by home students. Although some national students were included in international groups to conduct their group assignments, a specific national group was also created and led by an international tutor. Whilst those students participated in most lectures and activities, they did not seem to integrate with the rest of the group. Discussion in the FGs evidenced that those students did not share experiences with the international groups. This meant these students were not known to the international students until the last sessions with the consequent disappointment in the transcultural experience. It was felt that having a “same country group” was not good.

### *Accommodation*

This IP took place in a cold February. Unfortunately the accommodation heating system was not operational at all times which made it difficult for some students to relax properly. Additionally, students shared a hostel room with up to five other students which created basic difficulties such as access to shower and a lack of privacy. Other issues included no Internet access, lack of common areas to work during time off and no opportunity to cook own food.

### *Economy and lifestyle*

The IP took place in a north European capital, stimulating but not cheap. Students were confronted with expensive tickets and food issues. They found it difficult to have to eat out every night and discussed strategies they used to manage, as bringing food and drink in was banned in the hostel. Students did have financial difficulties which made going out very difficult, despite being in a busy capital city. There were some organized activities but expense was a major issue.

### *Teaching Methods*

Students reported that as they now have access to a wide array of teaching methods and they can access many resources they were disappointed at having some straight lectures and preferred the more interactive lectures. They also felt that they learned much from their peers’ experiences and would have valued more class discussions.

### *Academic Skills*

Students noted that despite their enthusiasm for the topic, they felt some teachers did not have the relevant background for teaching mental health. Students wanted more lectures on the speciality and felt some topics taught were dictated by the expertise of the teachers.



#### **4) Theme: Student Commitment**

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings was the amount of effort the students made to attend the IP. Some students had given up holiday time, others had to miss out on clinical experience in their own countries and make up this time when they could, some had assignments due and had much work to do on their return home. During the IP there was little time for anything other than the IP work and the international students spent much time in the evenings working on their IP assignments.

#### **Conclusions**

Findings revealed overall a positive transcultural experience and good bonding (amongst students) as well as peer international (academic) learning. However, improvements seem required concerning practical organizational matters and curriculum content.

International intensive teaching programs seem not only a logical but also an excellent avenue for students to both learn and interact in a global scenario. Specific nursing programs such as the Rainbow Network, with a focus on Transcultural Nursing, offer students a focal point to deepen in issues inherent to the nursing profession such as mental health, chronic conditions or ageing. In this particular case, analysis showed that students were passionate about the Mental Health topic and they felt the IP gave them important insight on this broad theme.

However, students were particularly helpful to identify aspects that may hinder their learning in such a concentrated time. When planning such events, it emerged that aspects such as housing, food and relaxation are an essential part of the students' experience and therefore it should be taken into account as an essential part of the program planning. Despite the fact that no program can ever be flawless, it is important to note that those aspects may have a key impact in the whole experience, particularly linked to the learning process. Interestingly, the students emphasised the benefit of the learning opportunities outside the classrooms that such an educational format offered to them. It should be noted that this IP's program was particularly demanding. Students were asked to work and prepare specific assignments after classes, but nevertheless they saw those occasions as opportunities to work on their transcultural experience from both a recreational point of view and as a valuable opportunity of learning how other countries work and manage their care. They thus ensured that they learned from their peers, but felt that such discussions should have originated in the classrooms.

Finally, the type of student attracted to the IP is worth further research. The students who participated in this study were challenged by the organizational aspects of the IP such as the poor living conditions, the cost of living, no access to internet in the evenings and they therefore had little chance to contact their friends and families. They had made sacrifices in order to attend the IP and they found the academic work quite difficult – especially when they felt they had little feedback and that there were changes to the curriculum, which caused confusion. Despite all of the challenges though, all of the students reported that they had thoroughly enjoyed their participation in the IP and that they felt it was a unique and once in a lifetime experience. Such enthusiasm and resilience are traits to be admired and strengths that will transfer to any role these people choose to take on. Whether these are strengths the students had before the IP or whether these are strengths they have gained from the IP is immaterial. What is important is that the students learn what they can and cannot do in the context of an intensive international program. It is therefore essential that such experiences are offered to such students.

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