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# THE EXPERIENCES OF NURSES AND PUBLIC HEALTH NURSES ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXCHANGE

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## Abstract

The increase of multiculturalism causes changes in peoples' health needs. From the nursing perspective it is very important to assess the challenges of increased mobility and immigration for the development of nursing and nursing education. One of the professional requirements for graduating nurses is the development of cultural skills. This target is pursued by offering students an opportunity to undertake studies abroad.

The main purpose of this paper was to explore the meaning of international student exchange for Finnish nurses and public health nurses.

The aim was also to describe the meaning of international student exchange in regard to the development of professional identity and cultural knowledge self-assessed.

A qualitative approach was used in this study. The data were collected through interviews. Six (n=6) Finnish nurses and two (n=2) Finnish public health nurses participated in the study. The Participants had been on international exchange between 6 to 10 years ago. The exchange place were in Africa, Nepal and Europe. The data were analysed using the content analysis technique.

International exchange affected personal growth. The widening of one's world view, personal development, and the experience of being different relative to others were related to personal growth. International exchange also improved professional growth.

The strengthening of confidence in work, and becoming familiar with different treatment practices and working environments as well as the recognition of the position of nurses in treatment culture and society as a whole were related to professional growth.

A functional work community as a resource for nurses was considered to be a meaningful factor.

International exchange had a significant effect on nursing based on cultural needs. A family oriented way of working, the recognition of the multidimensional aspects of health and illness, and cultural sensitivity were related to this kind of cultural nursing.

The recognition of the challenges caused by differences in health and welfare was considered

The results of this study suggest that international experience improves the personal resources needed in nursing as well as the knowledge, practical skills and attitudes related to nursing based on cultural needs.

The results can be used in the planning and implementation of international exchange practices in nursing education.

Keywords: International exchange, nurse, public health nurse, nursing education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Most countries saw significant changes in their demography in the last century as a result of migration across national borders, which resulted in them becoming more multi-ethnic. This presents considerable challenges for those involved in the needs, experiences, values and beliefs of an ethnically diverse population.

Finland is a country in northern Europe with a population of 5.5 million. It is one of the Nordic countries, geographically situated between Sweden and Russia. It is officially a bilingual nation with the official languages being Finnish (89.3%) and Swedish (5.4%) [1]. As globalisation continues to accelerate, the demographics in Finland have changed significantly during the past two decades, during which time the annual immigration rate has nearly doubled. About 5.5% of the population are immigrants, with the most prevalent immigrant groups being Russians or people from former Soviet

countries (24.6%), Estonians (13.6%), and Somalis (5.2%). Finland also has its own ethnic minorities, such as Finnish Swedes, Finnish Roma, and Sami people [1].

Exchange programmes became an important method to teach and learn about culture in higher education throughout Europe in the 1990s. Erasmus is the biggest European student exchange programme. Last year 8000 Finnish students studied abroad and over 20 000 students studied in Finland. The annual number of Finnish exchange students from the fields of social care and health care has been about 900 [2],[3].

Social health care systems are more and more likely to find that the clients, families and communities encountered are from cultures that differ from their own. The increase of multiculturalism causes changes in peoples' health needs. Finnish nurses encounter patients with different cultural backgrounds in their daily work and wide regional differences in the population exist. From the nursing perspective it is very important to assess the challenges of increased mobility and immigration for the development of nursing and nursing education. One of the professional requirements for graduating nurses is the development of cultural skills. This target is pursued by offering students an opportunity to undertake studies abroad.

Cultural competence is an essential component in providing effective and culturally responsive health care services, reducing health inequalities, and challenging racism in health care as well as in improving patient satisfaction and health outcomes [4],[5],[6],[7]. Cultural competence can be seen as a precondition for an ethically acceptable nurse–patient relationship [4],[8].

Cultural competence can be taught in multiple ways in nursing education. Common methods include studying abroad as an exchange student completing clinical practice abroad or participating in cultural immersion programmes [7],[9],[10],[11].

## **2 THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The main purpose of this paper was to explore the meaning of international student exchange for Finnish nurses and public health nurses.

The aim was also to describe the meaning of international student exchange for the development of professional identity and cultural knowledge self-assessed.

## **3 METHOD**

Qualitative research explores a subjective, holistic pathway which helps to develop theory. Whereas quantitative research is based on scientific method, qualitative research suits behavioural and social sciences as it aids in understanding the unique nature of human beings. Qualitative research can generate information that can help nurses by informing clinical decisions. Qualitative nursing research focuses on patients and/or health professionals' experiences. Through this approach the reality of people's experiences and lives are not over simplified and subsumed into a number or a statistic [12].

The Qualitative approach was used in this study. The data were collected through interviews. Six (n=6) Finnish nurses and two (n=2) public health nurses participated in the study. All the nurses and public health nurses that participated had been on international exchange between 6 to 10 years ago. The exchange places were in Africa, Nepal and Europe.

The data were analysed using the content analysis technique. Qualitative content analysis is the analysis of the content of narrative data to identify prominent themes and patterns among the themes. Qualitative content analysis involves breaking down data into smaller units, coding and naming the units according to the content they represent, and grouping coded material based on shared concepts. [12].

## **4 RESULTS**

International exchange affected personal growth. The widening of one's world view, personal development, and the experience of being different relative to others were related to personal growth. International exchange also improved professional growth.

The strengthening of confidence in work, and becoming familiar with different treatment practices and working environments as well as the recognition of the position of nurses in treatment culture and society as a whole were related to professional growth.

A functional work community as a resource for nurses was considered to be a meaningful factor.

International exchange had a significant effect on nursing based on cultural needs. A family oriented way of working, the recognition of the multidimensional aspects of health and illness, and cultural sensitivity were related to this kind of cultural nursing.

The recognition of the challenges caused by differences in health and welfare was considered important.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that international experience improves the personal resources needed in nursing as well as the knowledge, practical skills and attitudes related to nursing based on cultural needs.

The results can be used in the planning and implementation of international exchange practices in nursing education. The results also can be utilized in the development of the daily work of nursing teachers and, more generally, international nursing education.

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