


Please cite the Published Version

Lee, A  (2020) An (interpretive) phenomenological analysis of nursing professionals experience of developing a transnational curriculum. *Nurse Education Today*, 84. p. 104251. ISSN 0260-6917

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2019.104251>

Publisher: Elsevier

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: This is an Author Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Nurse Education Today*, by Elsevier.

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Article title: AN (INTERPRETIVE) PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF NURSING PROFESSIONALS EXPERIENCE OF DEVELOPING A TRANSNATIONAL CURRICULUM

Reference: YNEDT_104251

Journal title: Nurse Education Today

Article Number: 104251

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This manuscript has been accepted for publication in Nurse Education Today

Abstract

Aim : The purpose of this phenomenological study is to reveal how senior staff who have engaged in the development of a transnational nursing curriculum make sense of the opportunity.

Background : Merging two, country specific curricula for a dual award bachelor degree nursing program, taught exclusively in China through ‘flying faculty’ model is an innovative way to deliver a global nursing education. As with any innovation, lessons can be learned through reflection, to streamline future institutional investments which are responsive to country specific needs.

Methods : Four senior staff involved in curriculum development were recruited through purposive sampling. Semi structured interviews were undertaken to elicit data on their experiences during the merger.

Discussion : Five main themes were key to participant's sense making during the curriculum development process. These were: managing and overcoming differences in expectations and pedagogy, meeting deadlines, engaging stakeholders and the need to think creatively. All participants revealed there had been a significant learning curve during the process, and highlighted the benefits of this in their own development.

Conclusions : Participants perceived transnational education curriculum development as complex. They cited differences in learning, teaching, pedagogy and quality processes as factors to address and identified the most crucial elements to success, were communication, mutual engagement, meeting deadlines and the ability to think creatively. Their continual efforts to understand systems and processes allowed them to make sense of this complex undertaking.

KeyWords

Transnational education: China nursing education: staff experiences: Curriculum development: phenomenology : IPA

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors

Introduction

The drive to recruit international students and engage in multi centre collaborations is high on the agenda for many universities (Home Office, 2018). The most prolific country targeted for recruitment is China. In the UK, Chinese students bring an annual income estimated at £2.55 billion to British Universities (British Council, 2017, Home Office, 2018). However, rather than send students for international study, Chinese governments are now seeking ‘transnational education’ (TNE). TNEs offer mechanisms for educational collaboration between universities - so they can deliver pre-determined curricula through international and intercultural based education. The TNE curriculum is delivered in the students’ home country, with teaching and supervision shared between Chinese and an internationally based faculty.

This paper reveals information on how members of Chinese and UK based academics made sense of all systems and processes involved during the merger of a curriculum for a TNE nursing award. It applies interpretive phenomenological analysis to understand academics’ experiences during the initial development phase of TNE in Nursing. Thus, the research aims to highlight themes which may underpin future and ongoing evaluations to support healthcare related TNE provision.

Literature review

It is important to review new ways of sharing learning. Increasingly, education is becoming a global commodity, with universities as key players to economic prosperity (Lomer et al, 2018). Nowadays, universities must diversify their income streams – with staff encouraged to seek innovative, entrepreneurial investment strategies. (Bilous et al, 2018, King, 2010). ‘Education’ is increasingly sold to the global market for economic profit (Hill et al, 2014, Wilkins, 2017). Thus, education has moved from its’ original purpose of ‘public good’, to a commodity within a globalised, knowledge-based economy (Shams & Huisman, 2012, Caruana, 2016).

Academics are ethically and morally obliged to ensure potential 'knowledge sales' and shared curricula are guided by mutually accepted values and culturally accepted pedagogies and this takes time and investment. Joint TNE ventures offer means to facilitate global citizenship, but this must be acceptable (Bilous et al, 2018). Merged curricula must work for both academics and students. Leask & Bridge (2013) support this stance, They identify a need to understand educational outcomes, challenge power and authority, to ensure all stakeholder's knowledge is valued. Thus, mutual collegiality and respect are key to successful pedagogical outcomes. Thinking creatively and finding solutions which fulfil everyone's ideals of delivery are paramount. These must be guided through the appropriate social and cultural systems so the principles of learning and teaching methods fit with existing and emerging pedagogies to meet needs of the student groups (Wilkins, 2017).

The research is sparse on international TNE in nursing. Many professions, such as business, law, politics, modern languages, education and the sciences have established international education profiles. Health related programs and nurse education is an emerging market, so this review identifies key issues relating to TNE in the other disciplines.

Many studies identify a number of factors which impact on TNE curricula. These factors cover a range of academic governance, financial and legislative processes (Lane & Kinser, 2013). They identify the global, virtual, local and 'real' drivers which must be met through curriculum (Caniglia et al, 2018). Evaluative studies on international collaborations reveal a need to explore the differences in learning styles and cultural norms, suggesting careful navigation towards mutually acceptable education strategies (Makrakis & Kostoulas-makrakis, Salt & Wood, 2014, OMahoney, 2014). Studies cite success in managing quality and achieving student satisfaction is facilitated through contextually appropriate teaching methods (Smith, 2010, Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2012). Teaching styles must be adapted to cultural norms and embedded in the curriculum framework (Hill et al 2014, Kharouf et al, 2015). The programs

must be contextually and culturally appropriate and the higher fees must reflect improved employability prospects (Mok et al, 2018).

The situation is highly complex in healthcare education. Graduands must be prepared to adapt to the requirements of health care delivery systems, to work professionally across diverse hospital and community environments. With a Chinese TNE, this means delivery of healthcare in conjunction with traditional Chinese Medicine. It also means integration with an array of educational, professional and governmental regulators.

Clarke et al (2016) offer a framework for curriculum design which highlights the cyclical nature of transnational collaborations. Their ‘cyclical process’ offers an approach to re-evaluate curricula to conform with all institutional, professional and country specific regulations and norms. Continual evaluation processes must be undertaken with the aim to improve the curriculum, and to avoid homogenized assessment and delivery strategies (Pyvis, 2011, Healey, 2015). Thus, any new transnational projects must be continually evaluated.

TNE curriculum design is multifaceted, and making sense of highly complex systems and processes, is key to a successful outcome. This research seeks to generate an understanding of academics’ experiences when developing a transnational nursing curriculum. By interviewing those who were involved in the process, the research seeks to identify how they made sense of opportunities, how they used their knowledge and experiences to support and inform future practice and what they would do if asked to undertake similar developments in the future. In line with Clarke et al’s (2016) recommendations, this information begins the cyclical re-evaluation. As this new and innovative program begins to be delivered, further studies will be undertaken.

Methods

The research question

How do senior staff who have engaged in the development of a transnational nursing curriculum make sense of the opportunity?

The research design

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach to reveal the lived experiences of participants in research (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). The underlying philosophy is based on Husserl and Heidegger's concepts that 'truth' is determined by how people perceive their own true life experiences. Heidegger's hermeneutic approach offers a process for the researcher to interpret these experiences, through a method called 'interpretative phenomenological analysis' (IPA). The aim of IPA is to listen to each participant's experience and attempt to make sense of these experiences through a reflexive process. Researchers become a part of the process, as they describe and explain human phenomena, working with their participants, to achieve an in depth understanding of experiences. They can then derive meaning through interpretation (Friesen, Henrikkson & Saevi 2012, Van-Manen, 2014).

The focus of this study is on the very early phases of curriculum development, with the aim to gaining understanding of academics' experiences so this knowledge can inform future – larger scale evaluations as the curriculum is implemented. The lead researcher for this study was an Associate Dean (International), and held responsibility for overseeing operational and strategic directives of the TNE process. There were four key team members responsible for the curriculum merger – two UK based and two China based. Each of these team members were consulted regularly to ensure interpretation of interview records was truly representative of lived experiences.

Study Context

A 4 year nursing degree 'dual award' between two universities was developed by aligning Chinese and UK nursing curricula for annual intake of 90 student nurses, using 4+0 mode of

delivery (4 years in country, with one third of the curriculum taught by UK based 'flying faculty'). Successful graduands receive a 'dual award' Bachelor degree in nursing, one conferred by the UK institution and the other conferred by the China University. Thus, graduands receive two awards, cited as 'double degree'. This is approved by a number of University and Governmental stakeholders across both countries. The degree culminates in a 1 year clinical internship, to prepare graduands for a Chinese based examination for professional recognition as 'registered nurse'. This TNE means students can receive UK education without payment of full international fees, and negating the requirements for translocation to UK institutions.

The research is relevant and timely as it evaluates staff experiences in curriculum merger for the first ever UK TNE nursing curricula delivered solely in China. In asking key staff about their experiences, the study aims to reveal how they perceived human and institutional structures, systems and processes which impacted the development of a merged curriculum and how they made sense of opportunities and threats during the process.

Sampling & Ethics

Purposive sampling was used to identify all academics who had input to the TNE during the phases of curriculum development, both in China and the UK. There were 4 academics involved in the curriculum design process. Two from China and two from UK.

An independent review board - Ethics committee granted approval for the study in March 2018 and four participants provided written consent to be interviewed. Interviews took place within 6 months of completion of curriculum documentation, conducted between September and November 2018. All responses were anonymised and data stored in a password secured, IT controlled environment.

Procedure and data analysis

A series of open ended and closed questions were developed by the author using Schon et al's (2017) approach. Key staff were identified and semi structured interviews undertaken so staff could discuss their experiences, thoughts and perceptions during the process of curriculum development. Interviews were conducted either by SKYPE, or the 'WECHAT' platform (see Table 1). Demographic data included length of educational experience, qualifications, and experience with curriculum development. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. Journaling was used to separate interviewers' thoughts and feelings – to bracket any information with potential impact on subsequent interviews. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy and authenticity by participants.

To assert trustworthiness and rigour, emerging themes were discussed with participants until consensus was reached. To assert interpretive phenomenological analysis, themes were derived by applying Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach. This included familiarisation with data, coding and further discussion with participants, revelation of emerging themes and then production of a research report.

Findings

Findings are presented in the themed table (2). All participants were immersed in the experience of curriculum merger and development. All but one had PhD level education and all were professionally registered as nurses. All participants had anticipated high levels of complexity for the process, but rated this as 'higher than anticipated' after the event. The mean years of experience in academia was 17. Participants identified a number of factors which were key to making sense of a transnational nursing curriculum. They identified the need to manage expectations and understand pedagogical differences, to meet deadlines, to engage many stakeholders and to think creatively.

Managing Expectations and understanding the differences in pedagogy.

All participants felt they had experienced difficulties in managing preconceptions and expectations during curriculum merger at both personal and University level when navigating cross institutional systems and processes. Differences in quality outcomes and measurement tools were highlighted. UK based participants expressed concerns on how healthcare and health culture were different. They wanted to learn more about Chinese approaches to healthcare, and this included use of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), so they could teach more effectively.

All four participants revealed that they had experienced problems asserting their roles and responsibilities during the merger. To overcome this, participants suggested developing a list of objectives for further review, of procedures across both institutions, so that each centre became aware of the next 'step' in the (quality / approval / development) process. All participants were keen to ensure that they were active in decision-making processes.

Significant differences in modes of teaching and delivery were highlighted during interviews. Participants revealed they had to have many discussions to clarify student contact time and facilitated learning, so that they understand both UK and China perspectives. They identified differences in how Chinese and UK based students expected teaching to be delivered. The Chinese participants identified their students preferred teaching where information is conveyed during longer hours of face to face contact. UK based academics were more used to online pedagogy and reduced contact time. They had initial expectations that students would challenge, question and participate in classroom discussions, based on their UK experiences. However, discussions with Chinese colleagues revealed that this approach would not be palatable to the China classroom.

Program mapping was identified as complex and required a lot of input and discussion. Program structures are very different between the countries. Chinese programs are split into very small 'courses' - delivered across semesters, whereas UK based programs are modular

based and delivered through trimesters. The Chinese rely heavily on examinations to complete courses in comparison to UK written papers to depict critical analysis. To merge the UK modular based systems, five to eight Chinese ‘courses’ was required to fulfil the UK based academic credit system. This had to conform to China expectations of content, so the program fulfilled MOE regulations.

Meeting deadlines

There were concerns on deadlines and timelines for mapping, curriculum development and delivery of program materials. Overall, participants identified feelings of being ‘rushed’ needing time to concentrate and collaborate more effectively. The time difference (up to 8 hours) was noted as a precursor to difficulties in scheduling meetings, but also indicated staff lethargy as a factor for those travelling across time-zones.

Engaging stakeholders

Participants revealed a need to engage a variety of stakeholders. They needed to develop module teams, to assert the differences they had identified during the mapping and initial negotiation processes. They identified their own support networks to facilitate the curriculum development, citing ancillary and support staff and module teams as helpful.

Participants also cited the need to clarify the benefits of a transnational education and dual degree award to stakeholders, citing the need to engage wider teams – to educate them on the complexities of different systems, suggesting these benefits should be conveyed to the wider team. However, the two program directors identified their roles and responsibilities in line with this and were confident they understood rationales for TNE. A variety of stakeholders were identified by the participants and this illustrates the nature of curriculum development as a multidisciplinary process.

Thinking Creatively

This theme highlighted how participants managed cultural differences and expectations across both institutions. They revealed information on differences in healthcare delivery, managing expectations of Chinese nursing professionals, nomenclature of nursing and medicine, and the means to express concepts in a secondary language.

All participants revealed they had learned a great deal through the process. Teaching and learning processes, program delivery models, understanding differences in teaching styles and expectations, managing communication in a second language, learning to work across geographic boundaries and managing the team's expectations were all highlighted in interviews. They all expressed time as a contributing factor to potential problems and each participant mentioned time constraints were an issue. Communication was identified as a key factor to success and participants revealed the times spent with face to face contact was most beneficial.

Discussion

Developing and adapting a curriculum so that it is culturally, socially and professionally appropriate but which also meets quality assurances and equivalence is no easy task. This study concurred with that expectation, revealing participants views that developing a TNE curriculum in nursing is a complex undertaking. This study showed that participants made sense of their experiences in TNE curriculum development, by managing expectations, understanding timelines, engaging stakeholders and thinking creatively. Rather than identifying negative elements, participants focussed on strategies which they had adopted to overcome issues, because they were driven to achieve their goals.

The transglobal approach required understanding of different pedagogies. Smith (2010) suggests academics must strive to identify and understand curricula and country specific contexts for appropriate student engagement. Hoare's (2011) study asserts this, supporting the

need to challenge Western assumptions that all students are active learners. An understanding of learning styles and pedagogies across countries and cultures was particularly influential to participants within this study.

There are many stakeholders in any TNE development. However, these increase when applied to professionally regulated programs. Students and staff must meet also assert professional and clinical standards of practice, which are embedded into the curriculum. Participants in this study identified a range of stakeholders – all with the authority to impact on the curriculum (China Ministry of Education, affiliated hospitals and clinical placement sites, UK nursing and midwifery regulatory bodies, universities, British Council and China Council, UK and China based offices for quality educational standards, third party legal and taxation private companies, interpreters for documentation and China based Government and taxation sectors).

~~Leask & Bridge (2013) offer insight into the requirements to understand educational outcomes, challenge power and authority and ensure all stakeholder's knowledge is valued. They assert this comes through a mutual commitment to collegiality and respect. Mutual collegiality and respect incorporates the need to identify each other's needs, to think creatively and offer solutions which fulfil each person's ideals of delivery of the new and merged curriculum. To develop a culturally sensitive, socially directed learning environment, each member of staff involved in developing a curriculum need to consider their own agendas, their own processes and systems for communication. This fits with the advice from Clarke et al's (2016) study – proposing the requirement for continued evaluation and review, for communication and understanding during each iteration of the program. Participants also raised the need to challenge power and authority, to value all stakeholders, which is reflected in previous research (Leask & Bridge, 2013).~~

The processes of mapping, articulation between Chinese and UK curricula therefore, required significant amounts of communication, understanding of nomenclature, and collaborative discussions on delivery mechanisms – all underpinned through mutual respect and collegiality.

Findings from this study are also reflected in the wider literature on developing international curriculum. Despite only four participants, (as only staff involved in curriculum development were interviewed), this research revealed a number of important considerations. When asked if they would do anything differently, all participants had suggestions for change and adaptation. Nursing is a profession which requires significant amounts of self-generated learning, reflection on incidents and developing knowledge from experience (Benner, 2011). This was truly expressed by participants during development of the transnational nursing curricula. Delivering transnational education across a culturally and professionally diverse landscape was felt to offer a rich learning experience for all participants, with all participants identifying they had learned a great deal during this initial process.

Limitations

It must be acknowledged that the primary researcher was a key stakeholder in the project, as the Associate Dean (International) for the UK based university. This had a potential to affect how much information participants were willing to reveal, though the researcher held no line management responsibility across the two sites. However, this did mean that the main researcher had insight into TNE development – so that observations and assumptions could be discussed fully with participants. Thus, knowledge and experiences by both researcher and participants had the potential to yield a rich data source – supported through insight and experience.

One limitation is on the number of participants in this study. However the small sample size reflected the nature of the curriculum development. Although there were only four participants,

a smaller group facilitated ongoing engagement and mutual understanding of all systems and processes between the two countries. The group was purposively small to ensure all members were fully cognisant of the proposed curriculum, so that they could generate discussions and tacit agreement on the anticipated program within the supporting networks, educational and professional regulatory requirements, and conform to standards set through UK and Chinese government ministries. There is a significant drive for TNE nursing education from China's Health Education Authorities – so we must learn lessons from experience to improve and streamline future educational developments. Using this methodology to identify staff experiences in TNE curriculum development and merger can benefit future TNE development. Interpretive phenomenological analysis complements other forms of curriculum evaluation, as findings inform the understanding of individual staff experiences. As more staff develop curricula, further studies may be undertaken.

Conclusion

The aim of this phenomenological study was to reveal how senior staff who have engaged in the development of a transnational nursing curriculum make sense of the opportunity. In developing a new and innovative way to teach nursing at global levels, the research identified that participants were focussed on how they could overcome difficulties. To do this, they identified a need to think creatively, to overcome a range of boundaries, recognise differences and challenges and they had to be prepared to negotiate and manage expectations with a wide range of stakeholders. These approaches were undertaken so that participants could make sense of transnational curriculum development.

Thus, this research highlights the need to support academics and provide them with time and resources so that they can effectively seek new strategies for global outreach. Time for

discussion, communication and negotiation, for understanding differences, is crucial for success.

Acknowledging the diverse cultural, social, and philosophical discourse which lie at the foundation of the curricula is key to successful TNE developments and this is especially relevant to healthcare programs. Institutional objectives and quality monitoring processes must be embedded in any shared curricula to meet requirements of inter and extra-institutional policymakers and quality assurance departments. Student and staff expectations must be carefully managed, so the TNE can digress any economy driven model. This means Inter-institutional discussions must be cooperative, to ensure congruence in aims. These must be mutually beneficial engagement strategies and exchange of ideas and each participant must have the aim to deliver a culturally sensitive, socially directed learning environment. (Kharouf et al, 2015, Wilkins, 2017).

As we move to a more global university citizenship status, and expand horizons to internationalisation of curricula in any discipline, it is important to celebrate the differences – the similarities and the nuances of a curriculum merger process. The increasing pressure for transnational education and international studentship faced by many universities today, means universities must be able to respond rapidly to identified growth potential. Generating more creative curricula is key to meeting our increasingly global student population's needs. However, academics need resources and time so that they can manage expectations, meet deadlines, engage all the relevant stakeholders and think in a creative way.

****NB** This paper presented an analysis of transnational curriculum development at its very embryological stage. As the TNE develops, further evaluation, review and analysis will take

place. Nurses will be flying to China in the next few months to deliver the first modules of study. Their experiences during this phase will also be evaluated to underpin future TNE developments.

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