

# Transatlantic Collaborations: Baccalaureate Nursing Students' Experiences of Participating in a Semester-Long Study Abroad Program

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## Abstract

**AIM** The aim of this study was to describe students' experiences during a 15-week semester involving clinical placement in an Irish university.

**BACKGROUND** Internationalization is promoted and facilitated through study abroad initiatives within nurse education. Collaborations were developed between one university in the United States, an Irish university, and service partners. This study abroad initiative involved planning logistics, curriculum learning opportunities, and negotiating clinical placement in meeting state professional requirements.

**METHOD** A qualitative descriptive approach was used. Following ethical approval, 19 fourth-year students participated in focus group and individual semistructured interviews. Data analysis followed a thematic approach.

**RESULTS** Connecting our worlds details a process of acclimatizing, navigating learning, and using person-centered practices, illustrating meaningful learning in a journey of personal and professional development.

**CONCLUSION** Moving beyond the rhetoric of globalization is critical in future proofing initiatives in developing nursing practitioners while balancing potential safety risks in a post-COVID-19 era.

**KEY WORDS** Baccalaureate Nursing Students – International Clinical Placement – Learning Experiences – Study Abroad

Global initiatives in higher education that expand student mobility opportunities are a growing policy priority (Surssock, 2018). Evidence is needed to promote the value of internationalization (O'Brien, Graham, & Timmins, 2019) and the fostering of global relationships within nurse education (Markey et al., 2019). The advent of COVID-19 as a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) led to extensive global public health measures, along with travel restrictions. Measures to promote safety and reduce transmission have had a devastating effect on the world and have paused student mobility. However, even under current circumstances, it is critical that nursing faculty foster

and future proof international learning opportunities for global mobility (Johnston & Malik, 2020). Future proofing as a concept guides a vision of change as a process of increasing resilience and adaptability to unexpected or uncontrollable future events (Masood et al., 2016).

Growing sustainable internationalization initiatives within nurse education requires leadership, commitment, and innovation, especially in these unprecedented times. Darbyshire et al. (2019) draw attention to the importance of cultivating “visionary, brave, and flexible” academic leadership within increasing demands and shifting pressures on institutions. Balancing university business models aimed at

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increasing international student numbers and creating meaningful learning opportunities that enhance nursing students' preparedness is a global concern (Mok & Jiang, 2018). This article reports on an innovative transatlantic study abroad experience that incorporated academic and clinical placement in Ireland for fourth-year baccalaureate nursing students from a large university in the United States. This innovation was planned and evaluated within the context of a pre-COVID-19 world. Nevertheless, the learning for students and colleagues reminds us of the value of seeking creative approaches to overcome barriers and foster international student mobility.

The US students' university has explicit student learning and student development outcomes for which curricula in various disciplines are constructed. The seminal Kolb (1984) and Knowles (2005) adult learning theories influenced the approaches to this initiative in supporting student learning. The study abroad experience was well suited to address the following student learning outcome in the nursing curriculum: *understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies*. The experience also served to address the following student development outcome: *appreciation of differences by recognizing the value of interacting with individuals with backgrounds and/or perspectives different from one's own* (University of Minnesota, 2021).

## BACKGROUND

Positive learning experiences for nursing students as a consequence of living, studying, and working in another country support the development of a globalized approach to nursing (Markey et al., 2019; Ortega et al., 2016). Furthermore, preparing graduates for worldwide employment through study abroad opportunities contributes to meeting increasingly culturally diverse health care needs. Research on study abroad experiences has grown in other disciplines but is relatively limited within nursing. The existing nursing literature focuses on theoretical experiences of learning in the classroom (Wihlborg et al., 2018), along with reports of short community immersion experiences in developing countries (Grudt & Hadders, 2018). Less attention has been paid to exploring study abroad experiences of both theoretical and clinical practice where students are registered and participate fully in academic life over an entire 15-week semester.

The mobility of students supports intercultural learning as an opportunity for home and international students to prepare for roles as global citizens in understanding and appreciating one's own culture and that of others (McKinnon et al., 2019). However, student mobility opportunities within undergraduate nursing programs are somewhat limited, as is evidence supporting their value. The host university curriculum and teaching and learning pedagogies are informed by the learning theories of Kolb and Knowles. Their philosophies of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and adult learning theory (Knowles, 2005) offer an iterative approach to bringing theory and practice experiences together to foster understanding of nursing practice (Kurt, 2020). Through a four-stage learning cycle, Kolb's (1984) theory brings the student from engaging with a concrete experience to reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Williams & Spurlock 2019). The Knowles (2005) adult learning theory supports student development in fostering motivation to learn, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, self-concept, and adult learner experience. Thus, experiential adult learning and reflection approaches influenced the creation of teaching and learning opportunities for students.

Setting up a study abroad experience is complex for nurse education leaders. The nursing curriculum incrementally builds knowledge, skills, and practice competency requirements to meet accreditation for registration (licensure), which differs within each state in the

United States and in European countries. Through discussions, it was recognized that both participating universities shared similar values and perspectives on nurse education, influencing the design of this study abroad semester. Significantly, we understood that a practice placement experience must differ in structure and duration from home placements and be tailored and negotiated to support practice learning. Careful scrutiny ensured that the visiting university curriculum met individual module and program requirements. Curriculum mapping ensured that program credits closely aligned with the levels of award in the students' home university.

Opportunities for American students to learn together in shared modules with Irish and other international students, along with the clinical component, offered a unique experience. All students had progressed to the fourth year of the BSN program in good academic standing. Two cohorts of 10 students self-selected to engage in the study abroad semesters. A lack of knowledge surrounding study abroad learning provided a rationale for this study, designed to explore nursing students experiences of undertaking a 15-week semester abroad incorporating both academic and clinical placement.

## METHOD

We used a qualitative descriptive design to provide a rich description of students' views. This inductive approach illustrates student experiences rather than predicts outcomes, contributing to new understandings of student experiences at one Irish university and helping inform future initiatives (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality were followed. A gatekeeper role was established to foster the voluntary nature of participation, recognizing the potential power imbalances between students and faculty (Markey et al., 2019). The use of numbers identified participants to maintain confidentiality. Data were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the main researcher's office, and online data were protected via encrypted files in keeping with the Data Protection Act (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Study during a single semester offered a small window for data collection. After ethical approval was granted from the university's ethics committee, we began data collection using a focus group and one-on-one individual semistructured interviews. The gatekeeper circulated an invitation with information to the student cohorts via email. Potential participants were assured of the voluntary nature of participation and told they were free to withdraw at any time without impact on grading. Each participant provided written consent for each aspect of the study. Faculty not involved in teaching or assessing students at the time collected the data.

Focus groups were considered a way of creating a space where collective insights and views by participants could be gathered through group interactions (Leonardsen et al., 2021). Ten students volunteered to participate in the focus group, which took place on campus during Week 2 of the semester. The focus group lasted 60 minutes and was intended to hear and address early concerns. Introductions and ground rules were established, and the importance of adhering to ethical principles of confidentiality was reiterated by the moderator.

Individual semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to guide the conversation complemented the focus group and took place toward the end of semester; 19 students participated. The interviews aimed to seek a broader perspective, encouraging participants to share experiences and offer a comprehensive description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes and took place at a time and venue chosen by the participants. Authors not involved in teaching or assessing the students facilitated the interviews. The

digitally recorded focus group and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy, and all identifiers were removed.

The quality of the knowledge generated through qualitative research is enhanced by trustworthiness and transferability, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Transparency is ensured through a detailed description of the study. The research team clarified and discussed emerging themes at regular meetings. Rigor and trustworthiness were assured by staying close to the original data.

Morse and Field's (1996) approach guided data analysis. Three authors independently listened to/read transcripts from the focus group and individual interviews to become familiar with the data and gain a sense of the whole. Data were examined for similarities and significant statements, generating themes across the data set related to the aims of the research (Patten & Newhar, 2017). Initial themes were identified and grouped together. All authors discussed and agreed upon three themes as a representation of students' experiences (see Figure 1). The themes are illustrated through direct quotations, giving a voice and authenticity to student experiences. Each individual interview is assigned a number; focus group data are designated FG.

## RESULTS

The results of the study describe how students connect between learning opportunities at home and their new university. Each theme is presented individually, influencing each other in providing an overall description of the findings. Students describe the importance of acclimatizing to a new country and navigating new ways of learning as a foundation in preparing for person-centered practices in clinical placement in a new world. Data analysis presents an overlapping view of connecting worlds as illustrating students' experiences.

### Acclimatizing

Acclimatizing describes student adjustment to a new country and university in Ireland. Benefits of orientation and support from the international office were identified. Descriptions show initial everyday realities. Figuring out formal and informal university environments, though

essential, was difficult, as indicated in the following quotations: "Everyone was very welcoming; we got much support, doing Skype, emails, getting to meet staff right away, getting class details...I was nervous yet excited, never left home for this long before, a bit overwhelming not knowing what to expect" (P8); "Good tornado where I felt uprooted but then there was sunshine afterwards" (P16).

Students described day-to-day difficulties being far from home, moving through different time zones, schedules, and systems. With time, life became easier, and confidence grew as noted in this quotation: "Being away from friends and family was challenging, time zones didn't let me ring and chat when I wanted.... I had to be able to deal with things myself, I gained confidence" (P4).

It took time for students to find room locations/schedules. Orientation was identified as essential for academic performance. "I was nervous in case I was in the wrong place at the wrong time...didn't want to miss any classes. It was important to me to give a good impression" (FG). Through orientation and university support, students became involved in campus life through club membership, participating in cultural tours meeting with other study abroad students: "Birds of a feather flock together for comfort and familiarity" (P18).

### Navigating Learning

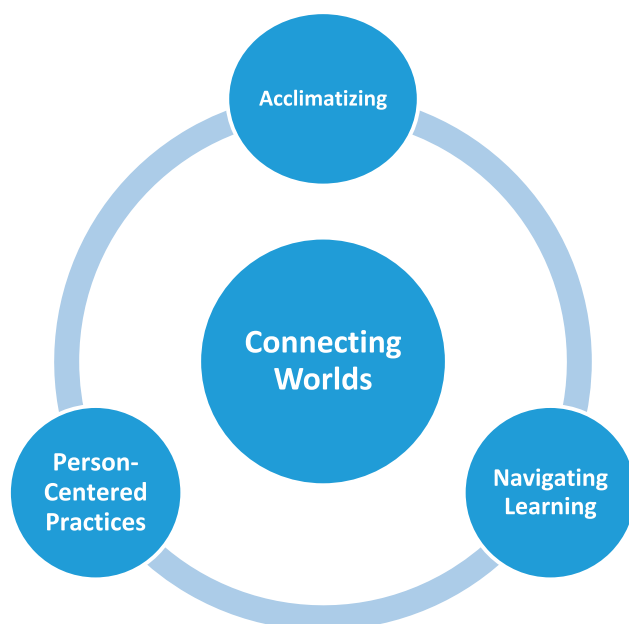
Students spoke of a new learning environment with different teaching and assessing approaches. They spoke about moving from familiar, multiple-choice questions to less familiar approaches and different classroom interactions. Reflection as a learning strategy was seen as significant. Students raised concerns about maintaining academic performance in a different system as noted in this comment from the focus group: "...online learning platforms and how you grade...I was worried before I traveled, fearful my time would impact on my GPA scores and ability to do well in the state exam" (FG).

Students welcomed opportunities to demonstrate learning through assignments. "Assignments are challenging; I like them, as I can be more creative here. This is important in nursing as there are multiple ways of doing things" (FG). Diversity within classrooms was described as beneficial: "New classrooms with lots of international students from China, India, Africa, and Saudi Arabia, so many places. I learnt so much about other cultures...helping me with patient cultures" (P19).

All students described the value of reflection in guiding personal and professional development: "Reflection is big here; we don't do it to the same extent back home. I don't think I understood the impact reflection had on nursing...here I see understanding of reflection is important for learning. Deeper reflection, using literature is new. Writing about my feelings and bringing forward my insights to practice was great. Great to understand where I have come from and where I am going" (P5). One student commented that reflection helped in "describing my perfectly imperfect journey" (P14).

### Person-Centered Practices

This theme illustrates students' experiences of learning during clinical placement. Students enjoyed meeting with patients and ward teams in an Irish health care setting, identifying a connection across caring and seeing values in action. "Core values are the same. Really good experience to see nurses use person-centered care in Ireland. Different ethnic groups, realizing you can't have culture sensitivity if you don't go abroad to understand what's different..." (P3) and "Great to see a different health care system...going home I will be able to look at cultural values and beliefs differently and be able to understand patients more than I did" (P7).



**Figure 1.** Connecting worlds represents the interrelated themes.

Students described feeling welcomed and valued, seeing nurses' caring practices when interacting and communicating with patients. One student told how learning "what to say to patients by watching nurses in practice was phenomenal, interacting with patients with humor about life situations, seeing compassion. Providing opportunities for patients to talk and for us to listen. That is the biggest thing I will take home from here" (P8).

Organizing and working through logistics in partnership with health service providers was challenging in providing placements. Placements were scheduled for two-week blocks compared to one day per week in the United States. This quotation shows one student's positive reaction: "We got a great welcome and introduction. The nurse on my ward was fantastic. It took time to figure out the blood work ups... tiring working full weeks. Everything isn't perfect and that's ok" (P9).

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore nursing students' experiences of participating in a transatlantic study abroad semester initiative. The findings illustrate students' experiences, described as a process of acclimatizing, navigating learning, and using person-centered practices, showing a personal and professional learning journey for students. Such knowledge provides valuable learning for nursing faculty in future proofing initiatives for a post-COVID-19 era. This initiative afforded an immersion experience over a fall semester in a developed country, in contrast to short community immersion experiences in developing countries (Grudt & Hadders, 2018), usually undertaken outside of semester time in BSN programs. Our experiences are unique within the literature, describing both an academic and clinical experience over a 15-week semester abroad, while remaining on track for registration within students' program time frame. Sharing modules with host undergraduate students along with registered international nurses from Africa, China, Saudi Arabia, and India, while moving from diploma to degree awards, provided an exposure that is not usually afforded during BSN programs.

The first theme, acclimatizing, includes students' experiences prior to departing for Ireland and at the beginning of the semester. Phillips et al. (2017) highlight how thorough preparation of students prior to the study abroad experience is vitally important. Discussions among faculty, international education divisions, and students began a year before students traveled, serving to establish good working relationships. This collaborative working relationship informed the design and structure of the initiative and established a critical foundation for positive student experiences.

Predeparture information sessions addressed a range of topics, from transportation and accommodation queries to academic concerns, such as university support and available services. All contributed to student integration (McComb et al., 2019). Students described motivation and readiness to learn in keeping with the Knowles (2005) adult learner theory. Students were positive about the warm welcome they received on arrival from faculty and the university international education division, an important component of helping students settle in. Having a designated person, such as an exchange coordinator, connect with students and oversee the experience was especially helpful (Bagnasco et al., 2020). Although students did experience day-to-day difficulties during their first few weeks (e.g., figuring out different time zones to connect with home, understanding university schedules and systems, and managing finances), being part of a group supported students in acclimatizing to their study abroad experience.

All students availed of on-campus accommodations, which may have positively influenced their initial settling in period and encouraged

interaction with the broader student campus community (Markey et al., 2019). Online conversations among US faculty, international education divisions, and students that continued throughout the study abroad initiative helped in acclimatizing students, who described a keenness to explore and learn details of their upcoming experience (Kolb, 1984) and reported developing confidence throughout the semester, findings similarly reported by Bagnasco et al. (2020). Understanding different ways of thinking and different ways of being educated seemed to lead to feelings of personal growth and maturity (Hsiao et al., 2021).

The second theme, navigating learning, pervaded for students throughout the data. Significantly, students identified the challenges of different learning approaches within their study abroad experience. The assessment mode most used by students prior to this experience was multiple-choice question examinations. Exposure to different assessment methods tested different learning styles, supporting synthesis and application of nursing knowledge through the engagement of critical thinking skills (Rao, 2019). Introducing new pedagogies for study abroad students can be challenging (Hsiao et al., 2021).

Concerns were raised in the focus group about how different learning and assessment strategies might affect overall grade performance, especially as students were in their final year. Bagnasco et al. (2020, p. 4) reported that students feared "falling behind with their study." Students in our study voiced similar concerns. How students referenced their study abroad experience as having a possible impact on their academic performance is a noteworthy finding and an important consideration for faculty and students. Students welcomed the opportunity for creative and critical thinking expected within written assignments and reflective work. This in itself is an interesting finding as both the American and Irish programs sought to prepare nurses for licensure. McComb et al. (2019) found that as the semester progressed, students became more comfortable in participating in classroom activities.

Another key finding relates to reflective learning. Students described familiarity with the concept of reflection informing personal and professional development and described using reflective writing in making sense of learning (Graham & Johns, 2019). Nevertheless, expectations of moving through descriptive writing to drawing on evidence to inform opinions and demonstrate insights for future practice seemed to be challenging (Graham & O'Brien, 2020). Over the semester, students described the benefits of guided reflection in synthesizing and applying literature, contributing to deeper learning (Barbour & Schuessler, 2019). A process of learning from experiences is described, which is similar to Kolb's theory of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), with experience transformed into knowledge as learning occurs through discovery and active participation (Chiu, 2019; Kurt, 2020).

The final theme, using person-centered practices, offers a positive dimension to the unique practice placement of the study abroad program. The students described the practice placement as valuable learning through experience (Kolb, 1984). Similarities and differences in the health care systems and structures between countries were noted. Although students were looking forward to placement, concerns were raised during the focus group about the organization, length, and location of placements. At the outset, time was spent in furthering relationships with clinical site teams, and attention was paid to creating support structures for students (Bagnasco et al., 2020). Students witnessed delivery of person-centered care and saw daily realities of nurses engaging in patient assessment through caring conversations that promoted compassion as well as skilled interactions with patients and families (Dewar & McBride, 2017). Our findings

relate to caring science as envisioned by Watson, where connection and relationship among nursing, patient, and family are central to guiding caring practices (Turler et al., 2018). Students recognized the importance of touch, facial expressions, and body language similar to Wi Mahmoud and Schuessler (2017). Development of caring skills enhances students' ability to become more globally connected with diverse patient groups and other health care colleagues.

This initiative involved a small cohort of students and was based on the premise that trust begins with starting small. The findings are important in contributing to developing and future proofing nursing (O'Brien, Tuohy, et al., 2019). Although COVID-19 has paused international mobility, supporting the development of "internationalization at home initiatives" (Johnston & Malik, 2020), nurse educators must continue to prepare for the future, balancing safety and the quality of educational opportunities (Scobic, 2020). Our findings reaffirm the importance of being innovative in planning student learning experiences that support graduates to work in a connected world, contributing toward global development of nurse education in meeting diverse health care population needs (O'Brien, Tuohy, et al., 2019).

McKinnon et al. (2019) recognize partnerships are vital to the development of international clinical experiences for students. The National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation (2016) provides a strategic direction in advancing nurse education with the ultimate goal of preparing students to contribute to healthy nations and global communities through quality patient care. Quality in clinical practice stems from the advancement of nursing education as its foundation. Thus, we need to learn from the positive outcomes of this initiative to sustain learning opportunities beyond our current understandings of learning in the future. It is timely to review what is meant by study abroad; can a virtual world create meaningful intercultural and globally connected experiences? Going forward, the mode of nurse education delivery must be reviewed and transformed. As we live through a global pandemic, nurse education needs to be proactive and innovative, embracing opportunities in how teaching and learning are delivered.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This article illustrates the potential of growing partnerships nationally and internationally for an uncertain world. Future research aims to broaden the research approach to include experiences of faculty, host students, and clinical partners. Overall, this article provides an opportunity to discuss the possibilities for connecting practice globally.

The limitations of this study relate to having only two student cohorts with data gathered over a short time frame. Small-scale qualitative design limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the intention was never to generalize findings but to contribute to global discussions and enhance the quality of future study abroad initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

This initiative has taken a concept within internationalization and study abroad and moved to working through the realities of nursing students undertaking a semester-long study abroad experience. This is the first initiative we have found whereby nursing students undertake both theory and practice elements. It was essential to ascertain what worked well and how we can maximize learning opportunities for students. Future research needs to include faculty, host students, and clinical placement partners and have follow-up interviews with students nearer graduation. This article adds to our body of knowledge, paying attention to a transatlantic collaboration, connecting educa-

tional worlds, and navigating curricula and professional body licensure requirements. It is hoped this work will generate further discussions and contribute to understanding about safety and risks in possible future global collaborations.

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