

INNOVATIVE COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH NETWORKS FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS

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Introduction

The world is getting smaller and nursing as a scholarly discipline is growing. Research activities and research outputs are being categorised increasingly as sub-national, national and international. The nursing research community is also becoming interdependent. Faculty are encouraged to publish in international peer reviewed journals and there is pressure on them to link with like-minded scholars in other countries. For example, in the European Union, there are research funds that can only be accessed if several countries collaborate in the endeavour. In particular, the United Kingdom's university funding bodies encourage international research collaboration and financially reward those universities that do so.

Therefore, there are incentives available to universities to link globally. The benefits of such linkages are obvious; joint publications, global sharing and understanding, larger research grants, exchange of ideas among students and faculty and increased prestige. Furthermore, worldwide dissemination of nursing information represents a novel opportunity to expand the reach and impact of professional nursing (Dougherty et al., 2004).

According to Hegyvary (2001) international collaboration provides alternative modes of thinking for nursing scholars, enables wide-range testing of theories in practice, facilitates scholarly maturity through self-assessment, and leads to the advancement of nursing science. More recently, Dougherty et al. (2004) stated that such collaboration improves our knowledge and understanding of human needs across

geographic boundaries and supports a global perspective for nursing by fostering a worldwide inclusiveness and an expansion of the cultural and ethical values underpinning nursing's goals. It was within this context in the late 1990s, that I began to explore opportunities for international collaboration.

Four Country Project

The University of Ulster has always had strong cultural links with the southern states of America. After all, many Scots-Irish emigrated to that part of the world in the eighteenth century. They brought their culture, which included whisky making and Celtic music, echoes of which can be seen in the southern distilleries and country music. Furthermore, the many Irish confederate regiments in the civil war were composed of young men who had left Ireland because of the great famine. Other similarities include the civil unrest seen in both Northern Ireland and the southern USA in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1998, I travelled to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and interviewed faculty with the purpose of identifying a Visiting professorship at the University of Ulster. The successful candidate was Professor Dougherty, editor of the journal "Nursing Research." Professor Dougherty came to Northern Ireland many times over the following three years. It was through her that I met her Dean, Professor Linda Cronenwett.

In 2000, Linda Cronenwett, I and a colleague (Professor Kader Parahoo) discussed how best to continue the collaboration for mutual scholarly benefit. We explored different approaches to the exchange of faculty and doctoral students. However, we accepted that the inclusion of other partners would bring an added vibrancy and critical mass to the initiative. Linda had existing links with Gail Donner,

then Dean of the University of Toronto, and I had undertaken previous collaborative work with Professor Ingalill Hallberg from the University of Lund in Sweden.

We decided to ask Ingalill and Gail if they would be willing to join us in a collaboration that would be based upon research activities of doctoral students and faculty. We proposed a model whereby each of the four partners would host a 5 day event at their university on a specific research theme. The theme had to be of relevance to each of the four partners. It was agreed that the host institution would pay for the accommodation, food and organise social events. The other partners would pay for flights and general day-to-day travel expenses. This meant that over a four-year period, little money would change hands and the costs were nominal.

In 2001, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill hosted the first event on the theme of Maternal and Child Health. Two Faculty and three doctoral students from each of the other partner institutions, who had this theme as their research interest, travelled to North Carolina. The students presented their doctoral research and debated issues of methodology and theory and local experts on the topic were invited to share their experiences in seminars and workshops.

In 2002 the Four Country event took place at the University of Ulster and the theme was 'Care of the Older Person'. In 2003, Lund University hosted the event and the theme was Cancer Nursing. Of note is that the Four Country Project agreed that INDEN could send students to Lund to participate in the initiative. In 2004 the Four Country event will take place at the University of Toronto, Canada where the theme will be Nursing Perspectives on Health Services Research. INDEN is being invited to send several students to this workshop as well.

Lessons Learned

1. Explore options before getting involved too quickly or intensely.
2. Link with people and places with which you already have a relationship.
3. Identify places and people with the expertise.
4. Identify agreed funding mechanisms.
5. Do not compete with existing programmes.
6. If possible, link with those who have a higher profile than you.
7. Capitalise on what your school does best.
8. Link with those who are keen to reciprocate - beware one-way traffic!
9. Formulate a strategic plan at the beginning; sign a mutually agreed memorandum of understanding.

Benefits to Date

1. Joint publication on internationalisation in Nursing

The initial linkage with UNC-CH has led to two publications in high quality US nursing journals. This is important as non-US nurses appear to have difficulty in getting papers accepted in American journals.

2. Joint Doctoral supervision

A professor from UNC-CH is involved in jointly supervising a University of Ulster PhD Student. This has obvious benefits for the student but also for the faculty from both universities.

European Academy of Nursing Science

In 1999 Professor Rosemary Crow and some other European Nurse Academics (e.g., Georges Evers, Jenifer Wilson Barnett and Renzo Zanotti)

established the European Academy of Nursing Science (EANS). The EANS would be an independent body composed of individual members who have made significant contributions to the advancement of nursing science in Europe through scholarship and research. The purpose of the Academy would be to sustain a forum of European nurse scientists to develop and promote knowledge in nursing science and to recognise research and scholarly achievement in the pursuit of excellence. It would be composed of Fellows including Full Fellows and Honorary Fellows. All newly inducted scholars are requested to present a 20-minute overview of their research. By 2003 there were 25 EANS Fellows from 8 different European countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom).

An important part of EANS annual meetings is an eight day intensive course for first, second and third year doctoral students from a range of countries. For the first year students the focus is on raising awareness and skills in comparing differences and commonalities in health care systems, nursing and nursing research across Europe. They are also exposed to feedback on their own doctoral work from students and faculty from other European countries. In the second year the focus is on developing ideas and skills for extending students' doctoral work with a European dimension. This may be either explicating the relevance of the research question, replicating design and methods, interpreting data or publishing results. The third year students' programme centers on the development, presentation and defence of multi-national research proposals that could be submitted for EU funding. Therefore the work is open to in-depth scholarly analysis and debate. There are also master classes by recognized scholars in nursing science. To date the courses have been evaluated positively both by students and faculty.

Lessons Learned

1. Have and seek an attitude of partnership/collaboration.
2. Develop at least one student/faculty international project.
3. Agree on protocols for intellectual property and ownership/rules of publication and presentation.
4. Beware of cultural imperialism – claims of methodological superiority can impede collaboration. Acknowledge language difficulties.
6. Seek assistance from professional nursing organisations.
7. Balance between national and international – there is little benefit in being well known in another country if you do not have a high profile in your own country.

Benefits to Date

1. Fellows within School of Nursing at the University of Ulster.

This means that Faculty within the School are Fellows of a high profile international academy of nursing whose focus is on scholarly discussion and activity in nursing. This has the benefit of having a ready-made collaboration that can exploit EU funding opportunities.

2. International presentation at Swedish EANS Conference.

Through annual presentations at EANS conferences, faculty members can share their research findings with people from different countries. Such presentations can lead to peer reviewed publications in European journals.

3. Faculty members on EANS Board.

Through being EANS Fellows, faculty can apply for election to positions on the EANS main board. This is a prestigious position and provides them with the opportunity to help shape the future of EANS and the development of young European nurse scholars.

4. Funded EU-US Project on older people

Through being EANS Fellows, three professors of nursing in the UK, Italy and Sweden were successful in obtaining funding from the EU to undertake a project on care of older people. This illustrates how international networking can lead to research partnerships, research funding, joint research activity and research outputs.

In conclusion, it can be stated that international networking and collaboration bring benefits for doctoral students, faculty and ultimately to patient care. It is not easy and in our busy worlds it is much more comfortable to be insular. Nonetheless, as I stated at the outset, the nursing world is shrinking and very soon there will be no reasons left why faculty do not get involved in international collaboration, there will only be excuses.

References

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