

**INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH
NETWORKS – A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

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I would first all like to thank the organising committee of INDEN and Prof Ketefian for their invitation to participate as a panel speaker at the biennial meeting of the International Doctoral Network for doctoral Education in Nursing. This paper will describe the impact of being involved in international collaborative research networks from a student perspective. This is informed from my recent participation in the 3rd International doctoral workshop in Lund, Sweden in June of this year. This event was planned under the broad auspices of a unique collaborative activity between four universities (Lund University, Sweden, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, University of North Carolina, USA and University of Toronto, Canada) and INDEN. This paper will give some background information as to the content, participants and activities of this workshop. It will then give you an overview from a student perspective on how the participation in such an event can contribute to the development of nursing scholars and the development of international collaboration. I would like to point out that the feedback on this perspective is informed both by my own personal experience and that of other students who attended this and previous workshops. Finally I will conclude with a more personal perspective of some of issues relating to international collaborative research networks.

Introduction

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2002) has defined the term collaboration as '*to work jointly on an activity or project*' and is derived from the Latin word 'collaborare' which means to '*work together*'. This definition clearly

epitomises the essence of the workshop that took place in June 2003 in Lund, Sweden. This was due to the clear focus on the words ‘work’ and ‘together’ and the need for action as opposed to passive contemplation.

The International Doctoral Workshop

First of all I would like to provide some more information about the content and focus of the 3rd International Doctoral workshop that took place in June 2003. The participants at the five day workshop included 2 faculty and 2 student representatives from each of the Universities and four student representatives from INDEN. Therefore a total of 12 nursing students and 7 Faculty members participated. The purposes of the workshop were to (a) enable doctoral students to meet with other doctoral students and faculty from the participating countries to exchange ideas and share academic, clinical and scholarly experiences; (b) present and discuss doctoral research projects; (c) create a network with other participating members working in similar areas of research; and (d) dialogue on future research directions.

The focus of the workshop was “*living with cancer or other chronic disease and palliative care*’ and was centred on four themes:

- Living with a chronic disease;
- Palliative and chronic disease;
- Chronic disease from a nursing and family perspective; and
- Researching the lived experience of chronic disease.

These themes were addressed through a thematic lecture provided by Faculty representatives from each country, with time allowed for discussion and questions.

The importance of having a focus for such an event cannot be overemphasised.

Therefore each institution sends students and faculty members who are already

conducting research within a focused area. For example, the 4 participants from University of Ulster were all focusing on conducting research in the area of cancer and palliative care. Other themes for the previous workshops have included: care of the older person and maternal and child health. This focused area helps to provide direction for the discussion and presentations that took place and contributed to a sharing across countries.

I would now like to outline, using my own personal perspective and feedback from other students, how participation in such international workshops can contribute to the development of future nursing scholars and international collaboration.

Development as a Nursing Scholar

The first question that we must ask is '*what is a scholar?*' Again the dictionary definition includes a distinguished academic or a person who is highly educated and has an aptitude for study. It is widely recognised that a doctoral programme is viewed as research training helping to develop various intellectual capabilities in doctoral students. These include identifying gaps in nursing knowledge, critique, debate, questioning and analysis. There is no doubt that these skills are valued and developed in each doctoral programme within each institution. However it can be argued that it is good for doctoral students to further develop these skills and apply them to a much wider arena and international audience. This was facilitated through participation in the international workshop, helping to enhance our critical thinking and academic discourse which are necessary for doctoral students to become nursing scholars. Another stepping stone on the journey to becoming a nursing scholar is the development of nursing knowledge and having a lifelong desire to expand nursing knowledge and one's own intellectual capabilities.

Broadened Nursing Knowledge

International collaboration is recognised as being of great value in the knowledge development in nursing science. Participating in international forums can be seen to facilitate the pulling together of nursing knowledge and exchange. One of the feedbacks from the student perspective is that participating in this workshop helped us as students to broaden our knowledge and perspectives about chronic illness and cancer nursing. These discussions were focused around research and practice and the need to develop patient care. These dialogues helped to remind us that scholarly activities need to be articulated with nursing practice. This connection was further facilitated by opportunities to visit some clinical areas for cancer nursing during the workshop.

In addition, we also were able to develop our knowledge about theoretical, methodological, and ethical issues in nursing research. From a personal perspective it was noted that some of the discussion and issues debated were not necessarily issues that are addressed in the wider nursing research literature, highlighting perhaps a deficit in the literature that gives us a responsibility as 'future nursing scholars' to seek to address.

Cultural/Global Awareness

As part of the programme for the workshop each of the countries and Universities had to give a presentation on the health and social care of the country and PhD education in the participating countries. This was invaluable in gaining some understanding, albeit limited in such a short time period, of a more global perspective of health care. The effect of globalisation is something that we read about but perhaps

do not apply to our thinking. But the advantage of such an international workshop is that it gives us exposure to other cultures and assists us to become more globally minded about health care. Whenever we think about globalisation, we realise that our world is shrinking and this is something that I feel has relevance for us in the United Kingdom and in particular, Ireland. People everywhere have many nursing needs related to health and illness. Such exchange and collaboration among scholars and doctoral students can promote better understanding of what knowledge is specific to particular cultures and what is global knowledge.

In addition, the sharing of information on the doctoral programmes could only assist us in reflecting/critiquing of our own doctoral programmes and seeking to develop and improve those taking cognisance of the experiences from other institutions. The striking aspect of these presentations was that although there were great differences between each health and social care systems there were a surprising number of similarities that researchers around the world are experiencing in their research projects. Thus, participating in such an event helps us as students to become more globally minded about the health of our societies but also to develop a wider world vision for nursing and awareness about nursing doctoral education.

Opportunities for Networking

These events can be viewed as providing an opportunity to network and exchange ideas both professionally and socially with other doctoral students and faculty members from representative universities. This can be viewed as a good foundation on which to build future contacts at a key time in the doctoral student's professional life. This teaches the student how to develop networks, maintain contacts and maximise opportunities.

Student Presentations

Each student had the opportunity to share her own research work by presenting a short account of her research project for discussion. This was facilitated by a time of student-led critique and debate around the nursing phenomena and research methods. This offered us the opportunity to clearly present our ideas to our contemporaries with an international perspective and to receive critical comments and feedback. A beneficial aspect of this was that the students who presented were at varying stages of their doctoral programmes from those presenting their proposal for their research study to those who were ready to complete and defend their thesis. This afforded the opportunity for rich sharing and exchange of experiences from the students whilst facilitated and guided by faculty members. This could be viewed as a good model for practice.

Another important positive aspect of this process was that each student's work was recognised as making potential substantial contributions to future nursing knowledge. Therefore, the emphasis was clearly on developing nursing knowledge and nursing scholarship. It is important that we realise that alongside this development of nursing knowledge to which we all aspire, that we realise that it is essential that nurse scholars are developed as well, and are facilitated in this way.

Role Modelling

It has been recognised in the nursing literature that a criticism that has been leveled at nursing is that it has a history of 'eating their young'. It was with interest that I read in the recent INDEN newsletter the article about the mentoring project and the development of a position paper. In the newsletter it was noted that '*mentoring*

has often been described as a key process in the development and socialisation of scholars' (Bryne & Keefe, 2002). This idea of mentoring or role modelling was for me a key aspect of the collaborative workshop. As noted at the start of this presentation I highlighted that the participants were comprised of both doctoral students and faculty members. Therefore throughout the discussions doctoral students were given the opportunity to be taught by and discourse with experienced faculty members. This was a key aspect of the success of this endeavour. Feedback from my fellow doctoral students included that we all experienced support and respect as aspiring nursing scholars. We were made to feel that both our research projects and our individual contributions to all the discussions were valued. This is related to the need to have critique, challenge, and questioning within a supportive environment. It was felt that this was very much provided within the workshop and is something that I will aspire towards and mirror in my future role as a scholar.

Conclusion

At the start of this presentation I highlighted that the definition of collaboration clearly indicated the need to work together with a focus on action. It is imperative that we move to more action. I could conclude with the words of Ghandi and the need for action:

“Have a bias towards action - let's see something happen now.

You can break that big plan into small steps and take the first step right away.”

This could be applied personally to me and my postdoctoral career development but it also has an application to a much wider audience. This bias towards action' and taking 'small steps' has a role to play in helping to achieve the wider aim of INDEN:

“To advance and promote high quality doctoral education in nursing through national/international collaboration.”

References

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