

# ENACTMENT OF VIRTUE ETHICS: COLLABORATION BETWEEN NURSE ACADEMICS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

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**Key Words:** International nurse education, second language, questionnaire design, virtue ethics, collaboration

## ABSTRACT

Increased enrolment of international nursing students in undergraduate and postgraduate programs is predicted as Australian universities compete for students in the globalised university market. This study explored issues impacting on the ability of international nursing students to achieve their study goals at an Australian university (n=29). However, this paper principally describes the design of the instrument by two nursing lecturers and international nursing students (n=10) in a collaborative process, characterised by a pluralistic world view and the enactment of virtue ethics. The myth of the term 'ESL' is critiqued, and challenged. In designing the instrument, we argued it was essential to be cognisant of the conceptual attributes and embedded meanings of language for the unique study population, to ensure face and content validity.

## INTRODUCTION

Design of the data collection instrument is usually described in one to two paragraphs of a research paper. However we believe the methodological issues specific to the process of the design of the instrument in a study entitled, 'On-campus International Nursing Students: experiences and reflections', warranted discussion in this discrete paper. The study built on previous research (Cecchin 1998) that examined the experiences of providers of education programs for international nursing students, revealing the need for nurse educators to have a greater understanding of the learning needs of nursing students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Given these findings, it was essential to also explore students' perspectives.

Using a questionnaire, this study explored the experiences of nursing students n=29 who left their homeland, family, employment and support networks to study in another country. It examined issues impacting on their ability to achieve their study goals and identified improvements in the learning environment for international nursing students. The study is to be reported in full elsewhere. In this paper, we describe the design of the data collection instrument used in the study. A key feature of the study was the collaboration between us, as the researchers, and the cohort of 1998 undergraduate and postgraduate international nursing students (n=10), in the design of the questionnaire.

## Philosophical position

As nurse researchers, virtues reflected our philosophical positions which, in turn, shaped our interactions with the unique group of international nursing students. Virtue ethics reflects a disposition that

challenges one to reflect on the kind of person one is, and intends to be, in any given action. As Johnstone (1999) discusses, virtue theory recognises that qualities like respect, care, compassion, kindness, genuineness, warmth, trust and empathy are intrinsic to creating and maintaining sound interpersonal relationships and effective healing (p.134-6). This is in contrast, Yeo (1996:47) claims, to the traditional deontological and utilitarian ethical theories which are based on moral rules and principles to inform one's moral life. Our work with international nursing students required us to 'practice across borders', and to critically reflect upon the nature and meaning of cultural diversity and ethical pluralism. However, as Brody (1988:90) stated, 'virtue is not something possessed, but performed'. Hence we claim to have enacted this philosophical perspective through a collaborative process with the students in the design of a meaningful instrument in this study.

Another significant issue emerged as key words were identified in the literature review. We contend that a myth has been created and perpetuated through the labelling of international students as 'English as a Second Language (ESL)' or 'second language' students. The inherent difficulty with this label is that it advances the assumption that English is the second language for all international students. However, for some students, English is their fourth or fifth language. While this may seem a minor point to some people, our concern is that this is a form of stigmatisation and is therefore demeaning, patronising and privileges ethnocentrism (Anglo-American perspectives). As a consequence, we call into question the use of the term 'ESL'. As Yeo (1996:46-8) stated, 'living a moral life ... is responding thoughtfully to the myths and stories that have shaped us'.

Our transcultural ethical approach acknowledged pluralistic world views in the diverse student population, and further challenged us to examine various myths attributed to international students. We understood that words have embedded meanings that differ for students for whom English is not their first language. Thus the collaborative process in the design of the instrument was to ensure face validity and content validity of the questionnaire and collection of accurate data. The process was informed by an awareness that lexical (word) meaning differs across various cultures. Therefore, in designing the instrument, we contend it was essential to be cognisant of the conceptual attributes and embedded meanings of language for the study population, in order to understand how international students identify themselves in their language. This embedded understanding, combined with various strategies in questionnaire design, guided the development of questions which best illuminated the research question.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview of international nurse education

Nursing has a long history of practising across borders of country and culture to provide education that contributes to the advancement of nursing in other countries. In the twenty-first century, the nursing community will become increasingly global and international nurse education will increase (Cecchin 1999; Meleis 1985; Styles 1993; Leininger 1994). This phenomenon is aided by easy immigration and emigration (St. Clare and McKenry 1999), less restrictive country borders, greater ease of travel and increasing use of technology. However, providing international education is complicated and requires specific knowledge, skills and attitudes and affects what, where, when and how teaching occurs (Morris and Hudson 1995; Phillips 1994).

Australia's university sector is highly dependent on internationalisation for its long term financial wellbeing (Mazzarol and Hosie 1997). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the provision of international education is more than having international students in the student population (Cecchin 1998). It requires an understanding of the specific learning needs of international students and calls for innovative development in teaching and assessment methods. However, Australian research indicates that academics focus on the deficiencies of international students and tend to take a remedial approach to students' learning problems (Biggs 1997; Morris and Hudson 1995; Mullins et al 1995). Nurse educators providing teaching and learning curriculum for international nursing students need to be well prepared for this role, with a clear understanding of the unique issues and complexity of international students' experiences (Ryan et al 1998).

### International students' experiences

There is a rapidly growing number of nursing students studying in Australian universities, representing diverse cultural and racial groups. Research shows that many international students (not specifically nursing) experience specific problems that other students do not encounter, including culture shock, adjustment problems, and psychological disturbances. These include, for example feelings of alienation, anxiety and depression, as a reaction to the drastic changes in their physical, social and educational environment (Mezger 1994; Kenyon and Amrapala 1993; Oei and Notowidjojo 1990; Javed and Shapiro 1992; Burns 1991). They are frequently ill-prepared to cope with adjustments to language; social, physical and cultural environments; limited finances; loneliness; academic pressures and difference. These factors impact on well-being, motivation, and ability to achieve their study goals. A South Australian study

reported students express fear of failure, doubts about academic ability and uncertainty about what academic staff expect in terms of academic work (Mullins et al 1995).

A Canadian study examined international nursing students' perceptions of their learning difficulties. The study compared perceptions of a cohort of students whose first language was not English, and a cohort of students whose first language was English. The study also examined the nursing faculty perceptions of international students (whose first language was not English), in relation to their learning difficulties, and the need for supportive programs for these students and faculty. Results indicated significant differences between the perceptions of faculty, and students' whose first language was not English, particularly in the area of learning difficulty (Jalili-Grenier and Chase 1997).

The experiences of international nursing students are unique and complex because, as reported in a United States study, students are more likely to be women, older than other students and established in their career (Wang and Lethbridge 1995). This study also found that some students are mothers who leave their children at home for periods of one or two years, and experience intense feelings of separation and guilt. However, when children do accompany the student, parenting frequently competes with study activities (Wang and Lethbridge 1995).

A number of studies have highlighted the relationship between students' experiences and their learning performance (Kayser-Jones and Abu-Saad 1982; Sharif 1994; Javed and Shapiro 1992). Factors and barriers influencing international students' academic success are of great interest to lecturers in nursing. However, here in Australia, there is a surprising lack of literature examining the learning experiences of international nursing students. Given this scarcity of nursing literature in Australia examining these issues, there is a compelling need for research uncovering those aspects which will enhance international nursing student learning. This knowledge will advance understanding, and guide the provision of culturally diverse, international nurse education.

## THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was exploration and increased understanding about the experiences of nursing students who leave their homeland, their family, employment and support networks to study in another country. Using a questionnaire, this study examined various issues impacting on their ability to achieve their study goals, and identified improvements in the learning environment for international nursing students. Therefore, an interpretive approach was adopted in this study, and

accepted criteria for rigour in qualitative research guided the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The aims of the study were:

- To explore the experiences of international students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate nurse education programs, particularly issues that impact upon these students' ability to achieve their study goals;
- To identify ways to improve the environment for current and future international students studying in undergraduate and postgraduate nurse education programs at an Australian University.

The study is to be reported in full elsewhere. In this paper, we describe the design of the data collection instrument used in the study, that was developed in 1998 through a collaborative process between us, as the researchers, and a group of 'on campus' undergraduate and postgraduate international nursing students (n=10) from the Asian region, so to ensure face and content validity. We invited the cohort of 'on campus' students to volunteer to participate in the design process. It could be argued that a limitation of the study was the nature of the sample as only students from the Asian region collaborated in the design of the questionnaire. We are not claiming their responses can be considered reflective of all international nursing students, however, the questionnaire holds credibility for students from the Asian region. Moreover, we argue transferrability of this process of collaboration in instrument design between researchers and members of unique study populations.

### Selection of the instrument

The aforementioned self-administered mail questionnaire was chosen as the appropriate data collection instrument in this study. Although self-administered mail questionnaires are cheaper to carry out than interviews, Dillman (1983) argued that cost should not primarily dictate the design of an effective data collection instrument (p.360). Further, Dillman (1983) argued 'response rates in excess of 80% have been achieved in surveys of university students using self-administered mail questionnaires' (p.360). Emphasis was placed on the design of the instrument because we considered the development of clear questions organised in a logical sequence as important as other aspects of the research process, such as ethical considerations and data analysis.

The importance of questionnaire design is supported by Dillman (1983) who stated 'the absence of an interviewer means there is no one to persuade respondents to complete boring lists of questions or to clarify confusing instructions' (p.376). The success of a questionnaire is also dependent on testing the instrument and Dunning and Martin (1996) claimed 'the preliminary testing of the draft

will identify problems with content, administration and scoring. By testing and revising the draft, the researcher can reduce random error, enhance the validity of the research and spend less time and resources on the study proper' (p.32). In our study, testing of the instrument was carried out by the international nursing students, and is discussed later in the paper.

### **Collaboration in the questionnaire design**

We adopted an innovative approach in the study whereby we collaborated with members of the study population in designing the instrument to ensure content and face validity. The rationale for this approach reflected our commitment to enact virtue ethics and honoured the unique linguistic issues of the students. We were guided by the attributes of collaboration defined by Henneman et al (1995) as a 'joint venture, cooperative endeavour, willing participation, shared planning and decision-making, contribution of expertise, power as shared, based on knowledge or expertise' (p.105). In addition, the collaborative process was a search for understanding (Coeling and Wilcox 1994) where roles are complementary, rather than hierarchical and where one participant is not subordinate to the other (Fagin 1992). Antecedents influence whether or not collaboration and collaborative practice occurs, and in the study the researchers and the international students required a willingness to engage with each other in this interpersonal process.

Henneman et al (1995) identified that communication is a crucial antecedent to collaboration in that it 'serves as the vehicle for articulating other important precursors to collaboration such as respect, both for oneself and others, sharing and trust' (p.105). Commitment and time were also required to build the relationship between us and the international students to a point where collaboration in the design of the instrument could occur. This notion is supported by Daley et al (1999) who identified the need for an 'initial time investment' to establish collaborative relationships in nurse education. Throughout the semesters, there was contact between us and the students in relation to academic issues, and also more informally at group lunches each month to discuss any other issues. Rapport developed at these lunchtime meetings thereby enhancing the collaborative relationship.

### **Linguistic issues in the questionnaire design**

We examined literature exploring linguistic issues and the cultural meaning of language. De Vaus (1991) discussed the design and evaluation of questionnaires in terms of their meaning for the study population and stated 'one of the problems in developing valid indicators is interpreting the meaning of people's responses' (p.57) and, 'to check to ensure that respondents understand the

intended meaning of the question' (p.100). Dunning and Martin (1996) advised researchers to 'use language that the study population understood' (p.32) in the design of the study instruments. Therefore, we explored the linguistic issues and the cultural meaning of language to inform the research process.

The manner in which international students use words in their language and how words are grouped together is of significance and conveys meaning in the communication. International students are not homogeneous and we recognised that words emerge from one's personal context and environment, and that words are cultural and changing in their meaning. As Keith and Shuttleworth (1997) noted, there are over half a million words in the English vocabulary and the majority are lexical or content words that are verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs. The second group of several hundred words are grammatical words that include conjunctions, determinates and prepositions (at, from, of, in) that are actually used more frequently than any particular lexical words (p.96-7).

Clearly, the development of language proficiency is a complex process. For international students using English in academic and professional contexts, the attainment of competency is essential in the areas of literacy, critical thinking, mathematics and statistics. Educators involved in various capacities with international students need to consider these factors in their expectations and interactions with students. As a consequence, it was important for us to understand how these students assigned meaning to words. This depth of knowledge was crucial for us in the collaborative process with the students in the design of a meaningful study instrument.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Collaborative process in questionnaire design**

The collaborative process in questionnaire design was visible in the monthly meetings between us and the international nursing students. It was evident when the students completed the draft instrument to ensure instructions and phrasing of questions were clear and answerable. The development of the questions was informed by our experience in working with international nursing students over a number of years, input from the international nursing students, and relevant literature.

### **Verbal discussions to develop the questionnaire**

We held meetings with the students to consider the language, layout, clarity, apparent internal consistency and face and content validity, as words can be interpreted in different ways according to cultural understandings of the meaning of words. For example, the students said they

could not attribute the descriptor ‘excellent’ to their experiences because in their cultures, the notion of excellence was rarely attained. Similarly, students had difficulty with the meaning of the word ‘satisfied’ as a descriptor of their experiences influencing their ability to achieve their study goals. Therefore, questions were organised with a 5-point Likert scale with descriptors of ‘not at all’ attributed to (1) and ‘serious problem’ attributed to (5).

**Overview of the questionnaire content**

The questionnaire contained open and closed questions, organised into five sections. Section one contained thirteen questions about students’ demographic characteristics, previous academic history and future employment plans. Section two contained two open-ended questions specific to their experiences on campus. Section three contained eleven questions rating the degree of difficulty in various study activities, using a five point Likert scale. Section four contained twelve questions, rating various issues affecting their ability to achieve their study goals. For example, questions in section three and four were designed as below, and students were asked to circle the number that best described their experience:

**Have you had doubts about your academic ability?**

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    serious problem

**Have you felt lonely?**

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    serious problem

Section five contained four open-ended questions asking how various university services could be improved for current and future international nursing students.

**Testing of the questionnaire by students**

The students were then given a copy of the draft questionnaire to complete. This manner of testing is supported by De Vaus (1991) ‘to evaluate how respondents interpret the question’s meaning and to check whether the range of response alternatives is sufficient’ (p.99). We reviewed the returned questionnaires and found sections one, two and five contained complete and comprehensive responses. However, in sections three and four limitations in the use of the Likert scale were revealed, as there were gaps in specific data about the international students’ experiences. It was revealed that 50% of the students scored ‘4’ in their response to questions revealing they had experienced difficulties in grammar and writing assignments, had doubts about academic ability, fear of academic failure, and had felt homesick. However, these data did not clearly reveal whether these difficult experiences affected their ability to achieve their study goals, which was an objective of the study. It was also unclear how the students differentiated between numbers 1-5, and indeed what the score of ‘4’ meant to the students.

Therefore, at the next meeting with international students, descriptive words were attached to each number to seek a better understanding of the meaning of the responses. For example:

**Have you had doubts about your academic ability?**

never	some of the time	unsure	most of the time	all the time
1	2	3	4	5

When did this happen

**Has loneliness affected your ability to study?**

never	some of the time	unsure	most of the time	all the time
1	2	3	4	5

Comment .....

In a study conducted in the United States by Kayser-Jones and Abu-Saad (1982) the experience of loneliness emerged as the predominant problem for all international nursing students, regardless of age, marital status or country of origin. Loneliness is usually an unpleasant experience and not a chosen personal state (unlike solitude) (p.302). Kayser-Jones and Abu-Saad (1982) further stated, ‘loneliness can be devastating and it can seriously interfere with students’ academic performance’ (p.312). Therefore, we decided to include clarifying questions in the questionnaire to seek greater detail of the international students’ experiences, particularly related to loneliness.

**CONCLUSION**

International nurse education presents many opportunities and benefits for nursing. Education that recognises culturally distinctive learning styles and develops effective learning environments and assessment methods that maximise learning opportunities for international students within, not separate from, the teaching system will enhance the learning of all students. Other nursing students will benefit from interactions with international nursing students because increased understanding of diverse cultures and contexts will better equip individuals for practice in the global health system. Nurse researchers are challenged to ‘practice across borders’, and to embrace collaborative opportunities to enhance understanding and tolerance between diverse groups in society. In conclusion, the collaboration by us, the researchers, with a unique population of nursing students in the design of a meaningful study instrument

enacted an ethical dimension in nursing education, practice and research.

Cecchin, M. 1999. *Beyond boundaries and barriers: Nursing in the 21st Century*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Collaboration with distinctive study populations in instrument design

We argue the importance of collaboration in instrument design between researchers and members of unique study populations, to ensure face and content validity.

### 2. Enhanced cultural awareness of international nursing students

We call for enhanced cultural awareness in research activities with international nursing students. The collaborative process described was underpinned by a cultural awareness of students for whom English was not their first language, thereby acknowledging lexical meaning differences, conceptual attributes and embedded meanings of language existing across cultures. The students wanted to tell their story, which has potential to influence policy, and create innovative teaching, learning and assessment methods.

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### 3. Research approach informed by relevant literature

Our approach to the research process reflects what several theorists and authors have advocated. We believe this broad use of literature from nursing and other disciplines enhanced the quality of this study.

### 4. Challenge to the profession

To make visible the myths, meanings, and stigmatisation embedded in the term, 'English as a second language', and to challenge nursing to lead the various disciplines in the authoring of a meaningful language which resonates a pluralistic world view.

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