

STAFF-STUDENT EXCHANGE BETWEEN MMIHS AND BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY (UK)

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[†]We would like to dedicate this article to Dr. Anneyce Knight who died during the initial drafting of this article, Dr. Knight very sadly passed away from breast cancer in late 2021.

INTRODUCTION

It is always a great feeling to be able to start an editorial with the words “We have just been awarded a new grant!” On this occasion it is a staff-student exchange grant between Nepal and the United Kingdom (UK), or to be more precise, between Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences (MMIHS) and Bournemouth University (BU). The grant was awarded by the British Council, National Agency for European Commission Erasmus+ Key Action 107 programme as part of their 2020 call for Learning Mobility of Individuals - International Credit Mobility. We were awarded the funds under the section ‘Higher education student and staff mobility between Programme and Partner Countries’.

Our ERASMUS+ project started with international virtual exchange and collaboration events focused on academic preparation, research, care and intercultural competence aspects which benefits entire programme cohorts as well as academics and professional services in both countries. The original plan was that Erasmus+ grant would cover the travel and subsistence costs for 12 postgraduate student mobilities and 12 staff mobilities: half from MMIHS and half from BU. The MMIHS and BU students spend three to six months studying at the partner organisation, benefitting from all the academic and cultural inputs entailed, whilst staff had the opportunity to go and teach for one or two weeks. Staff could also learn about the different

ways of working as a lecturer or researcher in the other country, as well as considering the many similarities.

The MMIHS-BU partnership

The MMIHS-BU partnership is a long-standing one as these higher education institutions have been working together for more than a decade¹. Although this was the first successful grant focusing on staff-student exchange between the two institutions, there have been several successful research grant applications in our partnership over the years. For example, just before COVID-19 BU and MMIHS academics conducted a joint research project and published one of the first papers of its kind on trans-gender and health in Nepal². MMIHS and BU are also part of a large-scale research collaboration lead by the University of Sheffield (UK) studying the impact of federalisation on the health system in Nepal³⁻⁵. This is a joint project (2020-2024) led by the University of Sheffield and it is a collaboration with Bournemouth University, the University of Huddersfield, MMIHS and PHASE Nepal. This longitudinal interdisciplinary study is funded by the UK Health Systems Research Initiative [Grant ref. MR/T023554/1].

Further research collaborations included work on CPD (Continuous Professional Development) in nursing in Nepal⁶. In this joint project we argued that CPD offers nurses the opportunity to maintain, improve and broaden knowledge, expertise and develop their personal and professional qualities to enhance practice and career development. Nepal has had limited process and progress in ensuring CPD for nurses and the uptake of post-registration education and training programmes or CPD tends to be ad hoc. Generally, CPD in Nepal remains under-developed as showing evidence of having received CPD is not currently a requirement of nurses when they re-register every five years. This project is a good example of the BU FUSION approach of fusing Research, Education and Practice (see also below). In this CPD project our earlier Research in the form of a needs assessment will promote the introduction of CPD which is of course, post-registration Education in nursing, helping to improve Practice in a low-income country. Our collaboration has had some impact on nursing in Nepal as CPD is now on the policy agenda.

Most recently we published a joint study on vaccine hesitancy⁷. This qualitative study, in an Open Access journal, explores what sorts of barriers are faced by women needing family planning services in Nepal during the pandemic. It was conducted in five districts of Nepal. Moreover, over the past decade BU academics have delivered various training sessions, workshops, and seminars at MMIHS in Kathmandu, several academics came as part of the ERASMUS+ exchange, but other came before and many will undoubtedly continue the collaboration in the future.

Of course, the partnership has its trials and tribulations. For example, as part of the ERASMUS+ exchange three MMIHS MSc students who were invited to come to BU could not get their visa in time and therefore could not come, as unfortunately, they could not fulfil the official requirements of the scheme. Whilst one BU staff visiting Nepal contracted COVID-19 and on

another occasion Dengue Fever. Despite these little mishaps we can say that the overall collaboration continuous to be a great success.

Internationalisation at MMIHS and BU

Both MMIHS and BU have internationalisation high on their agenda. MMIHS sees its internationalisation strategy as factor in its endeavours to do justice and make the world a better place. The guiding principles of MMIHS are M – Mastery on academic performance, M – Mutual effort, I – Interdisciplinary approaches and infrastructure excellence, H- Harmony and S – Scientific Innovation and sustainability. Key important goals of MMIHS’s strategy are to prepare students for their future in a globalised world, and to give staff the possibility of working together with international colleagues to develop teaching and research. MMIHS has developed linkages with the different universities and institutions of Nepal and abroad to strengthen the academic, research and extension works. There are also plans to initiate the faculty and students exchanges programme. The institute is working closely with different government organizations, non-government organisations and other agencies as a part of extension activities. Its internationalisation strategy focuses on tackling the national problems associated with insufficient education and limited health research capacity. Traveling abroad is relatively expensive and not within the means of most staff or students in Nepal. MMIHS is convinced that both the outward and inward postgraduate student and staff exchange has benefitted the participants as well as support the academic growth of the institution and will contribute greatly to its on-going internationalisation efforts.

BU’s vision is ‘to be recognised worldwide as a leading university for inspiring learning, advancing knowledge and enriching society through the fusion of education, research and practice’. Internationalisation of the curriculum as the process of diversification of education towards a more international perspective and approach is taken seriously by the university. Therefore, BU aims to (a) have a positive impact world-wide on the challenges facing society; (b) ensure staff, students and graduates enrich society as active citizens in their communities; and (c) strengthen BU’s shared impact through worldwide partnerships. Internationalisation at BU provides considerable scope for curricular and pedagogic innovations across cultures and geographies; internationalisation is at the core of shaping global learners and nurturing cross-border research and innovation. It is embedded within BU’s unique FUSION model (which includes three foundational elements: Education, Research, Professional Practice framework) and the co-creation of student and staff attributes which includes their global outlook. The result of a project such as this, with its intercultural focus, does not only benefit those staff and students at BU and MMIHS taking part in the exchange, but also their colleagues and the people within their care.

The partnership

This project has help achieve the strategic aim of BU and MMIHS to provide opportunities and support for students and staff to gain international experiences that can contribute to career and personal development of students and staff from each institution by fostering their global outlook and building and expanding on strategic collaborative links world-wide. BU is a centre of excellence for qualitative research and mixed-methods research in health. MMIHS will tap into this resource in order to contribute towards their vision of becoming the leading institute in the field of health sciences in Nepal. The project has provided opportunities to support BU and MMIHS students and staff to build their global mind-set and gain intercultural awareness which will form a unique international experience through study exchange at postgraduate level. This project is set to develop intercultural competence, academic excellence and employability through a set of attributes (knowledge, skills and attitudes). Students who have taken part in the ERASMUS+ exchange have commented on how they learnt ethical and transformative thinking, examined local UK, global and intercultural perspectives and that it had increased their intellectual curiosity. Students seem to have found cross-cultural empathy and self-reflection; work collaboratively, think critically and solve creatively with their international peers to strengthen their teamwork; build global networks to explore avenues and collaborate with local and global organisations. Students also demonstrated respect, tolerance, and a sense of responsibility to contribute to society; some said they aim to work in the future with local communities or initiate capacity-building projects that contribute to solving global challenges.

Final thoughts

The world is rapidly becoming a smaller place with globalisation occurring everywhere. The process of internationalising higher education institutions through partnerships like ours, brings benefits to both MMIHS and BU and to both staff and students. For the latter, it offers new ideas, alternative ways of thinking, insights in the other people's value systems and cultures, etc. It equips students and staff with knowledge, skills and dispositions to work in culturally diverse and international contexts, providing them with a wider diversity of knowledge and greater understanding of global issues and challenges. In short, the partnership offers many opportunities to gain new experiences, explore new sources and perspectives, and improve their cross-cultural capabilities and, ultimately, their employability.

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