

Research Space

Journal article

How valuable is an international cultural exchange?

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How valuable is an international cultural visit?

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It is acknowledged that due to globalisation and increasing levels of migration undergraduate nursing students require cultural competence skills to be able to deliver care to diverse populations (Sharifi, Adib-Hajbaghery and Najafi 2019). International exchanges and cultural visits have been identified as one of the ways cultural competence can be developed (Crawford et al 2017; Gower et al 2017). As a result, an element of my role as International Lead for nursing programmes, involves me facilitating cultural exchanges for students in Japan and the United States of America. Research suggests that students do learn about cultural competence from international exchanges (Curinckx et al 2018; Choi and Kim, 2018). However, I am often asked questions such as “What is the value of such visits to students and people they care for”? I am currently undertaking research focusing on the impact of international visits on the development of undergraduate health and care student’s cultural competence. However, these critical questions have encouraged me to consider what the outcomes of cultural exchanges are in relation to the person’s personal and/or professional development; and whether this could justify international visits in view of the financial costs for both students and university staff involved.

In June 2019, I accompanied a group of undergraduate students from across the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing to a partner university in Japan for an eight-day cultural visit. The visit included a tour of a hospital providing acute care, joining Japanese students for lectures, activities lead by Japanese students, including calligraphy and wearing Kimonos, and visiting an Earthquake Memorial Museum to learn about disaster management. During the visit, I become aware the experience appeared to have a positive and significant impact on one of the students in the group. They had recently completed a Certificate in Health and Social Care and would commence the undergraduate pre registration Child Nursing programme in September 2019. Therefore, I asked if she would be willing to share what impact the visit had on her; and whether she felt this could be translated into her future practice as a student.

Keeley identified development of communication skills as a significant area of personal growth. She

did not know any of the staff or students in the group. This led to some anxiety and she recognised that initially she was quiet and reserved. However, she acknowledged that her confidence in talking, and participating in activities, with others in the group, developed in a meaningful way as the week progressed. Communicating with people who spoke very little English, and not being able to speak any Japanese herself, posed many difficulties for her. However, Keeley acknowledged that, by watching how others in the group used mobile phones and drew simple pictures, she learnt to overcome this. In addition, she discovered that talking slowly, using simple language and avoiding slang and colloquialisms when talking with the Japanese greatly enhanced her ability to communicate. Keeley recognised these newly developed communication skills could be useful when undertaking future clinical placements. By living the experience of having to communicate in a different way, she identified that instead of using medical language she would, now use terms and phrases that were based on an individual's understanding and, access additional communication aids if necessary. Keeley's newly found confidence in her communication was seen by her to be a transferrable skill that would benefit her when undertaking academic work. Prior to the trip, Keeley admitted that asking for help was difficult for them. In addition, she was reluctant to participate in group discussions, and preferred to listen to others. She was now more willing to take an active role in group activities.

Keeping in touch and communicating with her own family was very important to her as she was in an environment that was very different for her, she was a long way from home and had never been abroad without her family. Keeley spoke to her family and was able see her pet dog, using Facetime. This highlighted to her how important it is to ensure people in hospital can access technology to enable them to maintain contact with friends, family and loved ones. Another area that was hard for Keeley, was adjusting to Japanese food, which she did not always like. However, this led to an appreciation of how important it is for people to have access to foods they are used to when in hospital and, how important food can be in relation to providing comfort and a sense of routine when in an unfamiliar environment. Observing how important customs and tradition are to the Japanese, allowed Keeley to gain insight into a different perspective of what respect and respectful behaviour

might mean to people from a different cultural background. For example, as a tourist visiting shrines where people were actively praying and showing deference to others, she was able to experience how important spiritual and religious expression could be for other people.

It appeared from her feedback and my own observation, that the cultural exchange had a significant impact on Keeley, only some of which has been shared. The value of a cultural visit is difficult to quantify and whether the learning she encountered is translated into her practice as a nurse remains to be seen. However, the discussion with Keeley, suggests these visits are potentially transformational experiences that could equip students with lifelong and graduate skills that cannot taught in the lecture theatre or comfort of our own country.

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