

The Innovative Learning Institute for Circumpolar Health

An International summer school for nursing
students in rural and remote areas

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This chapter focusses on nursing students' opportunities for participation in an international summer school specifically aimed at the people living in the circumpolar regions. The Northern Nursing Education Network offers a two-week intensive course for students to meet and to develop contextual knowledge of indigenous people living in Arctic regions. These areas are often challenged by vast distances and specific health issues. The summer school is made possible by collaboration across three continents and rotates between the northern universities. The topics about which the students learn are made relevant for nursing practice through peer student meetings, lectures and field trips. This chapter highlights the experiences of the students.

Introduction

This chapter deals with the development of an international summer school for nursing students in northern and rural areas organized through the Northern Nursing Education Network. The summer school is set in the contexts of Arctic and rural nursing education. It aims to meet the need for visits by international exchange students who do not participate in other exchange agreements. We will use a

descriptive case narrative to show how an international nursing education network can provide new learning environments for nursing students and highlight the circumpolar focus for the students.

The standardization of nursing education under the Bologna process (Collins & Hewer, 2014) and the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT, both focus on equal standards in and the streamlining of nursing education. This has been beneficial in ensuring the quality of all basic nursing programmes. However, there is a lack of focus on the contextual aspects of indigenous people and others living in Arctic regions, which are regions often challenged by vast distances and specific health challenges. In this chapter we discuss the opportunities where Northern nursing students have the chance to participate in an international summer school that specifically focusses on the people living in the North. This is made relevant for nursing practice through peer student meetings, lecturers and field trips.

One initiative of the Northern Nursing Education Network has been the Innovative Learning Institute for Circumpolar Health, ILICH, referred to as the summer school in this paper. Our data come from the students' anonymous written evaluations of three summer schools from 2016 to 2019 with the students' consent for publication. In addition, one student nurse from Sápmi, the Norwegian Saami area, who attended the summer school at Ilisimatusarfik/University of Greenland in 2019 was interviewed six months after the summer school. This student read the material from the interview and agreed on its inclusion in this chapter.

The Northern Nursing Education Network

The Northern Nursing Education Network (NNEN), following an initiative by the nursing education programme of the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, was established in 2014. They sought international collaboration with the decentralized nursing programme at UiT, The Arctic University of Norway. At the time, the aims were: to share experiences with starting nursing education in rural areas; to use technology to enable remote

teaching; and to establish a network of northern nursing programmes for mutual learning and inspiration. UiT had more than 25 years' experience in facilitating rural nursing education through its decentralized programme (Norbye & Skaalvik, 2013). The Canadian focus on indigenous peoples was new to us although, to some extent, we could recognize the challenges in our own history where boarding schools and a powerful assimilation process have caused problems for Sami people throughout the Nordic region (Minde, 2005). We started our decentralized programme by recruiting students to rural nursing education, but without a specific focus on Sami aspects – even though our catchment area included 14 municipalities in Troms with a Sami population large enough to be eligible for grants from the Sami Parliament (Meld. St. 31 2018–2019). However, this aspect was not included in the nursing programme, and we based our collaboration with the NNEN on the global knowledge of cultural sensitivity and its problems with a focus on indigenous people. We received external funding from the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU)¹ and formed the first international educational network for nursing in northern areas. The newly established NNEN was accepted as the UArctic Thematic Network on Northern Nursing Education in 2015.² Nursing programmes from 3 continents, 7 countries and 14 universities joined the network.

The NNEN aimed to focus on nursing education in the circumpolar region, including mutual knowledge exchange between students and teachers. We wished to establish an environment for nursing students in northern areas where they could learn about the Arctic and contextual factors and meet peers from other areas of the circumpolar region with both different and similar issues.

The goals of the network were set at the kickoff meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland in 2015:

¹ SIU has since changed its name to the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education, Diku in 2019.

² UArctic Northern Nursing Education, see <https://www.uarctic.org/organization/thematic-networks/northern-nursing-education/>

Network Goals

- Conduct research assessing the pedagogies and didactics most appropriate for northern nursing education.
- Share best practices amongst northern nursing educators at the biannual UArctic Thematic Network on Northern Nursing Education meetings, and conduct a concomitant survey tracking northern nursing education programmes, pedagogical models, and recruitment & retention rates.
- Establish an Innovative Learning Institute for Circumpolar Health to allow northern nursing students to meet and learn from their counterparts around the circumpolar north.
- Evaluate the regulation of nursing practice in a northern context across the circumpolar north.
- Explore different uses of technology, including remote presence technology, to improve the accessibility and quality of clinical instruction and continuing education, and to develop pedagogies suitable for healthcare students in the high north.
- Facilitate the transfer of knowledge between circumpolar health researchers and nursing educators and students.

Student exchange

Traditionally, nursing students in Norway take part in established student exchange schemes with countries and universities with exchange agreements. To receive funding from the Norwegian state or Erasmus Plus, the duration of the exchange must be from three to twelve months. The Norwegian nursing education programmes send and receive a set number of students each year. When linguistic barriers prevent students from attending theoretical classes, such as for English-speaking students in Norway, UiT offers exchange students specially adapted placements with English as the working language. A stated goal of the international exchange in the nursing programme is that students should enhance their understanding of different contexts and



Figure 1: Locations of the participating universities in the NNEN

develop cultural competence in their nursing. This is especially evident when students practice in far-off countries (Hovland & Johannessen, 2018). We live in multicultural societies, and understanding cultural context is important for our ability to provide care to people in vulnerable life stages, especially when cultural values and norms differ.

For some groups of nursing students, an exchange visit of 3–4 months is unsuitable, especially if they have obligations to their family or local community. In recent years, various educational programmes have been developed for students living in rural and remote circumpolar areas (Hyry-Honka et al., 2016; Butler et al., 2016; Edgecombe & Robertson, 2016; Møller, 2016). Such areas have had a serious shortage of nurses and most nurses are recruited from other parts of the country to work for shorter or longer periods (Berry and Butler, 2014). In addition to the difficulty of recruiting nurses to these areas, there has been little higher education locally. Education has been concentrated in large towns and cities, and most students still study in an urban area and are connected to a large educational institution.

Rural nursing education

In Norway, there have been several initiatives to decentralize education (Braastad Jensen, 2008; Andersen, 2008) and to provide equitable educational offerings regardless of where applicants live. The purpose has been to bolster professions with shortages, especially teachers and nurses. The first decentralized nursing programme in Norway started in 1990 in central Troms at the former School of Nursing in Tromsø and offered classes in rural areas (Andersen, 2008). This was the precursor of the present decentralized study centre with permanent study sites and infrastructure in small towns in rural areas of Troms. Similar initiatives have been seen in other regions of Norway, such as in Finnmark (Nilsen, Huemer & Eriksen 2012), Western Norway (Olsen, 2003) and the interior of Eastern Norway (Rognstad, 2009). Decentralized education has been proven to be successful not only in terms of recruiting local students but also in providing a stable nursing workforce in the same area (Eriksen & Huemer, 2019; Gaski & Abelsen, 2017; Norbye & Skaalvik, 2013).

The Innovative Learning Institute for Circumpolar Health

International exchange is a goal for all nursing education but has been proven to be difficult to achieve in rural and remote areas. One of the main aims of the NNEN was to develop and pilot an Innovative Learning Institute for Circumpolar Health, ILICH. The summer school for nursing students in rural and remote areas, ILICH, was developed as a two-week intensive learning programme for international students within the NNEN. It was piloted in 2015 with students from the North-Eastern Federal University in the Siberian city of Yakutsk in Russia in collaboration with the University of Saskatchewan.

Based on this pilot project, three international summer schools were completed, all with funding from SIU³. The hosts of the summer schools were the University of Saskatchewan in 2016, The Arctic University of Norway

³ Senter for internasjonalisering av utdanning, in 2019 altered to Diku Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education.

(UiT) in 2017, and Ilisimatusarfik/the University of Greenland in 2019. The funding covered students' travel expenses while the host universities and its nursing programmes were responsible for planning and implementing the programmes.

Students apply to join the summer school through their home university where the faculty selects the participants. Over the years, 42 students from the NNEN universities from Siberia (Russia), Northern Canada, Iceland, Greenland, Finland and Norway have participated in ILICH.

In the NNEN, we have considered it an advantage if students are nearing the end of their nursing programme. The reason for this is to enable the students to benefit fully from the teaching content they have received. It is also advantageous to include students from indigenous backgrounds.

Credits

One of the goals of the summer school was to award credits on a common basis. However, this proved to be challenging, both because the countries have different types of credit systems and because Canadian provinces vary in their requirements for the content of nursing education. Few of the nursing programmes in the network included the possibility of optional specialization practice. To solve this problem, each nursing programme decided whether to give credits, based on specific study tasks such as a written report and the programme for each summer school. The criteria for awarding credits were included.

Circumpolar relevance for nursing

The goal of the summer school is to enhance student knowledge on topics relevant to the circumpolar region. We also wish to enable students to learn about the health issues specific to this region together with the indigenous peoples' health challenges (WHO, 2019). These are underrepresented areas in mainstream nursing education, both in Norway and internationally (Exner-Pirot et al., 2016). The summer schools include excursions such as visits to healthcare facilities, contact with local people in fieldwork, and student work on the university campus. Circumpolar healthcare is complex and

challenging with limited opportunities for interaction with others. The geographies, distances, infrastructures and the climates vary across the Northern regions. Nevertheless, the students find they have many common challenges in the provision of healthcare. The challenge of being in rural and remote locations with access to fewer colleagues and resources is an experience common to both nursing students and health professionals in the circumpolar region.

Each summer school chooses the topics relevant to that circumpolar region, and students' familiar habits and ideas are challenged by meeting up in another country. The summer school is limited to a two-week intensive course. The programme includes evenings and weekends, which allows students to establish close relationships and an understanding of differences and similarities (Norbye, Butler & Exner-Pirot, 2018). The common history of assimilation and repression of indigenous peoples and the colonization of their land has been an important topic (Minde, 2005).

Common topics for the summer schools

1. Social determinants of health, an international knowledge and policy area (WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health 2018; Helsedirektoratet 2018).
2. The history and background of indigenous peoples in the host country, where Western change processes have dominated.
3. Fieldwork that includes contact with local people and participation in local and traditional knowledge.
4. How to deal with challenges in a local context.

Relevance to the Circumpolar Context

A Norwegian study from 2014 revealed a lack of focus on the indigenous perspective in Norwegian nursing education (Eriksen, Bongo & Mehus, 2017). Recent national regulations (Forskrift om felles rammeplan for helse- og

sosialfagutdanninger av 2017, amended in 2019) provide new guidelines for health and social science education, including the legal rights of the Sami people and knowledge of the Sami people as indigenous people. However, Eriksen et al. (2017) show that no nursing programmes have previously had learning outcomes on Sami languages and cultural understanding. Thus, the summer school has become an important meeting point for students to acquire knowledge of culture and language and explore their experiences of learning about themselves and others (Norbye et al., 2018; Sørensen, 1997).

Identity, culture and local knowledge

Understanding different cultures and values in relation to health is crucial to how healthcare can be provided, received and valued. Indigenous peoples who have experienced assimilation, with Western values and lifestyles as the prevailing norm, may find that healthcare professionals do not understand their way of expressing health problems. They are misunderstood or offered healthcare that is difficult to implement (Bjerregaard et al., 2004; Aagaard, 2017). The provision of healthcare may be perceived as a conflict between evidence-based knowledge and what the person and family find relevant. Healthcare is often disease-oriented, while personal factors such as how a patient can live a full life with an illness are of lesser value (Aagaard, 2017). Long distances to hospitals and disease-oriented healthcare can lead to isolation from one's family and the local environment.

Other factors may be important. A student from one of the summer schools said the following:

The lack of trust and cultural differences often result in people from the minority groups not seeking medical help or treatment. Without relationships of trust, it is difficult for health workers to get the information that they need to attend to the issues (Norbye et al. 2018).

Sami communities have a long tradition of natural medicine, 'reading' and the laying on of hands. Although clinicians may be sceptical of this tradition, a 2017 study shows that primary healthcare professionals had a positive attitude towards natural medicine. This was despite not having learned about it during their training or in their jobs (Larsen et al., 2017). They

reported having a desire to learn more about this tradition, and about Sami culture and health in general. The first Sami language nursing programme in Norway will start in 2021.

It is important for nurses to have an understanding of contextual factors and to help preserve the knowledge of the traditions and culture of the indigenous people. This topic has been included in all the summer schools; students recognize the issues involved and are given time and space to learn more about these perspectives. One of the students from the summer school organized by Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland, said the following in her evaluation: ‘They helped me to understand the challenges that Greenlandic people meet in their daily lives. It was interesting to understand the challenges which affect Greenlandic people these days’.

In Greenland, the student met a population where the majority are indigenous, and the minority are Danish. The main focus is therefore on the Greenlanders. Interpreters at the hospital were there to help clinicians, who often only speak Danish, to understand what patients were saying, not to enable Greenlanders to understand what clinicians were saying. This contrasts with situations where the indigenous people are the minority. From the Greenlandic point of view, the emphasis that the Danish-speaking people are the ones that are in need of an interpreter is based on the awareness that Greenlandic is the main language. Sørensen (1997) discusses language as an important cultural marker. Several of his informants say that one cannot understand Greenlandic norms and attitudes to life until one understands the language. It is only when one knows the language that one can call oneself a Greenlander (Sørensen, 1997, p. 255). The importance of language for identity has also been a recurring theme in the summer schools. Canadians wishing to study nursing are tested in the language that dominates in the area in which they are to work prior to enrolling in the nursing programme. This is to enable these Canadians to practice nursing in the local language.

Greenlanders create their own coping strategies that make sense for the individual and family. Sparsely distributed populations result in the creation of their own models of local nursing stations for healthcare provision in small communities (Aagaard, 2018). Berry (2018) and Exner-Pirot (2015) also point out that nurses in Canada’s small rural communities form the backbone of healthcare. In small communities, nurses often work independently as part of the local community. They are allocated various roles in close relation to where they live and work. Nursing thus becomes relational and includes the

entire community as supporters of the people who fall ill. Nurses must then create clear conditions and limits for their practice to prevent breaches of confidentiality and to maintain a boundary between their private and professional lives (Moules et al., 2010; Berry, 2018). In their encounter with Greenland, this is made clear for the students.

Way of life

The summer school is an educational opportunity with a focus on health challenges and knowledge in the circumpolar region. At the summer schools, students from Siberia, Northern Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Finland and Norway become familiar with nursing education in another northern country. They recognize the importance of meeting local people for informal discussions on their own experiences and local conditions. The students also appreciate the knowledge they gain from meeting people in their everyday lives and in contact with health services. One student from ILICH 2019 said the following: ‘It’s great to hear different perspectives from students from different countries. Lectures, hospital visits, university tours and talking to the head nurse’.

These meetings take place through organized activities and in field-work and healthcare in a local community. These meetings, the information acquired and discussions with fellow students challenge the students’ understandings of nursing. It gives them insights into the importance of nursing locally; furthermore, they realize that although their own challenges may be different, there are recognizable features because nursing is both general and contextual. In an unfamiliar context, students thus reflect on what they see and what they discover. A student in ILICH 2019 said the following: ‘The topics covered were helpful since we learned about the issues that face the Inuit population and how the systems deal with, and help the population deal with, these issues’.

When meeting people outside school, students also see similarities and compare the new environment with their familiar way of life back home. A group of students at the summer school at UiT in 2017 were on an excursion where they brought fishing rods. The students fished, made a bonfire and grilled the fish on the bonfire. The students flocked around the fire, sat on their knees and ate the fish with their fingers. They smiled and were clearly

comfortable with the situation: 'That's how I do it at home too!'. Students from Siberia, Canada, Greenland and Norway shared stories about fishing and hunting and stories from their childhoods. The main intention of the excursion was a pleasant joint experience, but it also became an experience of recognition of ways of life. Several students came from communities with long fishing and hunting traditions. The stories they shared showed that they had something in common apart from their studies and apart from nursing. The students appreciated the feeling of togetherness; they looked after one another and shared experiences.

In Greenland, one of the students met a husband and wife slaughtering reindeer. They were in Sisimiut, a town on the west coast. This Sami student was from a reindeer herding family and was familiar with reindeer slaughtering. She walked over to the couple, watched how they were dividing the carcass, and asked why they cut the shanks straight off, which damaged the hide. She was used to people using this hide for making boots and other things. The woman from Greenland said that they used to use the hide to sew gloves, but that now there was no need for the hide from this part of the reindeer. They talked and shared traditions from Sápmi and from Sisimiut in Greenland. The student, who was interested in her own culture and traditions, thought it was wonderful to be able to share her experiences with a woman in Greenland and said it caused her to reflect back to her own culture. She realized how important it was to uphold traditions: 'Just think, I got to experience this and determine what we have in common, even though we're a huge distance and a long flight from each other'. There was a common northern and Arctic feeling in the student's encounter with the couple slaughtering the reindeer.

The knowledge emphasized in our nursing education and our health services is evidence-based and generalized from a Western view of knowledge. This knowledge is inadequate unless it also takes into account the history and way of life of indigenous people. One of our informants said the following: 'We have lost our way of life, and where are we heading?'. She went on to say that we, the younger generation, are proud of our origins and need to develop our own generation's distinctive pride based on our own terms of reference. In this way, the summer schools present local solutions or opportunities that arise from the common challenge of the indigenous peoples in these communities. The summer school unites the cultural background and

healthcare provision – not as a solution to a specific problem, but as a reflection of how to solve similar challenges differently in different contexts.

One Sami student said that she was surprised at how Greenlanders talked openly about the mental health challenges of their population. She found this quite different from her experience among her own people: ‘They talked openly and honestly about having mental health problems in the population, which would be impossible for us’. The student also said that Sami do not talk about these problems. Dagsvold et al. (2016) and Bongo (2012) have also shown that Sami people use indirect and non-verbal approaches to health and illness. Dagsvold (2016) found that patients with mental health problems, even when offered the choice to speak their mother tongue, choose to talk about them in Norwegian. They justify this by saying that the Sami language lacks adequate descriptions of what they want to express.

After summer school, the Sami student saw ‘the open and honest approach’, as she put it, as a possible way forward. Being open about mental health problems makes it possible to relate to them in a different way, as she experienced in Greenland. The problems were out in the open and discussed more directly. In nursing and meeting people, one cannot necessarily understand and recognize all the cultural codes. However, by talking and showing openness towards the unfamiliar, one can meet others with humility. This may provide sufficient knowledge to suggest individually tailored measures and solutions. Without this knowledge, one may have the best intentions with one’s solutions, but they will be unsuitable for the person in need of care (Aagaard 2015). The person may have other strategies and social networks to provide help in difficult situations. A student from Canada describes this well:

Cultural awareness is a huge component of nursing. This trip helped me become more aware of my own culture, beliefs, values and perceptions. In nursing, you will care for individuals from many different backgrounds. Therefore, it is essential to become culturally aware so you can respect other cultures. (Norbye et al. 2018).

Seeing one's self with others' eyes

'It's been an eye-opener for me to hear about the other students' opinions of our country. What they've seen is very valuable: friendly faces, extraordinary nature and a culture with lots of values.' (Møller, 2019).

Two Greenlandic students attended the summer school in Greenland. They received feedback on their country and their people from peers from the other countries. Such acknowledgement is important to enhance pride in one's own culture, language and country. One of the students from Greenland said she acted as a guide for the other students, showing and commenting on aspects of the Greenlandic way of life. This was because she understood the culture and language. Such knowledge transfer provided an acknowledgement of her own way of life, which was valuable and important to her. Sørensen (1997) highlights the importance of the struggle for power over one's way of life as a struggle for the liberation of an alienated and repressed identity. The right to be a person aligned with one's origins is necessary in order to meet people from other countries and cultures on an equal footing (Sørensen, 1997, p. 248).

One can track Greenland's social and health challenges back to the assimilation of the Danish culture, which involved the loss of people's livelihood and values in a society where hunting, fishing, and knowledge of living and surviving in the Arctic climate were once vital elements. Greenlandic society came alive for the summer school students when the local students showed them its various aspects. The issues surrounding mental health problems were discussed openly with students visiting hospitals and nursing stations, but other aspects of healthcare were also visible, such as how the Greenlanders have created a system of having nurses available in small settlements, linked to a network of local helpers and helicopter or boat transport when patients need hospital treatment. In this way, there is less focus on the shortcomings and more focus on the sources of pride for Greenlanders. The nursing students from Greenland became representatives of their country, presenting and translating knowledge to make it available to their fellow students. Greenland became more than a country full of health and social challenges. The Greenlandic students attending summer school in their own country experienced this as an eye-opener.

Bonding across continents

The students build important relationships and acquire new knowledge by meeting fellow students, teachers, and local people. Trond Trosterud, professor and linguist at UiT The Arctic University of Tromsø, participated in the 2017 summer school in Tromsø. His research on minority and indigenous peoples' languages in circumpolar areas indicates linguistic and historical connections between the languages spoken from Alaska to Greenland and to Russia and the Nordic countries. He explained to the students that they shared a common linguistic origin despite living on different continents. Trosterud's explanations helped them to recognize words and meanings across peoples. This showed that the circumpolar areas are interconnected through language and culture, and linguistic revitalization is a key factor in achieving sustainable development of the areas (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2013). The students formed new friendships and gained new knowledge, and they aimed to hold a seminar at Riddu Ridđu, an annual international indigenous festival in Kåfjord in Nord-Troms. Their preparations consisted of student presentations in their own language. Not everyone was comfortable with speaking English in front of a large audience and they helped each other with the preparations. The language of the summer schools was English. For some students, English was their third language. When working on their presentations, the students came to realize that they would be presenting themselves as indigenous, across peoples and languages. They would present themselves through their families, parents and grandparents as well as where they lived, not through academic titles. In this way, students bonded across cultures, languages and countries. They travel from one continent to another. In this way, they can find and recognize something of themselves in others. In nursing education, these issues were not discussed as dimensions of being a nurse; limited understanding of others' self-understanding and the identity of indigenous peoples. There is little focus on the importance of understanding and recognizing how cultural norms and historical events have helped to shape minorities and indigenous peoples. Cultural norms and linguistic features become alien and disappear. Since nursing is largely based on trust and confidentiality, this can compromise the interactions with patients. A Swedish Sami nursing student at the 2017 summer school pointed out that

she had expected the nursing programme at UiT to make the Sami perspective more visible. The summer school finally fulfilled her expectation. Her impression concurs with a study by Liss Eriksen, Berit Bongo and Grete Mehus (2017), which finds little focus on Sami elements in Norwegian nursing education.

Summary

The summer school connects students in a community that extends across continents, countries and cultures. Despite the unknown, or perhaps because of it, the students learn to view themselves and their values in a new way. The summer school enables students to see and understand more of their own way of life when they meet others in a different context. In societies where Western and traditional ways live side by side, we find a variety of cultural expressions. According to Sørensen (1997), with one foot in each culture, people may feel rootless because they do not quite know where they belong. Sørensen discusses the problem of being half Danish and half Greenlandic. Being half of one culture and half of another culture, without one's own identity, may seem to split a person. However, by acknowledging and accepting that one is part of both, one can overcome this feeling and experience the better of two cultures.

The evaluations and reflection logs have revealed that the annual ILICH summer schools have highlighted a sensitive subject that we expect would have an impact on the participants' sense of identity and experience of their own culture. We believe this is important for students from the circumpolar region and for their future profession. Western norms and ways of life largely set the standard for understandings of illness and health, which may seem alienating to people living in societies with indigenous and minority populations. Student exchanges do not normally focus on indigenous peoples, but we will work to include this in other student exchanges. The NNEN is now addressing the need for this focus. Our wish is for nursing educations, particularly those within the circumpolar areas, to focus on cultural awareness and health inequity in our region.

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