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Empowering international nursing students to become effective library users

Abstract

This article summarises the research conducted for a dissertation which addressed the needs of students and academic staff of the Bachelor of Nursing International programme at St. Angela's College, Ireland. Aoife Murray completed an MSc Econ Information and Library Studies in 2015 from Aberystwyth University via distance learning. She gained a distinction for her work and has co-written the article with Hugh Preston, her dissertation supervisor. Aoife highlights the recommendations she made as a result of her research and the programme put in place to deliver those recommendations. She also reports on some early evaluations of the new programme.

Introduction

Irish government policy has identified the internationalisation of the higher education sector as a key strategic objective. Amid intense global competition and concerns that, in some instances, growth in the numbers of international students has been financially motivated, policymakers are recommending that any process of internationalisation undertaken by a higher education institution must involve more than simply increasing student numbers. It must also develop targeted, bespoke, high quality programmes supported by services which will achieve academic and cultural integration and add significant value to the career outcomes of students.[1] The library can play a key role in this process by working collaboratively with international students and their academic staff to develop high quality library services which will enhance student learning outcomes.

This article summarises the research conducted for a dissertation which focussed on the students and academic staff of the Bachelor of Nursing International (BNI) programme at St. Angela's College, Ireland. Developed in 2012, the one-year top-up programme confers a nursing degree on international students, preparing them to work in a global nursing career. Students are required to

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have an internationally recognised nursing diploma and a degree of fluency in the English language upon commencement. The academic staff of the nursing department expect these students to make full use of library services, such as online journals and research databases, in line with other undergraduate students. However, evidence of how and if they were achieving this was anecdotal, informed by observing students in the library and through informal discussions between faculty and library staff.

This research set out to provide concrete evidence about how the BNI students were using the library and how this compared to the expectations of their faculty, enabling the library to develop services that meet both student needs and faculty expectations.

Literature review

Language difficulties, cultural differences and lack of prior library experience are the key barriers to library use amongst international students.[2] Wayman[3] recommended cooperation between faculty and library staff in understanding not only these special learning requirements, but also the curricular expectations of international students. However, the literature is lacking in significant research in this area, focussing instead on collaboration between libraries and English as second language (ESL) instructors and international student support services or on faculty expectations of the wider student population's library use.[4–6]

Nurse educators expect library staff to provide traditional reference services to students as well as perceiving library staff as being expert in the search and retrieval of evidence within the evidence based practice (EBP) paradigm. Information literacy skills are recognised as vital to the success of the concept of EBP, which provides an opportunity for libraries to collaborate with nursing faculty in the development and delivery of information literacy programmes embedded in the curriculum.[7]

Research methodology

The research was conducted towards the end of the second semester when students had experience of using the library and had submitted and received feedback on a variety of assignments. The case study approach facilitated an in-depth study which met the research objectives by providing quantitative data to enumerate students' use of library services and qualitative data to establish experiences and expectations of both students and faculty. The cohort participating in this research were a diverse group – from Nigeria, India, Nepal and Sweden – and they possessed varying levels of exposure to academic and professional library services prior to commencing their studies in Ireland. Using a census approach, all 21 students enrolled on the BNI programme in 2015–2016 were sent a questionnaire with a 38% response rate. To ensure a variety of experience across education, language and culture, interview candidates were chosen based on nationality and willingness to participate. Two interviews were conducted, one with a Nigerian student and one with a Nepalese student. Three interviews were also conducted with academic staff from the Nursing Department. These interviewees were selected based on their availability and their lecturing experience within different modules on the programme. Questionnaire data were analysed using Microsoft Excel software, and interview data were coded and thematically analysed producing themes and subthemes which became the framework for analysis of results.

Findings

Both students and faculty acknowledged that students' previous academic experience centred around a heavy reliance on textbooks and rote learning with little independent research and exposure to online journals or nursing research databases. The study found that 71% of students had never used a research database and 72% rarely or never used an online library catalogue. This was despite the fact that 88% of students had used an academic library within 4 years of commencement of the programme. The student experience was of the library as a place of study with no online catalogue or PCs and limited resources and services.

Despite this, students had a clear understanding of the expectations of faculty for their use of the library and its services, citing research databases, peer reviewed journals and evidence based research within the discipline of nursing as the primary resources recommended by lecturers. However, disparity existed between students being aware of the expectations and meeting them. Faculty identified a lack of wider reading amongst the students, and in some cases, an inability to source articles using online databases resulting in a reliance on the college e-learning environment to provide access to recommended readings.

Cultural challenges

The study identified three areas of cultural challenge: academic, professional and group culture. The previous academic experience of students, particularly those from Asian cultures, had led them to have a hierarchical expectation of the teaching and learning relationship in academia leading to a reluctance to seek out assistance or to interrupt a lecturer to seek clarification, particularly as an individual within a class group. This was also shown to be impacting on students' use of library services and accessing the expertise of library staff. Students needed to be encouraged to seek assistance from lecturing staff on a one-to one basis after class and the development of this individual relationship encouraged openness and participation.

In relation to professional culture, the study identified that not only are students' qualifications and work experience rooted in a very different professional culture to Europe, but also students did not have an understanding of those differences before they commenced their programme. This lack of awareness fed into the feelings of unpreparedness to conduct library research expressed by students, with the majority being unaware of the concept of evidence based practice and the importance of nursing research at the beginning of their studies.

Faculty experience across multiple intakes has shown that the group culture of the cohort of students has a profound impact not only on learning outcomes but also on the group's social integration. The studied cohort of students is less homogenous than previous groups with a broader

mix of nationalities, professional and academic experiences. Coupled with the presence of a strong student leader, this has led them to be more engaged with the library, academic services and the college social culture than previous groups. The influence peers have on participation cannot be underestimated, particularly amongst Asian students where students stated they were unwilling to ask questions in the presence of older or more experienced students. The study also showed that students are highly influenced by the actions of their friends in making use of library services such as one-to-one database instruction.

Language as a barrier

When asked whether language presented a barrier to their academic communication only 8% of students felt that it did whereas 100% faculty felt that it presented a major barrier. The reasons for this disparity lie in faculty successfully employing many ESL teaching methodologies to overcome these language challenges. Tools such as written summaries of class material, mixed ability group work sessions, distributing class notes and an awareness of non-verbal clues to understanding all helped to mitigate the language challenges. They were also highly aware of their own linguistic style and the impact that may have on students' understanding. However, both groups acknowledged that professional nursing language and research terminologies presented a challenge for most students and it was suggested through the student survey that the library stock more resources which would support the development of students' professional nursing language.

The evidence from this research shows that academic and library staff's awareness of the language challenges faced by students and their subsequent approach to teaching and communication has led students to feel supported throughout their programme. They do not see language as a barrier to their academic studies or library use. This is an uncommon finding within the literature where language and communication is the most common challenge identified by international students.

Recommendations

> *"Until you know what you need the information given is not going to make any sense"*
> (Student)

> *"They have worked and been educated through a direct model so we need to seek them out rather than wait to be sought out"* (Faculty)

These two quotations sum up the approach that the research recommended taking in addressing the library needs of international nursing students.

Increased library time

The suggestion by students that they be given the opportunity to spend time in the library to enable them to become more familiar with available services and resources as well as developing their information seeking skills was echoed by faculty. This research also found that this library time must be timetabled and mandatory; otherwise, students see it as free time and will fill it with their other personal commitments.

User education programmes

There was agreement that current library training was valuable and essential. However, both groups believed that the one-off nature of their delivery and the timing of the induction training rendered them less effective. An overwhelming amount of information is delivered to students at the beginning of their studies and library induction can be lost in that tidal wave of information. A rising scale of delivery of library skills training was suggested by faculty and students. In their first weeks, students would receive an introduction to library services, covering, for example, locating items on a reading list and an introduction to the academic information landscape. As the academic programme progresses, students would be exposed to more detailed searching techniques and database training linked to their module content.

1:1 Library training

Following group training sessions, the facility to set up a one-to-one database searching tutorial with library staff was identified by both groups as a success of the library's user education programme. These tutorials were recommended by lecturing staff, but it was only when they were taken up by some of the more proactive students that some other students followed suit. Faculty therefore suggested that these appointments be set up on a mandatory basis for each student to assist in overcoming both the reticence to ask questions in a group situation and the challenge of keeping up within a group as experienced by students with weaker PC skills.

Implications for practice: delivery of recommendations

I presented my research to the BNI Course Committee in the autumn of 2015. The committee fully embraced the research, and it was decided to develop a library skills and information literacy programme as a vehicle to deliver the recommendations of the research. In collaboration with the programme's academic coordinator, I developed the programme to commence in January 2016 with a new cohort of students. A pre-session audit was conducted with learners and other stakeholders to inform the development of the programme. Timetabled for 20 hours throughout the first semester, the programme contained a blend of classroom teaching, practical computer based sessions and supervised library time for independent research. The programme was structured with reference to the ANCIL Curriculum [8] on information literacy, around the following key themes: • Introduction to the library and resources

- The academic information landscape
- Identifying and locating items on reading list
- Introduction to research databases and accessing electronic resources
- Developing a search strategy
- Academic writing, referencing and plagiarism

The programme is not formally assessed but students will have to complete a literature review as part of their Evidence Based Practice II module which will assess their research skills. Learning was assessed informally through the use of a practical classroom based activity towards the end of semester one. Students were given a research question and then asked to develop a search strategy, execute the search locating two textbooks and two journal articles using the online catalogue and the CINAHL database and to deliver a short summary on their search to the group.

Evaluation and development

The programme was evaluated through a student survey at the end of the first semester. Student feedback was very positive with all respondents stating that the programme was beneficial to them and made them feel more prepared to use library services and resources. Comments demonstrating the success of the programme to date include:

> *"Keep it up! I managed my assignment because of the library"*

> *"Thank you so much for the support that you are giving to us. It's all a new way of learning for me."*

This evaluation will inform part two, which is to be delivered in semester two. Having established strong relationships with the students through the classroom sessions, plans for part two include one-to-one database searching tutorials and more timetabled library time to conduct independent research with the support of library staff as required. A full evaluation of the programme will be conducted at the end of the academic programme with both students and faculty. This will consider the impact of the programme on student performance, and it is hoped that results from this review process will encourage other programmes and departments within the college to collaborate with the library to develop similar information literacy programmes embedded in their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

Conclusion

Information literacy programmes have been developed by academic libraries for international students, and nurse educators have explored the challenges of teaching international nursing students. However, a relatively unexplored area has been the overlap between the two and the challenge of developing an information literacy programme for international nursing students. In exploring this area, albeit utilising a small case study approach, this research has identified ways to not only empower students to fully utilise library services in order to match faculty and curricular expectations, but also to embed information literacy and research skills that will prepare students to become effective practitioners in an evidence based profession.

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