



Perspectives on enhancing international practical training of students in health and social care study programs – A qualitative descriptive case study



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ABSTRACT

Background: Internationalization of practical training in health and social care study programs is an important aspect of higher education. However, field mentors' and classroom teachers' competence in guiding culturally diverse students varies widely in European countries, and the majority does not have enough training in guiding foreign students.

Objectives: This study aimed to examine which factors enhance the efficacy of international practical placement experiences in health and social care study programs.

Design: A qualitative descriptive case study design was used.

Settings: The study was conducted at six higher education institutions—two in Finland and one in Croatia, Estonia, the Netherlands and Slovenia.

Participants: A convenience sample of 14 mentors, 15 teachers and 14 students with international experiences from six higher education institutions which are part of the Bologna Process was recruited.

Methods: The data were collected from six focus groups using a semi-structured questionnaire based on a literature review. Each higher education institution conducted one group interview that was tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed for themes.

Results: Participants made several recommendations for enhancing the practical placement experience of students, teachers, and mentors. Most recommendations dealt with practical supervision of students. Three major themes noted were: 'Attitudes towards internationalization of practical placements', 'Factors impacting the international placement experience', and 'Pedagogical methods used and structural support available for internationalization.'

Conclusions: The study highlights the need for strengthening the multicultural knowledge and skills of mentors and teachers. The findings provide practical guidelines for improving the international placement experience across health and social care fields.

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1. Introduction

European higher education institutions (HEIs) have always engaged in a wide range of international activities with partner institutions from around the world, but have lacked a systematic, long-term plan to

standardize the educational system in Europe. Widely different education and training systems across Europe have made it difficult to transfer skills acquired in one country when applying for a job or a study program in another country. In order to redress this issue, European ministers responsible for higher education initiated the Bologna declaration in 1999 by aiming to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 (French Bologna Secretariat, 2016). The purpose of the Bologna declaration was to ensure some agreed upon level of standardization and increase compatibility among the disparate educational systems. Since then, internationalization of higher education has become a strategic aim of European governments (Cohen et al., 2014)

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coupled with increased interest among students to study abroad (Kent-Wilkinson et al., 2015).

Situated firmly in this discourse on internationalization of higher education is the idea of culture. In fact, Maringe and Foskett (2012) describe internationalization of higher education as “the integration of an international or intercultural dimension into the tripartite mission of teaching, research and service functions” (p. 1). Interestingly, researchers have cautioned against ‘quick fixes’ such as recruitment of numerous international students or having a strong rhetorical commitment to internationalization. Conversely, they call for a change in the perspective of HEIs embedded in the ideas of multiculturalism (Knight, 2008).

In this paper, the focus is on the internationalization of health and social care fields where the key players in providing adequate international placement experiences to students are the clinical mentors/practical placement supervisors and higher education teachers (European Commission, 2013). Indeed, mentoring is an important element of professional learning in clinical practice (Myall et al., 2008; Al-Hamdan et al., 2014). Mentors are not only instrumental in socializing students into professional behaviours and practice, but can also significantly influence student careers and assist in their professional growth through advising and supporting skill development and personal growth (Edgecombe et al., 2013; Al-Hamdan et al., 2014). Further, a mentor's role calls for greater knowledge and skills when mentoring foreign students. However, there is a wide variation in the capacity of mentors and teachers in training international students in terms of the length and depth of their experience. Given that multiculturalism is an integral part of internationalization of higher education, the present study uses a multicultural framework to: a) examine the current attitudes towards internationalizing practical placements across various health and social service programs among HEIs and their working life partners; b) identify and examine the key factors impacting the placement of foreign students; c) describe the pedagogical methods employed by teachers and mentors in working with foreign students. The study also offers recommendations for enhancing the practical placement experience for students, teachers, and mentors.

2. Background

Student exchange has been endorsed by the Commission of the European Community (2007) and various research studies (Koskinen and Tossavainen, 2004; Chambers et al., 2011, Burgess et al., 2014) as being the most effective way of engendering cultural awareness in students. Bell and Anscombe (2013) argue that cultural competencies are acquired through international collaboration between educational institutions and an exchange of knowledge, teaching/learning experiences and research. Thus, becoming internationalized is about ensuring that HEI staff (teachers, mentors) and students understand diversity and, through this process, enhance their self-awareness and professional development (Rivers, 2010). Teaching methods and the English proficiency of teachers are key contributors to student satisfaction in such teacher-student interaction (van Aart, 2011).

Studies identify the main learning outcomes as being education, improved communication skills, language proficiency, increased intercultural awareness and understanding, and personal growth and maturing. For example, according to Button et al. (2005), international placement programs in clinical settings have four main benefits: learning cultural differences, comparing health care systems and nursing practices, and personal development. Moorhead et al. (2014) found that short-term study abroad programs have a positive impact on educators and social work students through reinforcing their values and beliefs, and gaining new knowledge and skills. Similarly, Bell and Anscombe (2013) found that international study experiences of social work students had significant positive impacts on student learning, group cohesion, professional commitment and motivation, enhanced appreciation of international social work, grassroots community

development work, cultural diversity, human rights and social justice issues. However, other studies (Edgecombe et al., 2013; Dale et al., 2013) noted some concerns of foreign students, namely English proficiency, communication difficulties, cultural differences, and unfamiliarity with the health care environment.

A well-functioning student-mentor relationship in a practical placement focuses on supporting students' learning processes, facilitating professional identity development and strengthening professional abilities. For students, the criteria for high-quality mentorship include social factors such as mentors' commitment and cooperation in the work place (Jokelainen, 2013). The student-mentor relationship is seen as an encouraging collegial relationship, which fosters students' professional development. Pitkälä (2012) found that students' success in the clinical setting depended largely on the mentors' interest in clinical supervision and their attitude towards students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Similarly, undergraduate nursing students mentioned student-friendly atmosphere at the ward as an important factor in facilitating a good clinical study experience (Dale et al., 2013). In contrast, encountering attitudes characterized by surprise, unpreparedness, or even negative reactions meant that students felt unwelcomed, which negatively influenced their learning process. Levett-Jones et al. (2009) found that, across different nations and programs, students' sense of belongingness and learning can be promoted by staff receptiveness, inclusivity, legitimization of student role, recognition and appreciation, and by being challenged while being supported. Skela-Savič and Kiger (2015) found that nursing managers often fail to assume responsibility for the professional development of clinical nurse mentors who tend to lack a career development plan. A common concern reported by clinical nurse mentors engaged in student supervision is the lack of support at different levels, ranging from the nursing school leaders and health provider managers, to colleagues in the clinical setting (Waldock, 2010). Thus, by exploring the teachers', mentors' and students' experiences with international practical placements, we aimed to understand their perspectives on multicultural competences and factors that contribute to enhancing the quality of the international student learning experience.

3. Conceptual Framework

Cultural training for higher education staff and mentors is often absent or minimal, and current curricula and pedagogical methods tend to position international students as in deficit (Avolio, 2010). According to Teichler (2009), internationalization involves a cultural exchange in which cultural differences are valued and emphasized by all stakeholders. Therefore, the conceptual framework used to guide this study combined existing models of (multi)cultural competencies and international placement experiences. According to Campinha-Bacote (1999) a *culturally competent model of care* includes four major elements of cultural competence: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill, and cultural encounters. The *transcultural perspective in social work* (Drabble et al., 2012) includes five interrelated but distinct dimensions of diversity that include: cultural knowledge; cultural competency; dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression; positionality and self-reflexivity; and respectful partnership. Finally, *international competencies* are described by Kosteljik et al. (2006, as cited in van der Woning, 2013) as follows: cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, flexibility, emotional stability, and self-efficacy. These concepts helped frame data collection in our study where we examined the factors underlying successful internationalization of practical placements in health and social care study programs.

4. Methods

A qualitative descriptive case study method was used to examine the importance of multicultural competencies in providing international practical placements in health and social care in five partner countries.

A case study approach “enables an in-depth investigation of one phenomenon within a single entity” (Polit and Beck, 2014, p. 235). According to Patton (2015, p. 259), “a study case can be defined by a variety of approaches”; in our study, six cases comprised six different HEIs. Each HEI conducted one group interview with all invited informants present. The six cases were based on Patton (2015), Polit and Beck (2014) view that persons sharing a common experience or perspective form a study case. The teachers, mentors and students participating in our study all had experience with international practical placements. Data were gathered using focus groups; “a common technique for obtaining information about personal and group feelings, perceptions and opinions on the subject entity” (Polit and Beck, 2014, p. 395). Moreover, we felt that this method could provide insight into multicultural competencies which can be a challenging theme to address with one respondent at a time. In our experience, a group has the capacity to become more than the sum of its parts. Hence, the group itself can show a synergy that individuals alone cannot possess (Polit and Beck, 2014; Krueger and Casey, 2015).

4.1. Participants

Researchers from each of the six HEIs included in the Bologna Process (University of Zagreb, Croatia; Tartu Health Care College, Estonia; Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands; Faculty of Health Care Jesenice, Slovenia; Lahti University of Applied Sciences, Finland; and JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland) were instructed to invite a purposive sample of 6 to 10 study participants to respond to a brief demographic questionnaire and participate in a semi-structured focus group interview. This is in line with Krueger and Casey's (2015) and Polit and Beck's (2014) view about the ideal size of a focus group. Krueger and Casey (2015) believe that, for most research topics, the ideal size is 5 to 8 participants per group, while Polit and Beck (2014) indicate that optimal focus group size is 6 to 12 people. Larger groups are more difficult to control and can easily limit each participant's opportunities to share their perceptions and experiences. Homogeneity of the group was ensured by selecting mentors, teachers and students with international experience as the participants. In order to get a holistic description of multiculturalism in international practical training, we were interested in the perspectives of all three participant groups. The number of mentor and teacher respondents was an independent decision of each HEI and depended on the country's characteristics and availability of such experts, but the number of student respondents with international experience was set at two to maximum three. Mentors provided supervision or mentorship in practical placement to foreign students, while teachers carried out courses at the HEI. Study partners displayed considerable variability in international experience with foreign students, ranging from 1 to 438 exchange students in the academic year 2012–2013. All HEIs were sending and receiving exchange students. HEIs offered from one to three types of mobility for foreign applicants: short-term mobility (2-week period), long-term mobility (3 months) and a degree program. We categorized institutions of higher learning into two groups: those with more experience (offering all types of mobility), a longer history of internationalization of practical placements, and greater diversity in foreign students; and those with less experience with foreign students (offering one or two types of mobility) and a shorter history of internationalization.

The total number of study participants was 43; 14 mentors, 15 teachers and 14 students with international experience. All participants were fluent in English, thus the most common foreign language used in mentoring, teaching or supervision of foreign students was English. Fifteen mentors and teachers came from the field of nursing, the rest (14) came from fields such as physiotherapy, midwifery, social pedagogy, special education, rehabilitation, and social work. They all had experience with foreign students from various regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, Northern America, and the Caribbean. Students participated in study programs of nursing (6), physiotherapy (6), social pedagogy

(1) and occupational therapy (1). On average, mentors had 3.75 years (SD = 1.07) of experience with mentoring foreign students and 8.5 years (SD = 7.13) of general experience with mentoring students (Table 1). The majority (64.3%) of students completed a 3-month exchange program. The students were engaged in 2.9 practical settings on average.

5. Instrument

Socio-demographic data were collected using a structured questionnaire which was completed prior to the semi-structured interview. The questions for the interview were derived from the conceptual models described earlier and the respondents were asked to reflect on their thoughts and experiences with concepts such as self-efficacy and communication, cultural knowledge and skills, emotional stability, open-mindedness, cultural empathy, cultural awareness, multiculturalism, social initiative, pedagogical methods, and internationalization in higher education.

Table 1
Participants' demographic information.

	n (%)	Mean	SD	Min-Max
TOTAL				
Number of participants	43 (100)			
Mentor, placement supervisor	14 (32.6)			
Teacher	15 (34.9)			
International student	5 (11.6)			
Home student	9 (20.9)			
Gender: male/female	7 (16.3)/36 (83.7)			
Total mean age/age range		35.51	12.912	21–65
Mentors and teachers				
The average age/age range of mentors and teachers		44.86	10.793	26–65
Years of experience with international students (mentor and teacher)				
Less than 1 year	3 (10.4)			
Between 1 and 2 years	5 (17.2)			
Between 2 and 5 years	10 (34.5)			
More than 5 years experience	6 (20.7)			
Missing value	5 (17.2)			
Years of experience with mentoring foreign students		3.75	1.070	
Years of general experience with student mentorship/supervision (home and foreign students)		8.5	7.133	2–30
Foreign languages spoken				
English	29 (100)			
German	8 (27.6)			
Croatian	5 (17.2)			
French	4 (13.8)			
Russian	4 (13.8)			
Other	3 (10.3)			
Area of work				
Nursing	15 (51.7)			
Physiotherapy	5 (17.2)			
Other	9 (31.1)			
Students with international experience				
Current status regarding the study				
2nd year student	3 (21.4)			
3rd year student	5 (35.7)			
4th year student	1 (7.1)			
Other	3 (21.4)			
Missing value	2 (14.3)			
Duration of the exchange program or full-time program				
3-month exchange	9 (64.3)			
3–6-month exchange	2 (14.3)			
More than one-year exchange	2 (14.3)			
Missing value	1 (7.1)			

N = number of answers; SD = standard deviation; % = portion; Mean = Mean value, Min = Minimum; Max = Maximum.

Questions for semi-structured focus group interviews were developed and approved by all participating institutions. The questions were written in English and translated into partner country languages. The semi-structured interview contained 28 basic questions and 20 sub-questions.

6. Ethical Aspects

The study was authorized by the managers or scientific committees of participating institutions. An information sheet was provided and clarified to each key informant prior to recruitment. Informed consent was obtained and respondents' confidentiality was maintained.

7. Data Collection

Data were collected in January 2014. Semi-structured questionnaires were distributed to focus group members either individually or in pairs by members of the research group at each HEI. Prior to data collection, the research team discussed the common rules of managing the focus group. Being aware of the interviewers' critical role, we prepared instructions for researchers on how to invite participants to the group, and conduct group interviews equally in each country (Krueger and Casey, 2015). In all countries, interviewers used the same guidelines with detailed descriptions of questions and comments for the interviewers, which was crucial for effective focus groups (Polit and Beck, 2014). Each interview lasted approximately 2 h, was tape-recorded, and transcribed. Two institutions conducted the interview in English, and four used their national languages and summarized the main findings in English.

8. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated using SPSS 20.0 to describe the sample. Moreover, thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was conducted to summarize the results of the semi-structured interviews. For qualitative data, two study authors examined all the transcripts and noted cross-cutting themes that appeared in them. Based on the initial data read, the following four overarching questions were identified to structure the development of themes and codes for data analysis:

- 1) What are the participants' attitudes towards internationalization of practical placements in higher education?
- 2) What are some of the key factors impacting the placement of foreign students?
- 3) What are the pedagogical methods used and the structural supports available for addressing international practical placements?
- 4) What are the participants' recommendations for improving the experience of international practical placements?

The data were reviewed again to identify themes under each question and the text was coded to provide examples under each theme. To check inter-rater reliability, a third author reviewed themes and codes, providing additional codes for some of the themes. Agreement on coding was achieved through consensus among the three researchers.

9. Results

We identified both commonalities and differences across the responses of the more and less experienced groups. The themes that emerged are reported under each research question (Table 2). Commonalities were observed in attitudes towards internationalization of higher education and key factors impacting the placement of international students, whereas differences were observed primarily in the pedagogical methods and guiding processes used in working with international students. The differences were related to resources, available infrastructure, and the development process. Participants also made

Table 2
Identified themes emerging from research questions with transcription extracts.

Research questions	Identified themes	Transcripts highlighting the essence of each theme
Attitudes towards internationalization of practical placements - benefits of internationalization	Increased sense of self-efficacy	"Internationalization helps boost employees' self-esteem; it is good to know that I can manage to supervise a foreign exchange student and it is good to see the results. This experience definitely broadens one's mind." (Mentor, Estonia)
	Enhanced professional development	"Being involved with the internationalization also brings significance and strong, genuine and positive impact to one's work as a teacher." (Mentor, Finland)
	Increased opportunities for exchange	"I gained the most understanding by being on exchange myself. Then I could imagine what it actually meant, because before you know that someone is coming from a different environment and you can imagine what that means, but once you're in that position yourself, in a new environment and part of an exchange, then you have the true experience, you get the broad perspective." (Mentor, Slovenia)
	Increased funding for programs	"International students are desired at our institution which is reflected by increased international cooperation (exchanges, projects, exporting education)." (Teacher, Finland)
Factors impacting the international placement experience	Length of the practicum	"We pass more knowledge on to Slovenian students because their practice schedules are different. While the practice of Slovenian students would usually last for two consecutive weeks, exchange students often spend no more than a few days at a department." (Mentor, Slovenia)
	Cultural background of foreign students	"It is important to know where the exchange student comes from to prepare oneself better for supervising. For example, Finnish students are similar to us, whereas Latvian students have not had much practice in nursing skills and it often turns out that it is their first practical experience and they need to learn a lot." (Mentor, Estonia)
	Individual motivation levels of students	"The problem point is not culture but the person's character. I have supervised students from the same country, culture and school and they can be different in good and bad

Table 2 (continued)

Research questions	Identified themes	Transcripts highlighting the essence of each theme
		ways." (Mentor, Finland) "I felt that they appreciated us more in Malta than the local students because they were more passive, whereas we tried to be actively involved, we tried to learn as much as possible." (Student 2, Slovenia)
	Impact of cultural issues on task performance	"You must make clear to the students that it is totally acceptable to ask if you do not know even though it is not appropriate in student's own country or culture." (Mentor, Finland) "I had the most problems with immigrants coming from Somalia where it is not advisable for a man to be in the same room with a woman. I also couldn't touch them, they started panicking, so at least one female interpreter had to be present at the department at all times so that I could work with them." (Student, Slovenia)
	English language proficiency	"I think I can guide Finnish students deeper to the client's situation and life issues. Students who come to see how we do physiotherapy in Finland are more observers because the language is the problem. I can't explain everything what the client says to the student." (Mentor, Finland)
Pedagogical methods used and structural support available for internationalization	Formal guiding processes	"There are shortcomings in the area of organization of practical training for foreign exchange students such as documentation, feedback sheet and content and other requirements..." (Mentor, Estonia).
	Specific teaching methods	"Well, when you're working with someone and you're lost for words, you realize how important it is that you can show something. While mentoring, you become aware of this and later, in everyday work, non-verbal communication becomes more prominent because this element is more pronounced, even though you might otherwise not have paid that much attention to it." (Teacher, Slovenia)
Recommendations for improving the experience of international practical placements	Creating an environment for multicultural learning	"Thinking about discussion and where it definitely should be increased is practice placements. It is an area without multicultural discussion at the moment because there are very few foreign people working at the hospitals." (Student,

Table 2 (continued)

Research questions	Identified themes	Transcripts highlighting the essence of each theme
	Developing specific tools for increasing multicultural awareness	Finland) "If an international student is coming, we should show interest and ask about their background, norms and values. The student can only function if they feel well." (Mentor, Netherlands)
	Adequately preparing supervisors/mentors	"Multicultural awareness, knowledge and skills are all important. You have to be aware in order to know, and you have to develop skills to adjust and overcome cultural problems. All of them are equally important. Skills are the most important part of competences. If you don't have skills there no use of the others (awareness and knowledge). (Teacher, Finland)

several recommendations or suggestions for improving the experience of international practical placements.

9.1. Research Question 1. Attitudes towards Internationalization of Practical Placements

All participants expressed a positive attitude towards internationalization of practical placements, regarding the experience as both rewarding and challenging. Despite some initial resistance from mentors in the less experienced group, increased opportunities for mentoring foreign students produced a positive response. We identified the following benefits of internationalization:

- Increased sense of self-efficacy* achieved through overcoming the fear of the unknown and knowing more about the international students.
- Enhanced professional development.* Participants saw the advantages of having more international students in terms of opportunities for cross-cultural learning which, in turn, created a conducive environment for learning about the professional standards of the host placement.
- Increased opportunities for exchange.* Teachers were enthusiastic about providing services to international students, seeing this not only as a means of learning about other cultures, but also of traveling abroad and gaining international experience. Such mentors' experiences were regarded as an important factor in training foreign students. What is more, a direct experience with different cultures lead to greater openness to other cultures.
- Increased funding for programs.* An important reason why international students were desired by the institutions was greater funding for English language training and degree programs offered in English.

9.2. Research Question 2. Factors Impacting the International Placement Experience

Factors that influenced the nature and outcome of the international placement experience were:

- a) *Length of the practicum* (i.e. short rotation in hospital setting, 2-week or longer for Erasmus vs. degree students) influenced both the quality and quantity of cultural issues that could be addressed, and also training efficacy. Short rotations did not provide enough time to get into the cultural nuances of both the host and the foreign cultures.
- b) *Cultural background of foreign students*. Respondents noted that there might be more difficulty in working with or 'prejudice' against a student's culture if it was deemed 'distant' from the host culture. The greater the differences between cultures, the greater the disparity in practical modalities of the host and foreign countries.
- c) *Individual motivation levels of students*. Some mentors felt that motivation was the most significant predictor influencing the relationship between foreign exchange students and mentors/teachers. Open-mindedness and interest in learning about other cultures were mentioned as important qualities in ensuring successful international placements.
- d) *Impact of cultural issues on task performance*. Culture occasionally interfered with task performance and was addressed on a case by case basis. For example, teachers described the difficulty in working with students for whom it is not culturally appropriate to say "I don't know." This might cause safety problems when a student is taking care of patients and does not admit to the teacher or mentor that she/he does not know what to do. Another example was the sense of 'time' and 'punctuality' since the concept of time may vary in Eastern and Western cultures. Other areas of cultural differences that impacted task performance were related to gender and religion.
- e) *English language proficiency* was a significant issue especially for mentors and students. Some teachers reported that it took longer to prepare lectures in English and it affected how material was presented to the students. It posed an even greater problem for mentors since it impeded the implementation of practical work and attending to patients. Patients were often not used to speaking a foreign language in health care settings. Interestingly, some of the mentors and teachers tied their own limited English proficiency to their sense of self-efficacy. This led to the concern that local students with some English proficiency might end up as interpreters for mentors and their foreign students.

9.3. Research Question 3. Pedagogical Methods Used and Structural Support Available for Internationalization

All respondents alluded to using pedagogical methods, although the level of formal structure available to support multicultural placements varied. Pedagogical methods included formal guiding processes and specific teaching methods.

- a) *Formal guiding processes* refer to materials developed explicitly to address internationalization in practical placements. Less experienced partners did not report any formal guiding processes to promote cultural competency for teachers, mentors and students. The more experienced HEIs offered students a structured introduction to the host society. For example, Finnish teachers composed a handbook for mentors on how to guide a foreign student in practical placement setting. The handbook outlined the roles of teachers, mentors and students regarding the training period, and different methods of how to guide and evaluate the foreign student's practice. However, the Dutch mentors/supervisors reported no special training for foreign students at the practicum. Most of the culture-related pedagogical work was done by the HEIs, whereby the students first integrated into the Dutch society and then begun their practicum with some familiarity of Dutch culture and health care.
- b) *Specific teaching methods* used by respondents were similar. However, the less experienced groups reported that teaching foreign students required more time due to English proficiency

requirements. Examples of teaching/training strategies used were: meetings with the teacher, student, and mentor during the nursing clinicals; observation physiotherapy procedures as part of the placement; peer supervision; guidance and communication; counselling; and mentoring.

9.4. Research Question 4. Recommendations for Improving the Experience of International Practical Placements

Participants made several recommendations for enhancing the experience of practical placement for students, teachers, and mentors that are merged in three topics (Table 3):

- a) *Creating an environment for multicultural learning* through effective communication, understanding of students' specific needs, and provision of a structure for consistent feedback between students and mentors. The need for increased multicultural discussions in practice placements was also expressed.
- b) *Developing specific tools for increasing multicultural awareness* through a specific multicultural course for mentors and teachers and preparation of foreign students for practical placement. Students need to be supported to cope in the practical and professional life.
- c) *Adequately preparing supervisors/mentors* through provision of a pre-arrival info package to mentors, increased communication between teachers and mentors, increased mentors' multicultural exposure and overcoming of language issues. An important recommendation was that prior to entering a placement, students should receive multicultural education through formal classes and peer learning through contact with local and foreign students.

10. Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate many conceptual framework ideas used here, namely the *culturally competent model of care*, the *trans-cultural perspective*, and *international competencies*. For example, a key finding was that participants expressed a positive attitude towards internationalization of practical placements, seeing it as an asset for personal development and for their institution. It could be argued that the idea of personal development is closely tied to the idea of self-efficacy which is identified as an international competency. Participants also mentioned factors that negatively influenced the outcome of international placements, such as: the short length of the practicum, major cultural differences, lack of mentors' international experience, lack of student motivation, and language barriers due to poor language skills. These factors are concepts that constitute the building blocks of this study's theoretical framework. It is interesting to note that cultural competency, a dimension that is mentioned in all the models used to guide this study, was central to the success of teaching strategies employed by teachers and mentors. Indeed, results indicated that pedagogical methods employed in working with foreign students included formal guiding processes to promote cultural competency for teachers, mentors and students, and specific teaching methods. Less experienced participants did not report having any formal guiding processes, whereas more experienced participants reported having more structure. Specific teaching methods used by all participants were supervision, group structure, and individual counselling.

Some of the barriers mentioned above are reflected in a recent Dutch study (van der Woning, 2013) where teachers in HEIs reported that mentoring foreign students was time consuming and had no added benefit for themselves or for health and social care. They did not feel confident lecturing to or mentoring foreign students because they lacked the knowledge and experience in working with non-Dutch clients or students. These challenges were similar to those identified by

Table 3
Recommendations and strategies for enhancing international placements.

Recommendations	Strategies
1) Creating an environment conducive to multicultural learning through: a) Effective communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide the students in a way that they are not afraid to ask questions. • Guiding methods should help students differentiate between really important rules and issues that may be negotiated. • Clarify expectations in order to avoid misunderstandings and safety problems at the clinic.
b) Understanding specific needs of foreign students such as additional time for processing learning; additional learning related to language and culture; and increased support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies include one-on-one mentorship to facilitate students' learning processes and competence building. • Peer learning through group discussion of the exchange experience, pairing up international and local students to promote mutual cultural awareness. • Increased availability of language classes.
c) Providing a structure for consistent feedback between student and mentor/teacher.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop culturally sensitive evaluation tools and pedagogical methods when teaching and assessing the performance of foreign students who may have different sets of norms for practice; • Build on-going feedback processes between student and mentor/teacher to continuously assess the exchange, not just at the final evaluation. • Students should also regularly provide feedback to mentors on the guidance process.
2) Developing specific tools to increase multicultural awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a specific multicultural course/study unit with the basics on host culture, some comparative issues, and general and basic matters on culture issues to help students cope in the practical and professional life. • Have HEIs play a prominent role in preparing foreign students to enter into placements. At the HEIs, the students can learn to integrate into the host society and the onus of preparation for multicultural issues does not fall only on the placements. • Include more exercises like transcultural practice presentation during the first semester when foreign students need it the most.
3) Preparation of supervisors or mentors to guide foreign students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a pre-arrival info package to mentors such as a handbook that contains: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The roles of teachers, mentors and students regarding the training period; o Resources for cultural information about the host and foreign cultures; o Different methods of how to guide foreign students (such as multicultural exercises); o Different ways of evaluating foreign students' practice. • Increase communication between mentors and teachers through events where they can: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Share information on forthcoming foreign students; o Share experiences and good practices of guiding and mentoring foreign students; o Discuss the evaluation of practical placement;

Table 3 (continued)

Recommendations	Strategies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Clarify roles, tasks and other duties regarding students' training period.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase mentors' multicultural exposure and skills by providing opportunities to travel to countries of foreign students' origin. • Select supervisors willing and suitable for multicultural supervision. • Overcome the language issues with strategies such as non-verbal cues and mirroring.

Edgecombe et al. (2013) and reflect the ideas of self-efficacy and personal growth expounded by this study's frameworks.

Some of the recommendations to overcome such challenges provided by the respondents in the Dutch study (van der Woning, 2013) were also reflected in our study. One such suggestion was to provide lecturers with the opportunity to learn languages such as English, German etc., or to go abroad and visit international partners and participate in international symposia/conferences. This recommendation is in line with other research results such as those of Sandin et al. (2004) and van Aart (2011), who argue for international collaborations as a way to enhance intercultural awareness and personal and professional growth. These perhaps are also indicative of the ideas of empathy, open-mindedness, flexibility, etc. described as international competencies.

Interestingly, our study found mixed self-awareness of how one's own cultural background impacts the supervision and interaction with foreign students. Yet, individual attitudes, values and beliefs are important components that shape a person's perspectives and understanding (Wickford, 2014). Our results also exposed limited structures within healthcare institutions intended to support the promotion of cultural competency and knowledge of mentors and teachers.

Finally, our results are congruent with the literature indicating that the learning environment was greatly enhanced by teachers' and mentors' motivation and openness to the cultural background of the students (Jokelainen, 2013; Pitkääjärvi, 2012). A positive attitude even helped overcoming language barriers as teachers and mentors found other ways of communicating.

Study participants made several recommendations for enhancing the experience of practical placements for students, teachers, and mentors that are closely tied to the study's conceptual framework and include: creating an environment for multicultural learning; developing specific tools for increasing multicultural awareness; and adequately preparing supervisors/mentors to be able to work with international students. There are other approaches to encourage and support students and mentors during international clinical placements, such as a reflective framework. Wickford (2014) critically examined a reflective framework approach that aims to support physiotherapy students participating in new cultural contexts to develop their personal and professional learning, and their reflective skills. Reflection involved interpretation and validation of experiences and knowledge. He found that a structured approach to reflection facilitated students' reflective processes and led them to perceived personal and professional insight, increased cultural appreciation, and a greater appreciation for reflection.

Although creating an environment in which critical thinking and learning can flourish is essential for the creation of successful international placements, the personal characteristics of foreign students such as open-mindedness, willingness to develop the self, and motivation are also key to successful international placement experiences. Wehbi's (2009) study revealed that motivation of social work students undertaking international placements is based on fascination with other cultures, the ability to make a difference internationally,

and a sense of altruism. Similarly, Burgess et al. (2014) found that student nurses' motivation for participating in international clinical placements included cultural curiosity and a desire to work with global populations. They suggest that additional education preparation on global citizenship is needed prior to these international experiences.

11. Limitations and Strengths

This study has some limitations. The raw data were translated from various languages into English and not always presented in a consistent format. Some were presented as response summaries, while others were direct quotes. Our descriptive case study was based only on focus group interviews, but other approaches should be used to understand the complexity of the subject. Strengths of this study include the grounded theory method of data analysis, its multinational nature, and obtaining the perspectives of teachers, mentors and students with international experience in the efforts to internationalize practical training in the EU.

Although the study cannot be generalized, the results can be used to conduct larger scale quantitative analyses with random selection of HEIs and working life partners in order to arrive at broader patterns that could ultimately influence the policy of higher education internationalization.

12. Conclusions

Despite the limitations, this study contributes to the knowledge on internationalization of higher education in health and social care programs by assessing the current state of readiness of various institutions within the European Union and by providing recommendations for improvement. Given that multiculturalism is a cornerstone of effective higher education internationalization, this study identified some multifaceted ways through which the internationalization of health and social care study programs can be enhanced. This could help reduce the variability in the quality of placements offered to foreign exchange and degree students. In line with the Bologna Process and its goals, the study highlights the need for structural resources to strengthen the multicultural knowledge and skills of mentors and teachers.

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