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**The Establishment of the First International Nursing
Education in Finland in the 1990's**

Abstract

The first International Nursing Education (INE) programme in Finland was launched in the autumn 1993 at Espoo College of Health Care and Social Welfare. The aim was to develop a diploma-level nursing degree programme for polytechnic-level education. The INE programme was important in the development of bachelor's level nursing education at Espoo-Vantaa Polytechnic (EVAMK), later known as Laurea University of Applied Sciences (UAS). In spring 2024 the programme's 30th anniversary was celebrated at Laurea.

The current challenges faced by the Finnish healthcare system are probably more demanding than ever. This is partly because of the lack of professional nurses, and international nursing education holds great potential for educating more healthcare professionals. Here, I discuss the initial phases leading to the establishment of the INE programme and revisit the programme's development over the decades. The fundamental idea behind the programme has always been a genuine interaction between academic nursing science and clinical practice.

Keywords: nursing education, nursing science, international students, study programme

The Establishment of the First International Nursing Education in Finland in the 1990's

BACKGROUND

In 1989, Finnish politicians decided to establish polytechnics (later UAS) to produce professionally oriented higher education. This launched intense competition between municipalities and professionally oriented colleges that started to develop polytechnic-level degree programmes, study content and curricula. Local politicians in Espoo, however, disagreed on the role of polytechnic higher education institutions. There were many who preferred the development of Espoo-Vantaa Institute of Technology (later EVTEK UAS) over the integration of different higher education institutions in Espoo. Espoo needed more time to find the solution.

In 1991 Vantaa Polytechnic was initiated as a pilot. Later, after thorough discussions, Espoo accepted the partnership with Vantaa as well with Hyvinkää, Kerava, Porvoo and Lohja, which led to the establishment of Espoo-Vantaa Polytechnic in 1997. The establishment of the polytechnic was preceded in Espoo by hard work to achieve a polytechnic level. The development of international nursing education for the first time in Finland can be seen as an example of that work.

Meanwhile, we at Espoo Nursing College were since 1991 convinced that nursing education should be part of higher education as it was in the UK, the USA and Canada, among others. Interestingly, it had become possible to study nursing science at the University of Kuopio (today known as the University of Eastern Finland) in 1979, Tampere University in 1981, the University of Oulu in 1986, and the University of Turku in 1986. University studies were planned for students who had previously completed their nursing education. Thus, it was logical to transform professional education into a higher education degree. This transformation enabled better integration of university-level nursing science studies and the professional education of nurses. Nursing science had already been identified as a science of its own in many western universities.

As mentioned, we at Espoo Nursing College began our work to establish higher-level education in nursing. We developed an initial curriculum and supported our educators to complete a master's degree and possibly later aim for a doctorate. Bringing the INE curriculum to the polytechnic level meant for example an increase in the learning content, yielding a total of 140 study weeks at that time (210 credits today).

The new curriculum was based on scientific knowledge from nursing science and related disciplines. The framework for studies integrated scientific nursing theories and pedagogical theories to optimise the polytechnic level learning outcomes. Furthermore, EU directives for the qualifications of registered nurses were carefully followed. At the same time, qualifications at a European level were revisited. Katariina Raij's membership of the European national working group led by Sirkka-Liisa Kärki from The National Board of Education enabled smooth and timely adaptation of the novel qualification demands.

When in 1991 it became obvious that, due to political reasons, Espoo would not get its own polytechnic, we at Espoo Nursing College refused to give up our development work. When we looked at our society, we observed changes in Finland's population structure. For example, there was a growing population of young people with a foreign background, especially in the capital region. These people could not proceed in their studies, mainly due to linguistic challenges. On the other hand, we knew that nursing science is international, and multiculturalism should be supported among future nurses. Päivi Mykkänen, who was Espoo Nursing College's rector at the time, initiated an idea to develop an international nursing education programme that would enable studying in English and offer international opportunities for nurses worldwide.

As described in the Final Report (1999) of the first INE programme, the programme at Espoo Nursing College was planned by Katariina Rajj (the person in charge), Kyllikki Kupari and Anna-Liisa Pirnes. Also, Rector Päivi Mykkänen and Vice Rector Paula Lehto participated in this group. Later, the curriculum was updated annually based on feedback collected from students, colleagues, clinical tutors, and others.

PERMISSION TO PILOT THE INTERNATIONAL NURSING PROGRAMME

The first steps of the international nursing programme were not easy. In the first place, the National Board of Education was not willing to give permission for the international nursing programme. They argued that it was enough to experiment with polytechnic education in general, and did not understand the need for an international nursing education programme. However, our slogan was 'Don't give up'.

We sent a delegation led by the chair of the Board of Espoo Nursing College (M.D., Ph.D. Eero Akaan-Penttilä) to meet the Minister of Culture and Education, Riitta Uosukainen. Due to her strong support the National Board of Education decided to grant the pilot permission on 19 May 1993 (decision number 114/504/92) for curriculum development, based on national and international demands of integrity and an exceptional curriculum. The latter was seen significant for our development work because at the time curriculum framework was always given from outside. The board was also willing to support us in our work and participated especially in the evaluation of the programme.

The permission did not please everyone and it was even considered illegal by some actors. For example, the Board of Helsinki Nursing College sent their official complaint to the National Board of Education, and the language teachers' union disapproved of our effort, because they considered the language skills of the educators insufficient because were not native speakers. However, permission was granted regardless of the complaints, and we continued to work on the implementation of our plans with a practice-oriented approach.

THE PILOT UNIT

The Final Report of the International Nursing Education curriculum foundation and curriculum experiment was published in 1999. According to it, at the beginning of autumn 1993 there were six educators in the INE team. The educators had been selected based on the competencies required for carrying out the programme. Also, international work experience was considered an advantage. The educators' English language skills were tested by Jyväskylä University and the required level on the national Certificate of Language Proficiency (YKI) was 5–6.

The first INE team consisted of Katariina Raji (the person in charge), Kaija Heikkilä, Aino-Liisa Jussila and Anna-Liisa Pirnes, who represented nursing disciplines, and Lea Brummer-Korvenkontio and Raili Tikanto, who represented the related disciplines. Other educators joined the team later when their competences were needed. Visiting lecturers from around the world were also invited to participate in the teaching as part of the INE programme.

The further development of our language skills was supported by arranging language education for the team with the possibility to share our experiences, successes and failures. Language education included exercises that focused on preparing presentations by some private companies, 'Brush up your English' courses provided by the University of Jyväskylä, and the English language camp organised by the University of Helsinki and led by professors from the University of Kansas (USA) and the University of Oxford (UK).

We also needed to clarify some concepts in order to share our understanding of them and their use. One of the most important concepts was the expression of being international. Based on our literature-based research work in the team (International Nursing Education Curriculum Foundations 1993), the concept of internationalism was defined by the following criteria:

1. The instruction is in English
2. Students are both from Finland and abroad
3. The curriculum is built on the nursing science generally accepted in the international sphere
4. There is instruction by foreign nursing experts
5. Student and educator exchange is organised
6. Cooperation among students, as a matter of intercultural exchange, forms an integral part of the programme

From the beginning, we had visiting colleagues from abroad in order to expand our cultural understanding. In spring 1994 we had lecturers from McMaster University in Canada and the Universities of Nottingham and Manchester in the UK.

The development of team teaching, that was quite new in that time, strong collegial support, and the development of new working methods, helped us to survive and supported our progress. Students were also given a significant role in the development of the programme, and they willingly joined us in our work. They were eager to learn and ready to work hard to achieve their qualifications. They also developed a good team spirit and supported each other throughout their professional path to becoming registered nurses in Finland.

The expectations towards the programme were high, and it was recognised that the programme was under both internal and external critical scrutiny. However, we wanted to show that we can do it.

STUDENT APPLICATION

According to the Final Report of the programme (1999), it was decided that the selection of students into the international nursing education programme would follow the same criteria used in the selection of student nurses into Finnish-language nursing programmes. The criteria were:

1. Secondary school diploma, Finnish or foreign equivalent
2. Sufficient selection points, as counted from the secondary school diploma or equivalent
3. Psychological adaptation skills and the health of the student evaluated by professionals
4. Students' abilities to be self-directive and to adapt to new learning approaches (evaluated by psychological tests)
5. English language skills (tested)

In the spring of 1993, we were ready to start and received over 400 applications for 16 study places. The high number of applications that met the criteria led us to almost triple the number of study places, and to form the INE93A and INE93B groups. In the end, a total of 44 students with different backgrounds were accepted to the programme. Students with foreign backgrounds (11) came from Ethiopia, Ireland, China, Gambia, Nigeria, the Philippines and Romania. The remaining 33 students were Finnish, and they had all expressed their willingness to participate in international projects. Here are some examples of future plans written by the students during their studies.

'One day I will also work as a nurse, first in Finland but hopefully somewhere abroad, too.'

'When I grow up, I will become a "supernurse", who works somewhere in this multicultural, interactive planet.'

'My future plan is to become a nurse educator after my university education. The next plan is to become a politician and fight for better condition for nurses in Nigeria.'

THE INE PROGRAMME

The INE programme was based 1) on the nationally accepted demands concerning nursing education at a polytechnic level and 2) on EU directives concerning registered nurses. The programme outline was:

- The programme totalled 140 study weeks (210 credits today), and lasted 3.5 years.
- The studies included 60 study weeks (90 credits today) of nursing practice, including 20 study weeks that were recommended to be completed abroad.
- The optional studies (10 study weeks) were integrated in the programme modules.
- Special emphasis was based on nursing research as one of the basic modules that included 10 study weeks.

Together, the modules formed a logical and systematic entity so that the qualifications of a professional nurse were covered (Final Report 1999).

The INE curriculum also included Finnish language studies led at that time by Maria Kela (Master of Arts). Together with language exercises in clinical placements, they were designed to support students' opportunities to decide later if they wanted to stay in Finland.

BUILDING THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

When planning the INE programme, it was clear that an international network was needed. However, in 1992/93 we did not have the internet, Google or any kind of online platform. Instead, we sent advertisements to well-known British nursing magazines, and kindly asked British universities to join us in building a network for the further development of international nursing education.

The positive feedback showed us that the idea of working together with the Finnish Nursing College was considered an appealing offer. The most relevant answers we got were from the Universities of Hull, Manchester, Nottingham and Newcastle which, in turn, led to development work financed by the Erasmus scholarship programme. The programme was coordinated by Espoo College and was led by nurse educator Leena Railimo-Saares.

Our growing international collaboration network enabled an active exchange programme for our students and teachers. The first student group (INE93B) was sent to the UK in spring 1994, and the first British nursing students came to Finland in spring 1995. The student and teacher exchange programmes were later developed and expanded based on collected positive feedback.

BUILDING THE DOMESTIC NETWORK WITH CLINICAL PLACEMENTS

Before sending English-speaking students to practise their clinical skills, it was necessary to develop cooperation with domestic clinical placements. Continuous cooperation with head nurses and other nurses in clinical placements mainly relied on the INE educators' personal networks. Using English was seen as a challenge for clinical tutors, especially in the beginning. Thus, clinical nurses' English language skills were mapped before the students' arrival.

The INE educators' role as a facilitator was important, and they spent considerable time supporting clinical tutoring. Later, when the number of students increased, finding proper clinical placements for students became more challenging and demanded more work. In addition, the personal connections between nurse educators and clinical tutors had to be developed. The change in attitude towards international students was sometimes slow.

Also, meetings with patients needed to be prepared. Many of the patients liked to use English and made an effort to participate in the interaction. At the same time, patient safety was of course taken carefully into account by the tutoring clinical nurses. Clinical placements offered also an authentic learning environment for INE students to develop their Finnish language skills. This was considered important regarding their possible future careers in Finland.

THE CURRICULUM PILOT 1993–1996

In the INE programme, a new curriculum was piloted. The main purpose of the curriculum pilot was derived from the programme's objectives. The programme's main objectives were:

1. To develop nursing as a profession, and to offer an international alternative in nursing education
2. To increase nurses' mobility nationally and globally:
 - offer an opportunity for foreign students to apply to nursing education
 - offer students an opportunity to study in multicultural groups
 - offer an opportunity for students who are interested in multicultural nursing and international developmental work
3. To participate nationally and internationally in nursing research projects (Final Report 1999).

According to the European-level development work for renewing the EU directives, it was estimated that nursing education in Finland was already of a high quality. For example, students were required to write a bachelor's thesis based on research. We were also happy to conclude that our novel international nursing programme corresponded well to polytechnic level.

By answering the question of how we learn, and what learning means in nursing, we were able to identify our role as educators and not as teachers who simply lecture. We did not consider students as passive information receivers but as active subjects in constructing their competencies. Being future nurses, the students needed both research-based knowledge and the skills and abilities to apply it. They also had to be able to manage different situations in the ever-changing world of work (Raij 2000).

As educators, we were involved in professional growing processes. Our role was to guide and facilitate, and share our knowledge and experiences with students from culturally different environments. We encouraged students to find their own ways to progress in their studies right from the beginning.

According to the programme's Final Report (1999), the self-directed learning processes guided students to individual professional development. There was a demand to create a supportive environment at both the national and international levels. Students' skills to be self-directive were supported and enhanced throughout their studies. Students were not left alone, but instead encouraged to concentrate on planning their personal curricula using the portfolio method and to establish their learning contracts. They wrote learning diaries throughout their studies and cooperated with nurses in different environments. Team teaching was developed between educators and clinical tutors to better support nursing students' professional growth as well as the growth of educators and clinical tutors.

RESEARCH-BASED CURRICULUM AND HANDBOOK

The INE curriculum's framework was formed around the main concepts of nursing science. The curriculum consisted of the modules: 1) person, 2) environment, 3) 4) health, 5) nursing, and 5) nursing research, which includes a final thesis work. They, in turn, were divided into items identified by internationally known nursing researchers, Roy's adaptation model (1991) being one of the most important ones.

The handbook was launched by the visiting professor Ann Buckingham from McMaster University in Canada, who worked with us a few months in spring 1994. It could be seen as a guide for book for educators and students. The book explained how the studies could be implemented and what they should contain. The book's chapters were structured according to the main concepts mentioned above with their items. The items, in turn, were rewritten describing the types of knowledge, identified during my doctoral thesis work: 1) knowledge in theories and models, 2) knowledge in skills and abilities, 3) moral knowledge and 4) experiential knowledge they included leading to form a holistic conception of the phenomena. They, in turn, gave basis for describing the outcome criteria for the INE students. The handbook also contained practice-oriented information on how to facilitate students' possibilities to steer their studies.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION

The international nursing education pilot was continuously evaluated and monitored by several evaluation groups, each with their specific responsibilities. The follow-up group assessed the pilot. The follow-up group consisted of members from:

- The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health
- The National Board of Medicolegal Affairs
- The National Board of Education
- The National Research and Development Center for Welfare and Health
- Professors from the nursing departments at the Universities of Turku and Kuopio
- The Finnish Federation of Nurses
- Nursing specialists and directors representing university clinics, hospitals and the community
- Student representatives selected by students

The programme also had a supervisory group that closely monitored how the experiments were conducted. Later, the group's name was transformed into a consulting group and it became self-directed by students.

Both the follow-up group and the supervisory group focused on evaluating the curriculum. Their work had an important role in developing the programme and producing the final evaluation.

The curriculum was also evaluated continuously in clinical placements. In the evaluation, the objectives and contents of the programme were compared to the demands of clinical placements. This, in turn, helped to update the programme to correspond to the competencies required in actual working environments.

RESEARCH PROJECTS ON THE INE PROGRAMME

The INE programme pilot from 1993–1997 was analysed in two academic research projects. The first was Kaarina Raeste's master's thesis (1998) 'Learning Nursing in the International Nursing Education as Described by the Students'. The study indicated that the programme emphasised nursing theories, holistic nursing, primary nursing care, as well as the ethical principles of nursing and medical knowledge associated with clinical nursing. The ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practice meant an increase in self-confidence in clinical nursing.

Raeste (1998) observed the learning environment as a temporal, physical, social and symbolic environment. According to her, the multicultural nature of the student group allowed the distribution of knowledge from different cultures, including different ways of life and thinking. The periods abroad developed interactive and cultural skills. The learning activities emphasised students' self-directedness and cooperative skills.

Katariina Raji's doctoral thesis (2000) studied the learning strategies used in the International Nursing Education programme. The study was based on the learning diaries of 16 students (INE 93B) from 1993–1996. The analysis work led to identifying the concept of competence as well as the types of knowledge referred to earlier in this article. According to the study, the students' attitudes towards their studies varied. The different learning orientations were named later as modellers, technicians, empathisers and investigators. Later, the findings formed the basis of the theoretical background of the Learning by Developing action model (LbD), a hands-on learning model that is used at Laurea still today. The further development work required interviews with Laurea educators, representing different fields. It took place in 2007. In 2012 Vesa Taatila and Katariina Raji showed that the LbD model had its roots in pragmatism.

THE FINAL EVALUATION PRODUCED BY STUDENT GROUPS INE93 A&B

According to the students' informal final reports Thera-Bee (INE93A) and the Final Reports (INE93B), they considered Espoo Nursing College a 'pulsating institute', a multicultural haven of aspiring young nurses and a hatchery for future academics. The following were typical sentences in students' reports:

Can we have lunch? Break? No group work!! No portfolios!! No learning contracts!! When is the next bus going? No-ou, we do not want to do it!

But they did, despite the huge challenges they met from time to time as forerunners. The chronicles of Thera-Bee (INE93A) and the Final Assumptions (1993B) clearly show how the students fulfilled all the expectations described in our curriculum plan. They became international, multicultural, multiprofessional and also good friends, always supporting and encouraging each other. They were humorous, open-minded and creative professionals.

'I cannot understand making a theory only for the reason that it would exist ... for me a theory is a tool to develop nursing in PRACTICE!'

'Starting as a study coordinator in Töölö Hospital 1.1.1997, my future plan came true!'

'My future means nursing in different cultures, missionary nursing. My own adaptation model!'

But also *'My plans: Leaving on 30th of December to Texas. I hope I will find a job as soon as possible!'*

One of our 'top students' had to leave the country. Jorvi Hospital would have welcomed him to work as a registered nurse, but he could not get a work permit. However, he found a job in first aid as soon as he arrived in Texas. It is sad to note that he was not the only one, and this kind of treatment still continues. Finland needs to learn more.

THE MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE PILOT

Based on the continuing national and international evaluation and development work, the main outcomes of the international nursing education programme were identified as follows:

1. The pilot curriculum and the International Nursing Education programme (1993) were the fundamentals for developing the Polytechnic Degree Programme in Nursing and Curriculum Foundations of International Nursing Education, Bachelor of Nursing (1997).
2. Teaching in English made transcultural connections, cooperation and networking possible.
3. Internationalism, multiculturalism and multiprofessional cooperation were emphasised in the programme.
4. For visiting lecturers and students on the programme, the Erasmus scholarship (Espoo College of Health Care and Social Welfare as a coordinator) and the language of instruction being English offered good opportunities for an active international student and teacher exchange.
5. After the four-year pilot, students were self-motivated and well aware of their competencies. They had become international, culturally oriented nurses who developed science-based nursing care.

Since 1994 the INE programme continued as an independent nursing education programme. It also led to the establishment of the Bachelor of Nursing degree in 1997. New student groups began their studies in the footsteps of the first groups. Additionally, the INE programme formed the basis for the polytechnic programme at Espoo-Vantaa Polytechnic, later known as Laurea University of Applied Science.

CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT WORK AT LAUREA

As mentioned earlier, Espoo College of Health and Social Welfare became part of Espoo-Vantaa Polytechnic in 1997, and in 2001 Espoo-Vantaa Polytechnic became Laurea University of Applied Sciences. Regardless of the organisational changes, the development of international educational programmes that began in Espoo College of Health and Social welfare has continued.

Based on the doctoral dissertation (Raij 2000, 142) in which the informants were the INE93B students, the frame for a new learning environment was formed. This learning environment, the Well Life Center, was established in cooperation with Laurea, Espoo City, the University of Technology (later Aalto University), professionals from public and private companies, clients, and students. It was seen as an environment where doers, activities, researchers and clients meet (Raij, K. & Lehto, P. 2010, 285).

The INE programme led to the development of a Master of Health Care programme (90 credits) in autumn 2007. The programme applies the LbD learning model, and it was established by nursing educators Paula Lehto (Doctor of Health Sciences) and Anna-Liisa Pirnes (Master of Health Sciences). The curriculum was referred to as a competence-based curriculum.

Internationalism is strongly emphasised at Laurea at different levels. This can be seen in countless international research and development projects. The first international nursing education pilot can be seen as a forerunner in

the field of nursing science both nationally and internationally. As soon as the pilot was regarded as successful, similar programmes were established in different parts of Finland.

What has become of our former INE students? Some examples can be found in the list collected by Ulla Parviainen (Master of Health Care): the majority of students are working as nursing experts. We also know that some have continued their studies and at least four students are now doctors, while some have master's degrees, including four educators. Some students have attended additional training and have become specialists in a specific area, while others are working on national and international projects. This look at the careers of past students demonstrates that the INE pilot was meaningful and worth the effort.

I wish to thank my former INE colleagues for reading and checking the content: Paula Lehto, Arja Majakulma, Ulla Parviainen, Anna-Liisa Pirnes and Pentti Rauhala, who was President of Laurea UAS from 1996 to 2011.

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