

Visiting Faculty from Abroad: Contributing to Global Competency of Nutrition Students at Hawassa University, Awassa, Ethiopia

Wendy J. Dahl¹ and Amanda L. Ford²
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL

Susan J. Whiting³
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK

Abstract

Significant research has been carried out examining study abroad learning experiences. In contrast, little is known about the impact of being taught by professors from abroad. Our aim was to examine the learning experiences of current and past students of the Masters in Applied Human Nutrition Program at Hawassa University, Awassa, Ethiopia, who have been taught courses by faculty from North American and European universities. Participants completed an online questionnaire through SurveyMonkey®. Respondents (46/67; 34 M, 11 F, 1 unreported; 31±6 y) confirmed that the course objectives were achieved with most reporting satisfaction with the course content, projects and assignments and critical thinking requirements. Most respondents felt that the visiting professors from abroad enhanced their program and were considerate of cultural differences. However, only 73% of respondents believed that the course material/content that was presented by the visiting professors from abroad was relevant to the nutritional concerns that exist in Ethiopia, suggesting that some students may be less interested in Western nutrition issues. Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that being taught by visiting professors improved their second language (English) skills. Further, 74% of respondents had never left Ethiopia, but 63% reported being more likely to travel outside of Ethiopia following their interactions with visiting faculty. In general, student perspectives of visiting professors from abroad

were positive and their role, beyond teaching, may be to enhance the global competence of students.

Introduction

Although there are many goals and outcomes for international experiences, a common theme is to encourage the development of global competence. According to Russo and Osborne (2004), the globally-competent student should possess a “*diverse and knowledgeable worldview*,” “*comprehend international dimensions of his/her major field of study*,” “*communicate effectively in another language and/or cross-culturally*” and exhibit “*cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptability*.” Rimer (2004) defined globally-competent students as “*knowledgeable and responsible as they go out into the world—to know languages, to know the culture, the economics and policies of the countries they will visit, to interact in a knowledgeable way*.”

Study abroad experiences are generally thought to enhance international and cross-cultural knowledge (NAFSA, 2007) and thus, global competence. For example, American students who have participated in study abroad have a higher level of functional knowledge of global interdependence and less ethnocentricity (Sutton and Rubin, 2004). In addition, study abroad has significant long term impacts on students in the areas of continued language use, academic attainment,

¹Corresponding author, Food Science and Human Nutrition Department, FSHN Building Newell Drive; Ph: 352 392 1991 (ext 224); Email: wdahl@ufl.edu

²Food Science and Human Nutrition Department, FSHN Building Newell Drive

³College of Pharmacy and Nutrition, 110 Science Place

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intercultural and personal development and career choices (Dwyer, 2004).

Cost is a major barrier to travel abroad experiences (NAFSA, 2007) and thus, there has been a call to internationalize the American college curriculum and thereby bring the world to students (NASULGC, 2004). However, as Koziol et al. (2011) suggest, we must prepare teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver a global education and perhaps teachers and professors require global competency to effectively deliver an international curriculum. Schuerholz-Lehr (2007) summarized that teachers who travel abroad, study abroad, find occasional employment abroad, attend international conferences and thus have international content to teach, are more likely to have world-mindedness or global awareness. International teaching experiences would be expected to increase the global competence of faculty and may facilitate internationalization of their curriculum at their home university. However, if international teaching is to be pursued as a method of increasing the global competency of faculty, the impact on the students being taught also must be examined.

Thus, when study abroad is not an option for most students seeking advanced education in developing countries due to serious resource limitations, these students may be exposed to the global environment through courses taught by visiting faculty from abroad. The impact of this “international” learning/teaching environment may be two-fold, increasing the global competence of both the teacher and the student. The impact and implications of the latter outcome, however, has been virtually unexplored.

A Case Example of International Teaching

The Masters in Applied Human Nutrition Program at Hawassa University in Awassa, Ethiopia, was initiated in 2007 to increase the number of qualified nutrition professionals in Ethiopia. Prior to the initiation of this program, few nutrition professionals were trained in Ethiopia. Overseas training to produce nutrition professionals had been the norm and these individuals often did not return to Ethiopia. Due to limited institutional resources and lack of individuals with PhD-level training in nutrition, the program has relied on visiting faculty from abroad (United Kingdom, United States and Canada) to teach their graduate courses in nutrition. Courses that have been instructed by visiting faculty from abroad include: Nutritional Biochemistry, Nutrition and Metabolism, Research Methods in Applied Human Nutrition, Principles of Epidemiology, Nutritional Assessment, Community Nutrition, Food and Nutrition Policy, Program Design and Evaluation, Maternal, Infant and Child Nutrition, Nutrition in Emergencies, Clinical

Nutritional and Dietetics, Selected Topics in Applied Human Nutrition and Biostatistics.

In 2007-08, the program had an inaugural uptake of 10 students for the two-year program. The program expanded to an uptake of more than 25 students over the next two years as demand for the program increased. In 2009, eight students from the first cohort received their Masters of Applied Human Nutrition degrees. To date, the program has graduated and enrolled 98 students and three of these students currently are pursuing doctoral training. The ultimate goal of the program is to have PhD-trained, Ethiopian-born professors teach the core nutrition courses. However, this objective is without consideration of what may be lost as a result, i.e. the unintended, positive impacts of being taught by visiting faculty from abroad.

The objective of this study was to examine the learning experiences of current and past students of the Masters in Applied Human Nutrition Program at Hawassa University, Awassa, Ethiopia, who have been taught nutrition courses by faculty who have traveled from North American and European Universities, specifically to determine if course learning outcomes were achieved and if being taught by visiting professor from abroad inspired global competence in students.

Methods

From an email contact list of current and past students of the Masters of Applied Human Nutrition Program at Hawassa University, Awassa, Ethiopia, potential participants ($n = 67$) were sent a questionnaire administered through SurveyMonkey®. Students who had not yet taken a course taught by visiting faculty from abroad were excluded from participation. The survey included demographic inquiries and questions on their learning experiences related to being taught by visiting professors from abroad.

The survey was exempted by the University of Florida's Institutional Review Board 2 and approved by Hawassa University.

Results and Discussion

The response rate of current and past students of the Masters in Applied Human Nutrition Program at Hawassa University was 68.7% (46/67). Of the respondents, 75.6% were male and 24.4% were female (34M, 11F, 1 unreported) with an average age of 31 ± 6 years. Students from the 2008 to 2012 intake classes were contacted. Most respondents (68.9%) had completed their Master of Applied Human Nutrition degree at the time of the survey. Current employment of respondents who had graduated included as lecturers, researchers, doctoral students and nutrition consultants. All current and past

students were from Ethiopia and the major region of origin of respondents (56.1%) was the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR).

Course Satisfaction

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their experiences as Masters students with having visiting faculty from North America and Europe teach courses as part of their program's core curriculum. Courses that most respondents indicated completing as a Masters student taught by a visiting professor from abroad included Clinical Nutrition and Dietetics (97.6%), Community Nutrition (97.6%) and Nutrition and Metabolism (90.5%). Respondents were asked to answer questions with responses ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. Respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the projects/assignments given by visiting professors were suited to their interests (90.5%), enjoyed taking classes that were taught by visiting professors from abroad (97.3%) and were satisfied with the course content that was taught (92.7%). Some respondents (14.3%) reported having difficulty keeping up with the amount of material/content that was presented by visiting professors from abroad; however, 77.2% of respondents reported disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they had difficulty.

Respondents strongly agreed or agreed that having visiting professors from abroad teach courses enhanced the Masters program offered at Hawassa University (93.2%) and thought of the visiting professors from abroad as experts in their fields of study (89.2%). The course material/content taught by visiting professors from abroad was new information for students (91.9%). Respondents reported that, overall, visiting professors were above average or excellent when evaluated on their respect and concern for students (94.1%), communication of ideas and information (90.9%) and availability to assist students in or out of class while they were teaching at Hawassa University (97.1%). However, only 70.6% of respondents felt that visiting professors were above average or excellent in their availability to assist students once they had left Hawassa University.

Respondents also were asked to evaluate and rate the visiting professors from abroad overall using a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from Poor to Excellent. Respondents reported that, overall, visiting professors' facilitation of learning and stimulation of interest in courses were above average or excellent, with scores of 88.2% and 85.3%, respectively.

Higher Learning Attainment

Respondents reported that assignments and exams given by the visiting professors required students to think

critically (86.5%). Respondents reported that, overall, visiting professors were above average or excellent in their ability to challenge students' thinking (67.6%), stimulate students' interest in learning more (85.3%), stimulate new thinking (88.2%), clarify concepts introduced (88.2%) and increase students' insights into what was already known (88.2%). Respondents also commented on the assistance visiting professors gave them in conducting their current and future thesis work and on the opportunity to work in novel areas of research that might otherwise be limited.

Cultural Considerations

Most current and past students (73.9%) had never traveled outside of Ethiopia. Those who reported traveling outside of Ethiopia had visited Germany (41.7%). Only two respondents reported visiting the United States or Canada and their travel was as a result of their interactions with visiting faculty from abroad.

Cultural differences represent a significant consideration when deciding to teach abroad. However, only 71.4% of student respondents reported believing that cultural differences existed between the visiting professors from North America or Europe and themselves. Of the respondents who believed cultural differences existed, 81.5% believed that the visiting professors from abroad were considerate of the cultural differences that existed. Respondents that agreed that cultural differences existed were asked to describe what they believed to be the greatest cultural differences between the visiting professors and themselves.

Responses varied and included differences in teacher-learner dynamics and a belief that "Westerners" utilize more interactive teaching approaches (classroom discussion, group projects, etc.) to promote student engagement and also have a more informal relationship with their students. Respondents commented on differences in teaching practice, with the visiting professors focusing more on practical application of teaching and learning. Respondents also reported that differences in culture influence dietary choices and recommendations and that this was not incorporated sufficiently into course content. Additionally, only 72.9% of respondents believed that the course material/content presented by the visiting professors from abroad was relevant to the nutritional concerns that exist in Ethiopia. Respondents recommended that visiting professors use global examples and current research in their teaching, but also focus on the specific nutritional needs and concerns found in Ethiopia.

In addition to exploring the intended benefits, e.g. content knowledge, of being taught by visiting professors from abroad, respondents were asked about

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possible unintended benefits or harm. Some respondents (62.8%) reported feeling more likely to travel outside of Ethiopia. Respondents also believed that being taught by visiting professors from abroad improved their second language (English) skills (81.0%). In addition, interactions with visiting professors introduced students to job opportunities in the field of nutrition that they did not know about before (54.0%) and 78.3% of respondents stated that they had stayed in contact with one or more of the visiting professors from abroad after finishing their course(s). Respondents were asked in an open-ended format about any unanticipated gains resulting from the experience of having visiting professors from abroad teach courses. Responses focused largely on cultural awareness and the opportunity to be exposed to individuals with different cultural values. In particular, values focused on time and time management, achievement and hard work and teaching practices that introduced practical skills and methods of nutritional assessment.

Summary

The results of this study suggest that in addition to providing nutrition courses that meet the traditional course objectives of content, critical thinking and general satisfaction, visiting faculty from abroad also may contribute to the global competence of students. As defined by Russo and Osborne (2004), the student respondents may have enhanced their global competence by improving their second language skills. However, although a “Western” viewpoint was provided, respondents noted that presentation of the international dimensions of the nutrition field was less than adequate, specifically due to the lack of emphasis on the major nutritional issues of developing nations, including their home country, Ethiopia. It is not clear from this study whether the students’ worldview was influenced, although it is interesting to note that the majority of Ethiopian students participating in this study did not seem to recognize cultural differences between the visiting professors from abroad and themselves. One of the goals of study abroad for American students is to improve cultural sensitivity, suggesting an inherent level of cultural insensitivity. It is possible that the Ethiopian students and graduates of the program focus on cultural similarities versus differences.

This case example of an international teaching/learning experience may have also contributed to the global competence of participating students, as defined by Rimer (2004), by increasing students’ knowledge and language skills as well as their intention to travel outside of Ethiopia. Further research is needed to evaluate the global competence of students taught by faculty from

abroad and could focus on incoming students, measuring global competence upon their entrance to the program, at program completion and early in their careers. Research exploring the relationship between teaching abroad and the global competence of participating professors and their ability to internationalize their home curricula also is needed.

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