Trialling Virtual Cross-Cultural Learning with Australian and Hong Kong Allied Health Students to Improve Cultural Competence and Employability

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Introduction: Employers expect occupational therapy graduates to have high levels of cultural competence, and the capacity to thrive in increasingly globalised and diverse workplaces. With the exception of international exchange or clinical placement, few opportunities exist for students to engage in diverse cultural learning experiences.

Objective: The research aim was to design, trial, and evaluate a virtual cross-cultural learning activity with Australian and Hong Kong occupational therapy and oral health students.

Method: A mixed methods study design was utilised. Data were collected via online surveys, administered pre- and post-activity completion, to determine students' study abroad participation, intentions and barriers, and levels of cultural competency (cultural confidence, cultural engagement, cultural respect, attitudes and preferences, social responsibility and self-awareness). After activity completion, focus groups were conducted with students in Hong Kong and Australia.

Results: A total of 201 students participated in the virtual cross-cultural activity (Hong Kong=58, Melbourne=98, Bendigo=45). The pre-survey was completed by 130 students (65% response rate), and post-survey 78 students (39% response rate). Australian and Hong Kong students' had different levels of cultural competency and learning needs. Out of comfort zone experiences were a catalyst for cultural learning. Students practiced communication skills, and developed deeper understandings of culture, health, and occupation.

Conclusion: The virtual activity enabled occupational therapy students to participate in peer-to-peer, international, cultural learning exchange. Virtual technologies can support the development of cultural competence in students, who may not have time, financial resources, or language skills to study overseas.