

## Graduate Students' Narratives and Self-Evaluation: Social Learning Experiences on International Mobility

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**Received:** July 02, 2020; **Published:** August 31, 2020

**DOI:** 10.31080/ecnh.2020.02.00085

### Abstract

The objective of this study was to promote narrative and self-evaluation as integrative ways to assess the experiences of students who participated in an International Mobility Initiative offered by the master's Program of the National School of Nursing and Obstetrics (Eneo) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The historical-cultural theory provides a global conceptual framework of the educational process in alternative educational scenarios alludes to culture, although international mobility occurs in the context of a formal curriculum. The study was developed from July to November 2019 and followed a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory design with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The findings suggest that the International Mobility Initiative contributes to enhancing the students' transforming intercultural practice in terms of two dimensions, one personal, and the other related to their researching potential because of their social experiences. Without necessarily implying institutional agreements, this International Mobility Initiative includes diverse presentations in academic events, as well as short international stays.

**Keywords:** Education Evaluation; Institutional Evaluation; Programs Evaluations; Qualitative Evaluations; Students' Evaluations

### Introduction

The objective of this study was to foster narrative and self-evaluation as integrative ways to give meaning to the experiences of students in the Master of Nursing program, as part of a larger, registered and funded postgraduate self-evaluation project by the School National Nursing and Obstetrics (Eneo) [1] of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

Educational Evaluation (EE) became an inevitable component of education policies under the assumption that it is a fundamental for solving social problems related to the economic growth and social integration. Based on a positivist approach, EE is characterized for being controlling, efficient, hierarchical, sanctioning and technical [2] and as such, it is expected to relate to diverse contexts, audiences, and qualitative methodologies in order to strengthen a culture of justice, pertinence, and social responsibility for the citizens that democratic societies require.

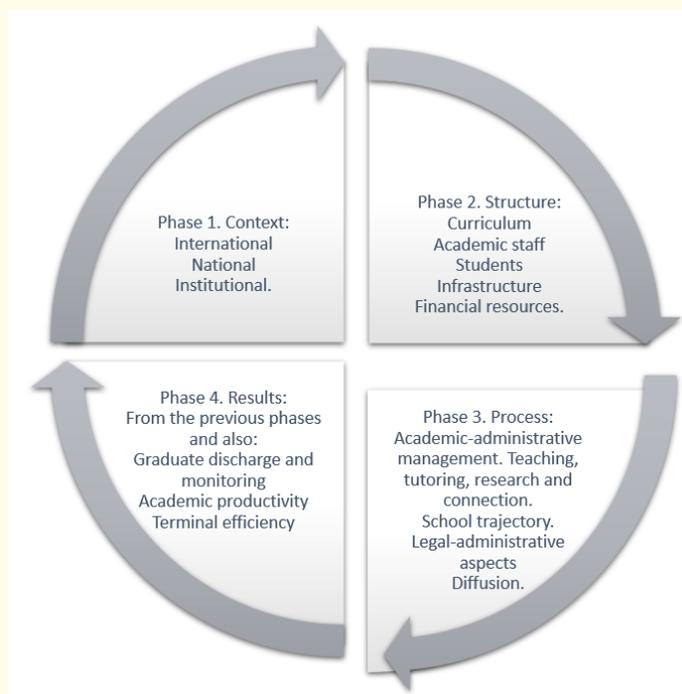
Based on systematic informing, self-evaluation is a process developed by actors of an educational institution to support decision-making processes that improve student learning [3]. Simultaneously, self-evaluation contributes to collegial reflection as the basis of empowerment from previous conceptions. The process of self-evaluation in a postgraduate program responds to the institutional context and

follows a modular design representing each of its core components, including its curricula, teachers, students, management, and regulations, among others.

Self-evaluation has had a scant number of significant references regarding its practices within educational institutions. Nevo [4] suggest that it contributes to the empowerment and center-based management to establishing and sustaining internal and external performance standards - in addition to, its capacity to provide actors with regular, valid, and pertinent information to develop their own practice and reach consensus on how to improve and maintain the educational activities [5].

Self-evaluation requires an institutional framework characterized by commitment and co-responsibility to the transformation and evolution of postgraduate studies. Therefore, it is necessary to design policies which can contribute to the development of a culture of institutional self-evaluation [6] and social responsibility [7,8] which can strengthen collegial life and democracy. Thus, the postgraduate program is a privileged space for reflection regarding the quality of the University's key activities that contribute to the empowerment of the community as the result of integral and extensive educational evaluation research.

The self-evaluation process in the postgraduate programs of the National Autonomous University of Mexico is regulated by the General Regulation of Postgraduate Studies Law, 2018 [9] and its Self-Assessment Guide for Postgraduate Programs [10]. Under the terms of these laws, self-evaluation has two purposes: the first is to account for the quality of the education; and the second is to serve as benchmark to the program accreditations. The model has four phases (See figure 1), and it is within the process phase when the students' school trajectories are analyzed - a procedure, which in the framework of internationalization, includes the assessment of the students' mobility to other countries and their related academic activities.



**Figure 1:** Phases of the self-assessment model of postgraduate courses at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. **Source:** 2010 Self-Assessment Guide. UNAM Postgraduates (Self-Assessment Guide for Postgraduate Programs at UNAM, 2010).

A definition for the student mobility "... is what undergraduate and graduate students do in terms of internships, short courses, and academic residencies outside their institution. If the stays are undertaken in a foreign country, they become an important supporting instrument in the integral formation of the students as future professionals, which includes the opportunity to learn another language, and meet and live with different people from other cultures. Simultaneously, student mobility allows taking advantage of the presence of foreign students - or nationals who return from abroad - a situation which can enrich the educational experiences of local students" [11].

Student mobility for postgraduate students of the National Autonomous University of Mexico contemplates carrying out study or research stays in national and international higher education institutions. In the latter case, "the duration of the periods of international mobility can vary between three to six months (90 to 180 days) and must be completed within the school semester schedule established by the study plan" ([12], p. 1).

International mobility has been considered since 1991 by National Program of Quality Postgraduate Studies in Mexico of CONACyT, which has had the important task of acknowledging the quality of postgraduate programs in the country; and this initiative has had an important role in the evolution of those programs within the higher education institutions. By contrasting against the quality categories and indicators framed by it, the quality of a specific program is evaluated with mobility being one of the indicators related to the pertinence, transcendence, and relevance of the program to respond to the social needs [13].

Regarding research on this topic has been made with undergraduate studies. Santiago, García and Santiago [14] reported the experiences of students who participated in an international mobility program in terms of: a) didactic strategies; b) forms of grading; c) distribution of tests; and d) dynamics of the academic life within the receiving unit. Navarro [15] analysed diverse motivational aspects related to changes in the academic performance of undergraduate students of two private universities in Mexico, who had previously had at least one international mobility experience. A study on the effects on the development of perceptions of generic competences was developed by Fresán [16] who reported that autonomy, capacity for economic planning, adaptation capacity, capacity to relate to others, ability to understand diversity in the forms of thinking, and ability to live with new friends from other cultures, were all strengthened.

Also, longitudinal studies on students focused on the achievement of maturity competences; independence; recognition of cultural diversity [17] and the satisfaction of the students by Otero, Giraldo and Sánchez [18].

Thus, the effects of international mobility on higher education has been mainly focused on addressing studies around description, perception, opinion, and skills development of students in the bachelor's programs, seldomly alluding to an institutional evaluation framework as a basis to reflect on the quality of the related educational programs. The question that guided the research was: Which elements of the narratives and self-assessment of students who participated in international mobility contribute to identifying qualitative indicators in the process of the master's degree in nursing?

### **The international mobility and the culture: The sociocultural perspective**

The historical-cultural theory provides a global conceptual framework of the educational process in alternative educational scenarios alludes to culture, although international mobility occurs in the context of a formal and scholastic curriculum. Students develop competencies and learning from diverse experiences that in mobility result from coexistence with other professionals, cultures, languages, etc [19]. Professional and research internships are extended to diverse cultural settings when students experience mobility. Vygotsky [20] approaches the notion of culture through cultural and social mediators. Mediation highlights the role of the educator, parent or member of the community in which the person develops, it is not reduced to the systematic organization of learning experiences.

Its fundamental function is to provide a conception of reality that allows the student or person to orient herself in her social environment, through an emotional relationship that provides her with elements of knowledge and assessment of her own behaviour. Specific

social situations of development that, due to their historical and social context, organize the processes of socialization, to transmit to future generations the knowledge, ways of seeing the world, of feeling and thinking. Students who experience mobility require mediation processes carried out by teachers and researchers at the universities where they go, who have different ways of doing and thinking about nursing from different theoretical, methodological and contextual perspectives. In the sociocultural approach, social and instrumental mediation translates into a Zone of Proximal Development.

Álvarez and del Río [21] recovering Vygotsky, locate the supports that culture offers the child through mediation processes, in the functional structure that the Social Situation of Development supposes along with other systems such as the Zone of Proximal Development, activity/awareness systems and motives. This approach allows giving meaning and understanding to the cognitive, affective and action dimensions of the students' experiences in a manner which is not a priori to the research. Moreover, Bruner states that a narrative way to build knowledge and reality can foster diverse forms to arrange and acquire the and the collective meanings of an experience. In short, mobility studies have been mainly descriptive and focused on students; nevertheless, a broader consideration of the international mobility phenomenon from the perspective of the students has been acquiring more importance, allowing the possibility to analyse their new learnings in relation to the curriculum.

### Method

The research followed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The design was qualitative in order to gain insight on the international mobility experiences of students in the master's degree program of the UNAM who were enrolled in their third semester - social humanistic sciences - of the study plan. The study took place during the months of August to December 2019.

The sampling process was intentional with direct invitation to the six students who took part in the international mobility initiative. Five of these students agreed to participate. The range of age was 25 to 33 years old. The first participant was a senior specialist nurse in critical and older adult care, who was also the editor of the journal "Cuidarte" (Taking Care of You) from the Iztacala Faculty of Higher Studies at UNAM. The second was a teaching assistant of two full-time academicians in the Zaragoza Faculty of Higher Studies at UNAM as well. The third, was a member of a research project in the Zaragoza Faculty of Higher Studies. The fourth, was a general nurse from the National Institute of Medical Sciences and Nutrition, finally, the fifth participant was a graduate student fully devoted to his studies.

To collect data, a face-to-face group interview, guided by teacher with a doctorate in pedagogy, was conducted with the five participants in a single two-hour session, which took place in a seminar classroom of the University Graduate Unit. The corresponding informed consents were obtained. The interview was video-recorded, and participants were also asked to write a reflexive prose narrative to inform on their achieved learnings during the international mobility experience. The interview was transcribed using a word processor, and the narratives were analysed by five encoders to extract the hermeneutic units. Diverse technical representations were used to account for the textual expressions of the interviewees and narrators [22]. The criteria of credibility, auditability, and transferability were acknowledged [23].

### Results

The Master's in Nursing program of the UNAM has promoted diverse national and international student mobility initiatives for over a decade; and in the most recent ones, its students have acted as speakers at various academic events in Latin-American, North American and Ibero-American countries. Based on the narratives and the interview, it was identified that the international mobility experience turned out to be an intercultural transformative practice explained in terms of two dimensions: one personal and the other related to research development.

In this sense, the experience lived by the students contributed to their reflecting that the stay was an exchange opportunity for cultural and knowledge enrichment, in which, the personal experiences were impossible to exclude from the academic development; because,

through a diverse, dynamic and constant construction of empowerment, the acquisition of a new strategic conscience is fostered in the learner. And it is with the writing, that internal issues can be made external in a more freely and less socially biased form, because the experiences can be detached from the social situations to which the individual reacts. Thus, this form of expression shows how a reality is perceived and how it is written about [24].

Within this innovating context, the students can seek sense and meaning to their lived expressions, and then transform their cognitive and affective states. Based on this perspective, the educational training offered by universities can be contrasted and modified accordingly. An educational innovating approach like this can strengthen the students' abilities to develop consciousness and efficiency while learning in international scenarios. This development can be acknowledged when the students reflect on every learning space in their stays as opportunities for knowledge and cultural enrichment in which, the personal experiences are just impossible to exclude because, it is through a diverse, dynamic and constant construction of the global society that the acquisition of new values can be fostered. This is the consciousness which experiences of mobility can strengthen.

Within the personal dimension, the need to learn a language - mainly English and Portuguese - to enrich the social interactions becomes a fundamental motivational challenge for students. The more domain of the foreign language that the students have, the richer their social and cultural experiences will be. Therefore, this motivation to strengthen a second language can be another great tool to develop new communication skills and even seek understanding the history and lifestyle of the other country.

In this language-driven social interaction, where the acts are translated into signs and meanings "to try to read" the other, Geertz ([25]: p, 10), it is necessary to establish all possible communication bridges. Therefore, when attending to congresses, for example, students can interact with professionals from other disciplines and countries and become motivated to learn the other language.

An additional element in the personal dimension is the expectation regarding the professional life. International mobility contributes to generating a projection of what is desired in the professional practice. Thus, these experiences contribute to boosting the academic and practice future of students as the result of discipline and hard work, and because of the proper design and implementation of education policies in nursing.

The second dimension, the intercultural transformative practice, refers to the teaching-learning processes, for example, those in the clinical practice which took place in Coimbra. The corresponding clinical lab sessions do not seek making a nurse in 10 minutes, as they are based and focused on the specific skills or competencies of the student, integrating specific scenarios, with pre-debriefing and post-debriefing which last longer than the practice itself. Practical and cognitive skills are practiced with small groups of students, while others have specific objectives as observers and graders. Thereafter, the roles are interchanged. This methodology supports the collective development of knowledge and essential skills.

Students tend to appreciate that their teachers reflect upon the limitations of the formation activities; and considering this, it is possible to assume that, in order to achieve transformation, activities, such as the act of researching, must be seen in diverse forms. This can allow enriching comparisons to take place [24].

### Discussion and Conclusion

The self-assessment and narrative are essential components to systematize the significant learning experiences of the students. In this direction, the culture of self-assessment of the program of master's in nursing contributes to the empowerment of its students who could change their beliefs that, when invited to participate in a specific research study, they would have to go through "examinations" - misconceptions which are the result of previous negative and sanctioning evaluation experiences [2].

The support to evaluation methodologies focused on the learning process can foster a self-reflection process regarding the own actions. This attitude is a starting point in a self-learning process [26]. In other words, a self-reflection process, which is based on what I am and what I can do in a specific context, is an experience which can be perceived as integral and enriching, Fresán [16] - including for postgraduate students' program.

From this self-evaluation, the category of transformative intercultural practice was identified as the result of social connotation experiences matching those proposed by Carassale and Martínez [27]. Experiences as social events imply being there, and really involved with the events of the academic learning and life itself. Thus, international mobility can be translated into a space of comprehensive and integrating academic experiences that strengthen the interactions among peers and other individuals. And these opportunities also offer possibilities of less formal learning, for example, when walking along the street, observing the type of clothing used, discovering what to eat and how to eat it, etcetera.

In the field of training for research, a fundamental aspect of mobility is that it allows participants to improve and strengthen their thinking and actions on issues such as planning and executing interventions, as well as on alternative forms to approaching the phenomena of health - including the nurses' roles in diverse economic, cultural and political contexts. Moreover, these abroad trainings can also promote or strengthen partnerships to establish international networks.

There is an overall agreement among students regarding the cultural and academic enrichment because of their continuing studying and working close to the area of nursing education. Students can also contribute by developing new ideas which can be applied in areas such as occupational health, decision-making, leadership, and clinical judgment. The experience of mobility enhanced the students' character, personality, autonomy, self-confidence, tolerance, and their understanding of social healthcare.

Regarding the master's degree in nursing this involves two fundamental actions: the attendance to international academic events and the construction of research spaces. Graduates students become better professionals when they are early involved in research groups and networks in parallel to their interests. By combining the education profile with teaching and research trainings, we can project groups of graduates who can enter the national system of researchers and publish their findings in journals and meetings, and who will keep their desires towards a life of continuous learning, thus contributing to enhancing the accreditation of the national educational institutions and their corresponding global impact.

Self-assessment using qualitative methodologies, such as the interview and narrative, helped us identify strengths and weaknesses of the international mobility initiative of the Master's in Nursing program. The students' related reflections can be oriented towards improving the educational program because the experience allowed them to positively compare their personal and professional knowledge with those of peers from different cultures and languages. Another success was the promotion of integral self-evaluation among students and academicians - an important component to strengthening social responsibility, democratic life, and social justice within the University.

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**Volume 2 Issue 9 September 2020**

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