

Introduction

An external evaluation team (hereafter known as the team) comprising experts in nursing from academic institutions in four countries plus a representative of the Lithuanian Ministry of Health was convened to assess five nursing programmes in three Lithuanian universities: Klaipeda, Kaunas and Vilnius. Each institution presented a Bachelor's programme which focused not only on the Bachelor's degree but also on the professional qualification of nurse. Additionally two Master's programmes were submitted for review: one at each of Klaipeda and Vilnius Universities.

Nursing is a relatively new academic discipline in Lithuania with the longest established programme being the Bachelor of Arts offered at Kaunas Medical University. Many changes to nursing in the WHO European Region have come about as a result of the World Health Organisation's 2000 conference in Munich resulting in the Declaration of Munich (WHO, 2000) at which the Ministers of Health in all 52 Member States committed themselves to improved initial and continuing education, for all nurses in the region. A follow up regional report for WHO (Europe) tracked the progress of Member States towards that goal (Fleming and Holmes, 2005) but unfortunately Lithuania had not responded on any occasion so the country's commitment to the implementation of the Declaration of Munich cannot be assessed.

Notwithstanding the position of the World Health Organisation, Lithuania became a Member State of the European Union in 2004. Prior to this a team of nurses from within the EU assessed nursing education and made some recommendations for change to comply with EU Directives on nursing which specifically focus on number of hours of theory and practice and subjects to be taught.

The team in their scrutiny of documentation and their site visits took both the Munich Declaration and the latest EU Directive (2005/36/EC) into consideration when making its assessment with particular attention being paid to the latter as it is this Directive which determines the mobility of the workforce.

It was clear that there are two tiers of qualified nurses in Lithuania. The majority of nurses are educated at Colleges of Higher Education preparing them for general nursing duties, most of which take place in secondary and tertiary settings. The team did not have any assessments to carry out on these programmes. Conversely the university programmes which are also preparing basic practitioners, seem to have more focus on educating nurses who work in more senior positions. The Master's programmes build on the Bachelor's programmes rather than the College Degrees. This is not in keeping with the spirit of the Declaration of Munich which suggests that only one level of practitioner is appropriate.

The university programmes provide in depth education in a field related to medicine and the academic level of each is appropriate to Bachelor's level and delivered in accordance with relevant Lithuanian laws. However none of the three institutions fulfilled the 2300 hours required by EU Directive 2005/36/EC and the team found a worrying lack of commitment to clinical practice. Both students and staff appeared to be unable to articulate essential qualities of a newly qualified nurse.

The profession thus in the collective opinion of the team needs some redefining. However to have programmes at university level is encouraging and progress is being made by each of the institutions towards a strong professional identity. This is particularly noticeable with the increase in Master's students and in turn graduates. These graduates should be encouraged to make radical changes to the profession.