Developing Radiotherapy services in Iraq

ROSBOTTOM, Keeley, SMITH, Sarah and COLLINS, Mark

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Authors: Keeley Rosbottom, Mark Collins & Sarah Smith Enquiries: s.smith@shu.ac.uk/k.rosbottom@shu.ac.uk
Contributors: Michael Du Rose, Denyse Hodgson, Stephen Hughes & Mayce Masood

Introduction

A 5 year partnership between Sheffield Hallam University and the Iraq Ministry of Health was established to provide education and development for healthcare professionals; including Radiation Therapy Physicists and Technicians (Radiographers).

Supported by the UK Government, the Iraqi Ministry of Health requested the planning and delivery of courses to develop their existing staff and train new practitioners to expand their Radiotherapy service following significant investment in equipment and infrastructure.

Reported here are the initial stages of the project: The first cohort of 6 students arrived in August 2012 followed by a 2nd in February 2013. All worked in some aspect of healthcare with a first degree (or higher) in Physics. A minimum of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) level 4 in English language ability was required. Many were currently working as Radiotherapy Physicists but students had mixed levels of clinical experience.

The overall programme of study was divided into 2 parts. The 1st was designed to enable students to develop their English language skills to a minimum of IELTS level 5; whilst also studying fundamental aspects of Radiotherapy, in preparation for a subsequent CPD Radiation Therapy Physics course (Part 2).

Course aims:

- Facilitate the improvement of cancer care in Iraq and help improve radiation safety by increasing the use of evidence based practice
- Give students opportunities to use, develop and share their subject/profession specific knowledge and skills
- Develop language for presentation and group discussion
- Develop awareness of the classroom culture in UK Higher Education Institutions

Design & Planning

Course design and content was developed in consultation with current UK practitioners and service leads in Radiotherapy and the Ministry of Health in Iraq. Student support needs were anticipated with help from within the University's existing student support structures and with local Iraqi medical colleagues who advised on culture, language, study skills and expectations of future service goals in Iraq.

Academic staff underwent cultural awareness training (Methal 2012, Smith & Khawaja 2011), and an Arabic speaking classroom assistant was employed to ensure maximum understanding and facilitate engagement in taught sessions.

Part 1 of the course provided English Language tuition (14 hours per week) for 15 weeks, alongside profession specific sessions covering the fundamental principles of Radiation Physics and Radiotherapy Planning (5 hours per week). The emphasis was on practical hands-on work using specialist facilities within the University, simulation of practice and observational placement visits to a UK Radiotherapy department.

Evaluation

All students achieved the required improvement in IELTS scores, with some achieving a sufficient level for future study at Masters Level.
Qualitative semi structured interviews were conducted with students from both cohorts (Krogana & Sheab, 2007) at the end of part 1 to:

- Investigate student expectations before beginning the course
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the course in meeting student needs, improving their knowledge and skills, and the perceived impact on their professional and personal development
- Explore the potential impact of students' experiences on their future work and study
- Inform planning of part 2 of the course

"Now I can discuss with doctors in English the treatment planning and anatomy to see that when we are planning we know the organs and that will make the planning more accurate"

“I hope to do mini lectures to my colleagues about this and transfer everything I have learnt here, to Iraq”

"What is very interesting for me is the 3D (VERT) for anatomy and seeing how to use the radiation to treat tumours"

Discussion and Conclusions

Staff and student experiences were overwhelmingly positive and will inform the development of current and future programmes.

Key themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews include:

- Student confidence academically and linguistically increased significantly throughout the course
- The more inclusive (non didactic) teaching style in the UK is very different to the students previous educational experiences and was seen as very positive
- Some students talked about the impact the teaching experience had made on them in terms of intending to practice similar skills when training new staff and colleagues in Iraq
- Students were very interested in exploring more opportunities to engage with UK students, clinical departments and have more social contact with the English community
- The course built on the students' motivation to learn
- A lack of pre-course preparation was highlighted by the students as being an area for development

References

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