



An internship program that empowers international students to grow professionally and find their voice in the nutrition field

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, our international students were confined to their rooms in a foreign land and were unable to return to their home countries during their semester break due to border closures. A summer internship program, underpinned by Asian philosophies including Confucianism⁽¹⁾ and collectivism⁽²⁾, was designed to bring them together physically in a COVID-safe environment and collectively develop employability skills. Twenty-five international students across six year-levels and from 11 countries participated in the five-week internship program. Our in-house dietitian presented participants with an authentic nutrition problem, i.e. observable unhealthy eating habits being prevalent amongst the international student client group. Participants were empowered to draw on their cultural knowledge, international student experience, cooking skills and evidence-based nutrition knowledge, in the development of an educational nutrition resource to be used in the dietitian clinic. Employability skills self-assessment was completed pre- and post-program for comparison. In addition, a collective reflection was facilitated at the end of the program to gather in-depth understanding of the unique learnings from the students' and program facilitators' perspectives. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the narrative data. It was found that the student-participants developed a website with healthy eating information, including tailored to international students' habits of late-night snacking and suggestions for quick meals during exams. They developed 50 healthy, simple, multicultural recipes with cooking videos. The internship served as an opportunity for the students to work together with a shared purpose. They reported a strong sense of community which was longed for and extended the established friends outside of the internship program. Students were observed sharing acculturative experience and knowledge with one another when socialising together. Upon reflection, students reported feeling challenged by the lack of structure and assessment guide for the internship tasks. However, they were able to develop confidence in their judgement and decision-making skills through this process and work together exploring the uncertainties. Many reported feeling empowered from this internship as their cultural differences and unique international-student-experience were valued and utilised in the resource development. This low-cost education strategy contributed to the development of professional skills and formation of professional identity, and for the students to find their voice in the nutrition field.

Keywords: international students; internship; professional identity; cultural tailoring

Ethics Declaration

Yes

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References

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2. Triandis HC (2001) *Journal of Personality* 69(6), 907–24.