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International Student Exchange in Australian Social Work Education

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ABSTRACT

International student exchange is pursued by Australian schools of social work as a strategy to engage with the internationalisation agenda set by government, universities, and the profession. However, little concrete information about the nature and scope of these activities exists. The study reported here aimed to address this gap. Twenty-seven of the 30 Australian universities that offer social work programs participated in an online survey about international student exchange activities. The results indicate that a majority of schools (n = 23) do engage in such activities, with international field placements the most frequent form of exchange. Exchanges are most likely to be facilitated and managed by social work staff. The findings, and their implications for the development of good practice in international student exchange, are discussed. This research provides a “point-in-time” snapshot of international exchange in Australian social work education and a benchmark for future analyses of this expanding practice in the profession.

KEYWORDS Social Work Education; Internationalisation; International Student Exchange; Outward Mobility; Study Abroad

A genuine two-way flow of student exchange between Australia and the Indo-Pacific is the cornerstone of the Australian Commonwealth Government's "New Colombo Plan", launched in 2013 and aimed at ensuring Australian higher education students are work-ready and connected to the region on graduation. This policy enhances the already integral place of internationalisation in Australian universities, where "strategic international engagement through collaborations, research... and student exchange is crucial for a healthy and productive university sector" (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 20). Schools of social work in Australia are influenced by this agenda and efforts to develop an internationalised social work curriculum have contributed to the development of social work student international exchanges and international field placements (Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Crisp, 2015; Trede, Bowles, & Bridges, 2015). However, there is no clear information about the number of international social work exchanges, the nature of exchanges that operate, or the goals and requirements of the exchanges. This article addresses this gap by reporting on the findings of a major research project, "*Going Places*" –*International Social Work Student Exchange: Facilitating Good Practice in Australia and Asia Pacific*. Funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching, the "Going Places" project is being undertaken by social work educators and researchers from James Cook University (Townsville and Cairns, Australia), in partnership with colleagues from the Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane, Australia) and international partners Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University (Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand) and the De Paul Institute of Science and Technology (Kerala, India). The project commenced in 2015 and will conclude in 2017.

This project conducted the first national survey about international student exchange in Australian social work and, as such, provides an overview of current practice and a benchmark for future research and analyses in this area. Data reported in this article were collected as part of the larger research project, "Going Places", in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed to provide a comprehensive picture of how international social work student exchange was practiced in Australia. For the purposes of this project such exchanges are understood to include short international study experiences, semester-long study abroad experiences, and field education placements completed by Australian students travelling to the Indo-Pacific.

Potts (2016) reported that 30,000 Australian higher education students travelled internationally as part of their university experience between 2014 and 2015. While this number represents only 11% of the higher education cohort in that period, it does highlight a dramatic and consistent increase in the number of Australian students taking up learning abroad experiences in the last five years (Potts, 2016). Given this general trend it is unsurprising that social work education also includes a range of internationalisation endeavours, “driven by student diversity as well as by employer demand, the profession internationally, and by universities” (Grace et al., 2013, p. 121). These endeavours include the development and delivery of short-term international exchanges and international field education placements.

However, a review of literature in this area highlights that most reported research uses qualitative ethnographic methodologies to identify learning outcomes for students as a result of their international experiences (Campbell & Walta, 2015; Curtin, Martins, Schwartz-Barcott, DiMaria, & Ogando, 2013; Potts, 2016). The enhancement of students’ abilities to work across cultures and to work with those who hold different cultural assumptions is a prominent theme in such studies (Gothard, Downey, & Gray, 2012; Sim & Mackenzie, 2016; Long, 2016). Further, Malicki and Potts (2013) concluded that students who include an international exchange experience in their university study do better academically on their return, progress quicker in their professional careers and acquire international skills, knowledge, and personal awareness. A recent experimental study examined the development of intercultural competencies between a group of student teachers who travelled on a short-term international exchange compared with a control group who did not travel and found no significant difference in competency development between the groups (Leutwyler & Meierhans, 2016). Other research has also highlighted that regardless of whether an experience is local or international, the key for students is an experience of unfamiliar environments, away from their usual supports and outside of their “comfort zone” (Lilley, Barker, & Harris, 2014). The authors reported that these findings contradict the majority of existing literature and discuss the overreliance on subjective qualitative analyses as a possible reason for this divergence (Leutwyler & Meierhans, 2016).

Thirty Australian universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate social work programs (<http://www.achssw.org.au/contacts.htm>) and according to Bell and Anscombe (2012), anecdotal evidence suggested that many of them engage in international student placements or exchanges. Literature that explores the outcomes of particular international exchange activities for individual or small groups of social work students is prominent (e.g., Bell, Morehead, & Boetto, 2015; Gillen & Young, 2009; Pawar, Hanna, & Sheridan, 2004). This research provides a number of compelling reasons to undertake international social work student exchange, such as the enhanced student learning in the intercultural dimensions of social work practice (Bell & Anscombe, 2012), the development of a global understanding of social issues, for instance, gender inequality and environmental degradation (Bell, Morehead, & Boetto, 2015; Boetto, Morehead, & Bell, 2014), the development of a sense of global citizenship (Trede et al., 2015), and the opportunity to experience different worldviews, to learn different systems of social welfare, and to witness diverse ways to remediate social problems (Shwartz et al., 2011). However, immersion in an international experience alone may not facilitate these types of transformative learning outcomes for students and participation should be matched with curriculum that encourages students to engage in critical thinking about their experiences (Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012).

Many aspects of international student exchange in Australian social work programs are not explored in depth in the literature, and the cautions of Leutwyler and Meierhans (2016) about the focus on subjective, qualitative research discussed earlier are well noted. The current discussion of social work student international exchange does not, for example, delineate the extent of international exchanges, and nor does it explore in any detail the processes involved in these exchanges. Gothard et al. (2012) posited that student learning needs to be developed through processes of critical reflection while overseas, and that the curriculum they return to should provide structured support to cement their newly acquired knowledge. The nature and extent of this type of structured support has not been fully explored to date. Drawing on Jones' (2012) analysis of curriculum transformation, the extent to which exchange is used as a "bolt-on" solution to intercultural learning or as a more embedded approach to transformative learning throughout the curriculum is unclear. There is then, a lack of information documenting the approaches employed in international social work

student exchanges in Australia and the extent to which these approaches are embedded in the curriculum, and little in the way of critical analysis of these initiatives. This paper reports on the results of an online survey conducted as part of the larger project, and focuses attention on the nature and structure of international student exchange in Australian schools of social work in 2015.

Method

Participants

The researchers used a total population sample with a sampling frame developed from the membership list of the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW). In 2015, 30 universities offered accredited social work courses and each was invited to participate in an online survey distributed via the ACHSSW email list. While the email was initially sent to the head of the program, the explanatory email encouraged distribution to the member of staff with the most knowledge about the international student exchange activity within the program.

Measures

Data were gathered using a single, purpose-designed, online questionnaire containing a diverse range of items. The survey questionnaire was divided into four parts. All respondents were asked to complete Part A, which sought institutional details and confirmation that the school participated in international exchange activities. If respondents answered in the affirmative they proceeded to complete Parts B & C of the survey. If the school was not involved in international student exchange they were directed to Part D, which explored reasons why the respondent school did not engage in any international student exchange activity. Definitions of key terms (e.g., “short-term international exchange” and “reciprocity”) were provided. Questions in Parts B and C collected data on the demographics of the social work program, the type or types of international exchange activity, the processes and methods of organising and accessing international exchange activities, the nature and type or types of student support, perceptions of student learning, and the location of, and relationship, with partner institutions.

Procedures and Data Analysis

Ethics approval for the survey was obtained from James Cook University Human Ethics sub-committee. Participation in the study was voluntary, all questions were optional, and identifying details of the individuals completing the questionnaire were not gathered. Information regarding these ethical issues was included in an email sent to respondents containing a link to the survey. Consent was confirmed when participants proceeded beyond the first page to commence the survey. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. It was hosted online and went live at the beginning of July, 2015 and remained live until the end of August, 2015. An online format was chosen to collect categorical data about international student exchange practice because it was cost effective, allowed for faster response rates, provided unrestricted geographical coverage, and left fewer unanswered questions (Egan, 2012).

Data were imported into SPSS version 22 (SPSS Ltd, Chicago IL). SPSS was used as the primary data tool and provided an opportunity to explore descriptive statistics generated about the nature of the respondents' international student exchange programs.

Results

Ninety per cent (27/30) of Australian schools of social work completed the International Social Work Student Exchange Survey. Respondent schools of social work were located across Australia, in all states and territories. Sixty-seven per cent (18) of respondent schools were located in metropolitan areas, with 33% (9) in regional Australia. Therefore, the results are indicative of the spread of social work schools in Australia.

Nine (36%) schools offered both undergraduate Bachelor of Social Work courses (BSW) and postgraduate Masters of Social Work (Qualifying) (MSW(Q)) programs with the remaining 18 (67%) schools indicating they offered only one accredited program—either MSW(Q) or BSW. Ten (37%) respondent schools offered their social work program externally as well as on campus, with one school offering an external online program only. For BSW programs, intake cohort size was most likely to be greater than 50 commencing students (41%) and in MSW(Q) programs the intake cohort was most commonly fewer than 50 students (48%).

The Scope of International Exchange Activity

Eighty-five per cent (23) of the respondent social work schools indicated that they engaged in some sort of international exchange activity. Of the four schools that indicated they did not offer any international exchange activity, three were located in regional areas of Australia.

Respondents were asked to distinguish their international exchange offerings according to the following definitions:

Field placement: international study experiences that occur within the field education components of the social work degree.

Short term programs: short international study experiences that occur outside the field education components of the social work degree.

Study abroad programs: student exchange (outbound mobility) programs where students study abroad, for example, for one semester or for one year.

Respondents reported that international field placement was the most frequently offered exchange experience, offered by all regional programs and most metropolitan programs (see Table 1). Regional universities were also highly likely to be involved in short-term programs (67%) while metropolitan programs were more likely to offer students the opportunity to participate in study abroad programs (67%).

(INSERT) Table 1: International student exchange offerings

For those respondent schools offering a short-term exchange program most provide their program as a social work elective (44%) rather than a core social work subject. Two respondents indicated that their international exchange activity was not embedded in any subject offering; others indicated the experience was located within a university-wide international skills subject and an intensive mode subject taken while students were overseas.

International exchange experiences were equally likely to be incorporated into BSW and MSW(Q) courses. Where respondent schools indicated that they had been

offering international exchange activities for more than 10 years, the activity was most likely to be either an international field education experience (8) or a semester-long study abroad program (6). Eighty-eight per cent (7) of short-term programs had been offered for less than 10 years (see Table 2).

(INSERT) Table 2: Type of international exchange program and no. of years offered

The majority of respondents (55%) reported annual cohort intakes of greater than 100 students, including internal and external students. The number of students participating in international exchange was often less than 10 per year, with the majority of these students taking up field placements (63%), followed by a study abroad program (41%) and short-term programs (14%). A minority of schools (2) offered programs to more than 10 students.

Coordinating and Managing International Exchange Activities

Respondents were asked to indicate who organised the international exchange activities offered in their program and while diverse groups of university staff were involved in a number of programs, international exchange activities were most likely to be organised by social work staff, particularly field education staff (76%), followed by university mobility officers (52%) and social work academic (non-field education) staff (48%).

Further confirming the level of responsibility held by social work academics are the responses that identified how partner institutions were initially discovered and located (see Table 3). Most hosts were recruited through social work staff contacts (71%) or through a relationship developed as part of the social work school networks (59%).

(INSERT) Table 3: Locating exchange hosts/partners

Student Support

Financial

Eleven (40%) of the respondent schools reported that their students self-funded their exchange activities. Others reported sources of financial assistance were OS Help

(19%), university mobility grants (30%) and other Australian government grants (26%).

Practical and learning support

All respondents who completed this section of the survey ($N = 19$) reported that they provided some level of practical or learning support for students undertaking international exchange. Many respondents engage in multiple support strategies including travel advice (95%), contact with staff (95%) or the host staff (84%) prior to or during an exchange experience, the opportunity to learn from previous students (79%) and cultural awareness training (79%).

Supports were most likely to be provided prior to exchange. Language training was the support least likely to be provided, with only 2 (11%) respondents indicating that they provided pre-exchange language support and only 3 (16%) providing language support during the exchange activity.

Respondent schools indicated that during exchange contact with host (74%) and Australian staff (79%) were the more frequently provided support activities, with in-country orientation (63%) and structured reflection (53%) also provided during the exchange. The most frequently provided post-exchange supports were contact with Australian staff (63%) and structured reflections (63%).

Student Learning

All respondents completing this section of the survey ($n = 21$) indicated that the international exchange experiences improved students' confidence in intercultural environments and their intercultural skills. Respondents also reported that enhanced learning was evident in students' understanding of alternative social work delivery models (76%), the impact of colonisation (57%), global social work issues (86%), and frameworks for international social work practice (86%).

In addition to highlighting the learning gained by students, 19 respondents indicated that overall their international exchange program was beneficial to students. Table 4 highlights that the majority (84%) of respondents suggested that undertaking an

international student exchange improved the quality of their graduates and that of the social work program overall.

(INSERT) Table 4: Benefits of international exchange program

Partner Institutions

Sixteen respondents provided details about the institutions with which they partnered to provide the international exchange experience. The majority of partnerships were with institutions in the Asia-Pacific region (33), with 17 institutions located outside this region in Europe (8), North America (7) and Africa (2). The most frequently accessed host institutions were in India (13), with the Philippines (4), Cambodia (3) and Thailand (3) also identified as important destinations for students on exchange. Most commonly respondent schools developed exchanges with higher education institutions in the host country, either public (27) or private (6), or with non-government organisations (13). Usually respondents indicated that Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) were in place with the host organisation, though three host organisations had no MoU.

Fifteen respondents, or 65% of the programs that engaged in international student exchange, indicated that some type of reciprocal arrangement was in place with partnering institutions. The survey defined reciprocal arrangements as arrangements between an Australian university and their international partner that encouraged benefits to flow in a reciprocal manner to both institutions. Respondent schools identified a range of reciprocal and collaborative activities with their partner institutions, with 47% indicating that they hosted students on placement and welcomed visiting staff. Other reciprocal undertakings included collaborative teaching and research endeavours and hosting joint conferences and seminars.

Why Exchange is not Offered

Only four institutions indicated that they do not offer international exchange activity at all, though two institutions flagged their intention to offer international exchange in the future. When asked to give reasons for this decision, respondents offered multiple explanations including insufficient staff resources (75%), lack of funding to support

students (50%), inability to engage in meaningful reciprocal relationships (50%) and a lack of support from the university (25%).

Discussion

The results of the research project described above indicate a high level of interest in international student exchange by schools of social work in Australia. The Australian government priority agenda of pursuing closer relationships with the Indo-Pacific region potentially reflects the number of social work programs engaged in international student exchange activities and with the areas to which students travel. However, closer examination of the data suggests international exchange activity in Australian schools of social work is limited to small numbers of students, and reliant on the contacts and support work of social work academic staff. Many partnerships exist between the Australian schools of social work and institutions and organisations of the Global South, a situation which suggests the critiques of international student exchange (Boetto, Morehead, & Bell, 2014) that challenge the profession to consider issues of imperialism and reciprocity, are worthy of further consideration.

Twenty-three respondents (85%) indicated they engage in some kind of international student exchange activity, with a further two respondents indicating their intention to develop such activity. Respondent schools indicated that they considered international exchange to be of significant benefit to their students individually and enriching to the social work program, reflecting other research findings that learning aboard contributes to staff and students' "motivation and passion" for their career direction (Potts, 2015). Over 60% of students who do engage in international exchange rely on some form of government funding highlighting the importance of initiatives such as the New Colombo Plan and OS-HELP in providing students with access to international exchange opportunities.

However, most of the activity in social work programs relates to field education placements for small numbers of students, which raises questions about the extent to which international exchange is embedded within the curriculum. While there is some guidance from the AASW about when an international field placement can occur in

the students' course, little else exists to guide and support the development of high quality international field education placements. A number of authors outline comprehensively designed support processes that can occur prior to, during and after international exchange experiences, and the importance of this structure to facilitate students' critical reflection on and learning from their experiences (e.g., Bohman & Borglin, 2014; Cleak & Fox, 2011; Dorsett, Clark, & Phadke, 2015; Lough, 2013; Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012; Wehbi, 2009).

Short-term international student exchange programs seem to be increasing in popularity with regional universities especially keen to pursue these options. While programs have consistently demonstrated their provision of logistical supports for students in international exchange, and have indicated that students learn a range of skills and knowledge from the experience, how this happens consistently and whether it forms part of a comprehensively designed curriculum is unclear and requires more attention.

As Lough (2013) suggested, reciprocity is a core feature of effective international exchange activity, however, further interrogation of the data indicates it is likely that, for some programs, reciprocity may be reliant upon the individual efforts of staff rather than broader institutional commitments. As most of the hosting institutions identified in the survey were located in India and areas of south-east Asia, the discussions in some social work literature that many international exchange programs are unidirectional initiatives from the Global North is relevant here (Gilin & Young, 2009; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2011). Razack (2002) in particular, challenged the language of "exchange" in unilateral programs and claimed such practices can reinforce colonial assumptions that only one side has something worth sharing, while Gray (2005, p. 235) suggested that these processes smack of "professional imperialism". Barraket et al. (2009) argued that partnerships with hosts need to be built and maintained in ways that ensure that the benefits are mutual and even suggest that hosts should be consulted in curriculum design and assessment activities. A number of authors argue that these aspects are all lacking in the processes of international social work student exchange (Alphonse, 2008; Gilin & Young, 2009; Razack, 2002).

Finally, the data clearly highlights that international student exchange activity relies on the commitment, the international contacts, and the work of social work academics. The efforts required by individual staff are considered to be one of the significant issues that has prevented the minority of respondent schools from including international student exchange in the social work course. So while international student exchange is promoted as crucial and strategic for a “healthy and productive university sector” (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 1), data from this research points to the reliance on personal relationships, connections and networks of social work staff and departments in developing international student exchange. These issues require further research because while government funding programs targeted at supporting students to undertake international exchanges have significantly increased the expectations of students, the lack of funding and support filtering into individual schools of social work suggest the development of comprehensively designed, well integrated international exchange programs is unsustainable. Furthermore, most international activity has occurred over a long period of time, with the majority of respondents reporting activity for more than five years, and many for more than ten years. The traditional international activity for most respondent schools is an international field placement. In some cases, this has occurred through formalised arrangements, such as an MoU and initiated in response to offers from international agencies. In other cases, it has been more ad hoc, initiated through staff contacts or student requests (Cleak & Fox, 2011). It is unclear to what extent current activity is shaped by Government policy, long-standing personal relationships, or a commitment to international social work. Ongoing research that examines the motivations for, and barriers to, the development of international student exchange in social work is needed to further understanding about the nature of this activity.

Conclusion

This paper has reported the results of an online survey that sought information and data about the nature and extent of international student exchange within Australian social work courses. The data provides important benchmark information for future research and analyses of this increasingly important aspect of social work education. A number of issues, such as reciprocity, sustainability, and the comprehensive integration of international student exchange activity into the social work curriculum, require further investigation.

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Table 1 International Student Exchange Offerings

	Metro	Regional	Overall
Field placement			
Offered	14 (82%)	6 (100%)	20 (87%)
Not offered	-	-	-
Not reported	3 (18%)	-	3 (13%)
Short-term program			
Offered	5 (29%)	4 (67%)	9 (39%)
Not offered	8 (47%)	2 (33%)	10 (43%)
Not reported	4 (24%)	-	4 (17%)
Study abroad program			
Offered	11 (65%)	2 (33%)	13 (57%)
Not offered	1 (6%)	4 (67%)	5 (22%)
Not reported	5 (29%)	-	5 (22%)

Note. Universities that do not offer exchange programs were excluded from the analysis;

$N_{\text{metro}} = 17$, $N_{\text{reg}} = 6$, $N_{\text{total}} = 23$

Table 2 Type of International Exchange Program and Number of Years Offered

	Type of Program		
	Field placement	Short-term program	Study abroad program
<5 Years	5	3	5
5–10 Years	7	4	2
>10 Years	8	1	6
Total	20 (95%)	8 (38%)	13 (62%)

Note. Universities that did not report the number of years exchange program offered were excluded from the analysis. $N = 21$

Table 3 Locating Exchange Hosts/Partners

	Responses
Social work staff networks and collaborations	12 (71%)
Established social work department/school relationship	10 (59%)
Established university relationship	6 (35%)
Established interdisciplinary relationship	5 (29%)
Other	2 (12%)

Note. $N = 17$

Table 4 Benefits of International Exchange Program

	Responses
Improves the quality of social work graduates	16 (84%)
Improves the quality of social work program	16 (84%)
Improves students employability	13 (68%)
Enriches the knowledge of your social work academic staff	13 (68%)
Other benefits	4 (21%)

Note. $N = 19$