

# LOCAL GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A framework and case studies for  
curriculum development



## 5 INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK STUDENT EXCHANGE

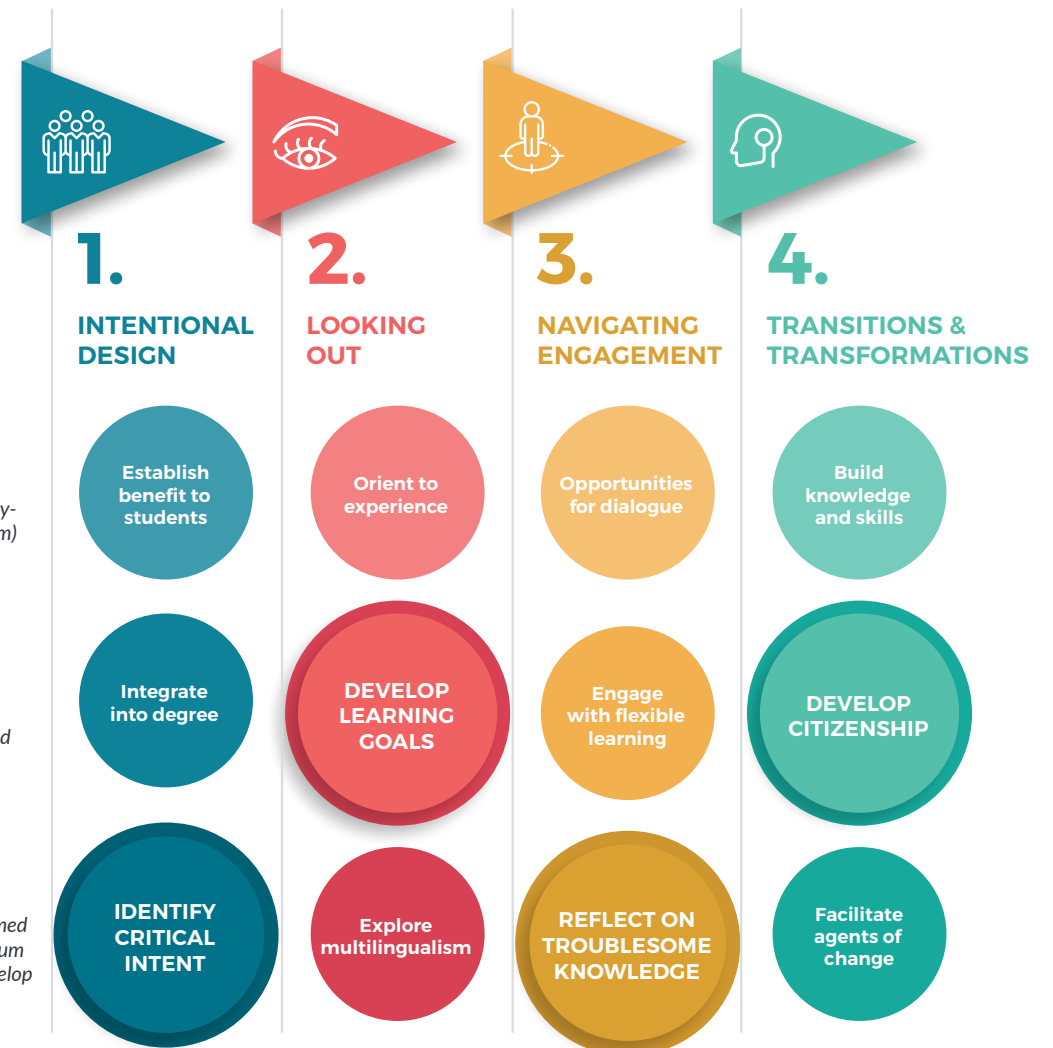
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### INTRODUCTION

This case study explores the nature and impact of an international student mobility initiative within Social Work and Human Services at James Cook University (JCU), in Northern Australia. This initiative sits within a discipline-wide program of internationalisation that aims to increase students' understanding of the complex global context in which they will practice as social workers and to facilitate, motivate and empower them to contribute to the goals of global social justice, potentially as **agents of social change**. This mobility project is just one of a number of internationalisation activities undertaken by the discipline, including the development of international reciprocal partnerships, collaborative international conferences, **international staff exchanges**, and research and publication collaborations with international partners. In 2014, international student exchange experiences were incorporated into one elective unit in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree: *WS2008: International Exchange*, thus **integrating the mobility project into the curriculum**.

Central to the subject is a three-week group mobility experience in either Thailand or India where students participate in a range of activities including interactions with students and staff at the host institutions, homestay experiences with local families and communities, visits to community development and social welfare organisations, and a range of other cultural activities. The **critical intent** of the subject is established through the learning objectives which focus student attention on a critical appreciation of self, culture and cultural difference. This focus is developed through explicit critical preparation before, during, and after the students travel, and through the facilitation of purposeful **opportunities for dialogue** between the students, between the students and the staff, and between the visiting students and their hosts. This dialogue is intended to highlight any **troublesome knowledge** with which the students engage and help them to grapple with this. This case study examines the experiences of staff and students who were involved in the preparation and delivery of this subject in 2015.



#### STARTING OUT

(initiating a community-based learning program)

#### MOVING FORWARD

(for more experienced practitioners supported by institutional resources)

#### BEST PRACTICE

(for well-resourced programs that are framed within critical curriculum and pedagogy to develop agentic graduates)

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### CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY

Social work is becoming increasingly international as new frameworks, perspectives, and understandings of global social work permeate and connect with local practice environments (Ife, 2007). Social work education is impacted by these developments and the internationalisation of the curriculum is increasingly an expected feature of social work education programs. The pressure to internationalise goes beyond professional and university imperatives with many social work employers seeking graduates who can demonstrate “an understanding of diverse cultures and the ability to work cross-culturally” (Grace et al., 2013, p. 122).

The Social Work and Human Services academic group at James Cook University has a consistent and ongoing interest in international social work and the **development of students’ global citizenship**. Most recently, a cross-disciplinary collaboration between social work and archaeology; the addition to the staff group of an academic with strong ties to India; the crystallisation of the university’s strategic intent including an explicitly internationalised institutional vision; and the availability of support funds through the AsiaBound and New Colombo Plan (NCP) programs created the conditions for a renewed focus on internationalisation activities within social work at JCU. In this newly conducive context, Social Work staff built **reciprocal relationships** with partner institutions Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University (NRRU) in Thailand and the De Paul Institute of Science and Technology (DIST) in India to develop and facilitate regular, short-term, student exchange programs. Funding to support students engaged in the mobility

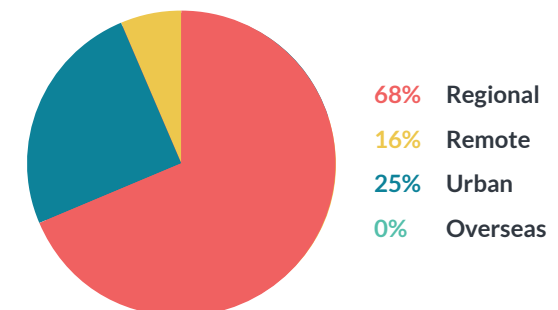
travel was successfully obtained through the Australian federal government’s ‘AsiaBound’ initiative, meaning that 20 funded places were available in 2015, ten each for travel to Thailand and India respectively. Students seeking to participate in the mobility project submitted applications that were evaluated by social work staff and successful applicants then enrolled in WS2008 as an **integrated degree elective** and began preparation for their travel.

This case study explores the experience of sixteen (16) students from a potential pool of twenty; six of the students travelled to Thailand in June/July 2015 and ten students travelled to India in November/ December 2015. The students were invited to complete an online survey after they returned from their international mobility experience. Ten students then participated in two separate focus groups where they were asked to reflect on their motivations for undertaking the international exchange subject and the learning support they received as part of the exchange experience. The respondents included students studying at each year level of the four-year BSW degree, in both internal (on-campus) and external (off-campus) modes, and were drawn from Cairns, Townsville and surrounding regional locations. Additionally, the views and perspectives of six staff members involved in WS2008 were sought through a focus group format, specifically examining their views about the purpose of intercultural learning experiences in the social work curriculum, the observed impact of the experience on **student learning goals**, and the challenges of integrating international exchange experiences into diverse aspects of the curriculum.

The demographic characteristics of the survey respondents generally reflect the demographic profile of social work students at JCU:

- The overwhelming majority are mature aged (94% aged over 21; 69% aged 30+)
- 54 per cent are the first in their family to attend university
- 6 per cent identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; 6 per cent identified as international
- 75 per cent lived in a regional or rural area prior to attending university
- 84 per cent balanced study with work commitments; 66 per cent had caring commitments

#### WHERE DID YOU LIVE PRIOR TO COMMENCING STUDIES



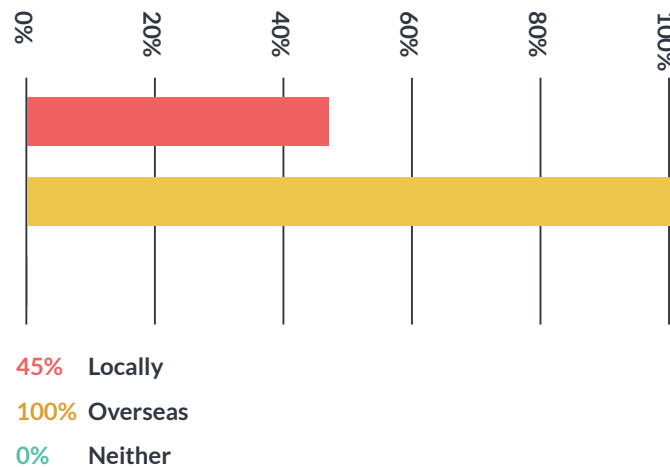
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For these students, demonstration of their **global citizenship** meant interacting with different cultures either through travel or by engaging with those from different cultures locally, and sharing ideas and learning from each other.

### AS PART OF YOUR STUDIES, HAVE YOU HAD AN INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE:

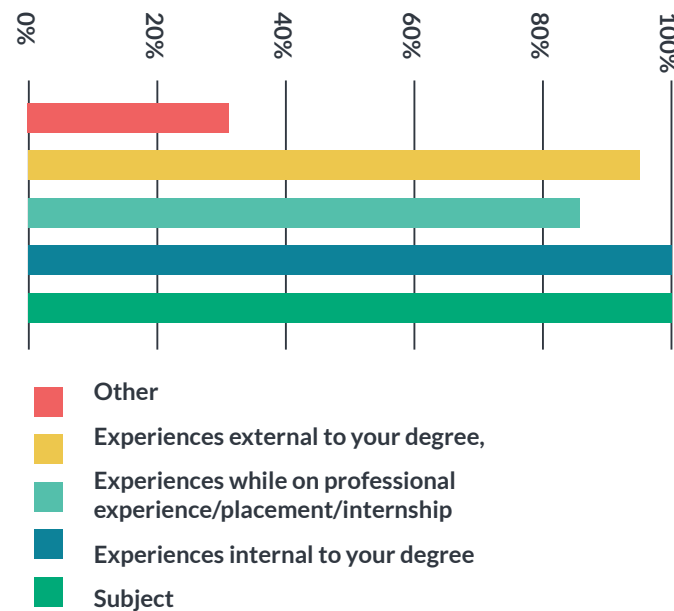


Most of the students who participated in the 2015 exchange considered themselves to be global citizens, citing their heightened global awareness and interest in global issues as evidence of this status and attributing this increased awareness to their exchange experience. However, nearly half the students were also able to draw on inter-cultural experiences within their local community.

*Being a global citizen, to me, means you are aware of the world on a global scale – the cultures, religions, events ... that are occurring, valuing diversity and a willingness to learn (Tiffany).*

The students reported that a range of experiences during their studies had made a difference to the way in which they engaged with different cultural experiences.

### HAVE ANY EXPERIENCES IN YOUR STUDIES OR PERSONAL LIFE INFLUENCED HOW YOU ENGAGE WITH DIFFERENT CULTURES?



The responses of some students demonstrated the impact of the **critical intent** with which this subject and the subsequent international experiences had been planned and developed.

*The overseas study experience to India has also had a massive impact on how I engage with different cultures. This journey has completely reconstructed the way in which I define 'culture' and has made me question many aspects of my own Australian social construction/ culture, especially in regards to white privilege, values and beliefs (Olive).*

These responses support the outcomes of previous studies which report that experiences with other cultures and places, such as those gained through international mobility programs like WS2008, "were perceived as being the most important element in developing students' global citizen identities and practice of cosmopolitan ideals" (Hendershot & Sperandio 2009, p 41).

Over half the students believed valuing diversity by demonstrating respect and support for difference was a core component of global citizenship while one third highlighted the interconnectedness of local actions with global impacts in their explanations of global citizenship. These findings support the literature that demonstrates that international study experiences not only increase students' understanding of different cultures but also result in an increased tolerance for difference, and a greater inclination toward interacting across difference (Engberg 2013, p. 477).

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### ENGAGING WITH THE CURRICULUM

The structure and content of WS2008: International Exchange has been developed with the recognition that JCU's demographic profile and geographical catchment mean that fewer students are likely to have had opportunities to travel internationally and be exposed to these opportunities for intercultural learning. The [subject description](#) signals the **intentional design** of the subject that aims to encourage students to begin **developing a sense of global citizenship** and a critical awareness of their place in a global context both as individuals and as future social work professionals. This **critical intent** is reflected in the perspectives of staff who share

*...a desire not to be sending groups of 'social work tourists' to Thailand and India, and not to be reproducing colonialist relationships and exposing our hosts to racist attitudes or attitudes of ignorance around other cultures ... we wanted to ensure that what we were doing addressed those issues in a very explicit manner rather than leaving them as kind of incidental learning that may or may not occur (Academic: Heidi).*

Exploring, with both staff and students, the processes developed to enact these intentions highlighted two factors that significantly contribute to the outcomes sought. The first of these is a focus on preparation activities that engage the students with self-examination. And the second key factor is embedding the exchange within a multi-faceted international partnership.

#### Critical preparation

Explicit in the objectives and organisation of the activities in the subject is the desire for students to grapple with, and develop an understanding of culture, cultural diversity and inter-cultural practice, that is, "recognising their own cultural context as an essential prerequisite for understanding and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds" (WS2008 Subject Outline). Critical reflection on the students' own context and experience is identified in the introduction to the subject as one of the pedagogical tools for achieving this goal. Staff comments reflect the expectation that students are exposed to settings and activities that are **'troublesome'** and encourage self-reflection.

*I really like the opportunities for students to be dislocated, because I think in the social work degree often they get to explore who they are as a person and reflect on it ... but I think when they actually enter [a] different environment, whether that's overseas or within Australia, what happens, is they really start to think about what [they've] taken for granted (Academic: Jacob).*

However, in examining the intentions and goals of the subject as expressed explicitly through the stated objectives and more implicitly through the focus and nature of the activities organised for students, it is acknowledged that how students take up these opportunities cannot be guaranteed: "That is, how students engage with what is provided ... and then seek to reconcile, reject or ignore the contributions from elsewhere will shape how they go about integrating their experiences" (Billet 2011, p. 11). Understanding the processes which foster

this integration will guide curriculum development and how it is implemented or enacted.

In this subject, a number of processes are implemented to create an environment that allows for an **integration of the intended curriculum with the student experience**. Firstly, there are explicit efforts to **facilitate opportunities for dialogue** and the critical reflection processes that students are asked to engage in. The students meet as a group a number of times prior to their departure, to participate in a range of language and cultural preparation sessions. Given that JCU students are often geographically dispersed, these meetings make use of videoconferencing, Skype and phone connections to bring students together. These preparation sessions are co-facilitated by JCU staff and presenters from the destination country. This development of the group and the focus on regular **opportunities for dialogue** is also fostered while in the host country where students share accommodation, undertake joint activities and work together to complete presentations for staff and students at the host institution.

Prior to their departure for their international exchange, students are also required to complete a set of assessable modules which cover five separate topics: culture; imperialism and cultural diversity; racism and privilege; critical reflection; and inter-cultural practice. Student interaction with these modules involves encounters with a range of conceptual and stimulus material designed to challenge, and even confront, students with **'troublesome knowledge'**. Through their participation in these reflective exercises, students explore and enhance their capacity to critically examine key aspects of their

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own culture, and cultural '[selves](#)'. Post-travel, students must complete an assessable reflection and statement of learning, looking back at their international experience and integrating the content of the modules with that experience. The focus here is on **flexible learning**, encouraging students to highlight the processes they use to make sense of their experience, rather than on finding the 'right answer'.

Once in the host country, and during the organised activities, the critical preparation and support is ongoing in a number of ways. JCU staff accompany student groups for most of the time they are in the host country, providing both a clear perception of at-hand support available and the capacity for staff to facilitate ongoing **critically reflective dialogue**. The impact of this focus is evident as the students in this case study identified a number of outcomes of the exchange that reflect the **critical intent** of the mobility project: intercultural learning, global citizenship, agency and personal growth.



### Intercultural learning

One of the features of the **intentionally designed critical preparation** activities and assessment was the facilitation of students' inter-cultural learning. Student comments indicate a high level of congruence between this intention and design, and the actual outcomes for students themselves.

In some cases, this learning was related to specific aspects or signifiers of culture:

*I learnt much about family dynamics, marriage, the role of gender, social norms, cultural practices, some basics of the language, privilege, the effects of globalisation, the social issues of India, and many, many other things (Elisha).*

For other students, the learning was more clearly related to the impact of the immersive experience itself and a recognition that this provided an opportunity to explore intercultural learning that was qualitatively different from a classroom experience, and even different from inter-cultural experiences in their home country:

*That culture can be quite different to reading in textbooks. Life experience by hands on is a better way of learning. Culture can be stereotyped and one needs to be careful to not stereotype and respect that people are individual as well as being brought up into their own culture (Tania).*

Interestingly, the inclusion of the issue of 'white privilege' as part of the WS2008 preparation materials seemed to sensitise students to this dynamic and a number commented that the recognition of this was a challenging aspect of their experience:

*I think a lot of us spoke about this ... being, firstly, a guest in India but also being a white guest in India and just having all of these privileges thrown at you (Libby).*

For many of the students, this critical approach to the international study experience met the desired goal of helping students to engage with the complexities of culture, and to examine their own place and role in global society:

*This experience challenged many of the cultural assumptions that I have made on a daily basis throughout my life. Being immersed within a population that holds greatly different worldviews than I do, enabled me to better appreciate diversity and highlighted how I, as a white, educated middle-class Australian, hold a position of privilege and this awareness will enable me to question and challenge this (Olive).*

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### Global citizenship / connection

The degree to which the students developed a **sense of global citizenship** and were able to articulate the connections that exist between themselves and their counterparts in other countries was less clear. Some students did discuss aspects of globalisation and the ways in which the experience had shaped their approach to global issues:

*...asking questions and not just taking a global issue and going oh, yeah, that's a global issue from what I understand it from where I stand. But maybe trying to understand that issue from that viewpoint and research, asking more questions, looking into it more, being more critical about trying to understand the place of different countries and the differences and similarities and that kind of thing (Libby).*

Others seemed to consider issues of global citizenship and connection in terms of the potential for reciprocity and two way learning. Some level of frustration was expressed regarding the limitations of the study experience and the ways in which visitors seemed to 'receive' more than they could 'give':

*I felt that there was little time to serve the community in a broader sense other than to contribute to the concept of what an intercultural exchange brings and could potentially bring. Whereas, the giving and sharing by our host university, students, and community [they] gave so generously (Ella).*

The experience led some students to reflect more clearly on their own culture, through identifying similarities and connections, or conversely, identifying what they perceived as shortcomings in Australian culture:

*I learned that what was said of some Australians visiting other countries was true. That truly respecting some cultural norms was lacking in awareness on some levels. I believe it is inexcusable as we have access to a copious amount of information (Ella).*

### Agency

The issue of agency, the ability to take action to **facilitate change**, was remarked upon by a number of students. For some, this was based on recognition of the agency and capacities of others, as observed during the study trip:

*I have learned that there are many people in the world who are willing to help others, who are willing to give what they can to improve other people's lives even when they have little themselves (Coralie).*

Models of practice, which can be thought of as frameworks for agency, were also identified as part of the learning acquired during the study experience. Students' awareness of these alternative ways of working resonated with them and led to thinking about how they might draw on these in the future:

*I also learned that there are many different ways to approach issues that differ greatly from Western approaches to social work/social issues. I was surprised to realise that after seeing alternative models of practice, that I align more closely to these ways of working than I do to many of the practices within Australia (Coralie).*

More often, students discussed their own agency as a potential, suggesting that they believed the international study experience was equipping them to **take action** at some time in the future:

*I believe that my experiences have given me the capacity to think more broadly about global differences and that I would be able to contribute in a social work capacity to be an agent for change (Sophie).*

It is possible that many of these outcomes and developments that reflect the intentions and learning objectives of the subject would have developed for students without the inclusion of specific materials that focused students' attention on culture, racism and privilege. However, Trede, Bowles and Bridges (2013, p. 442) support our own experience that "providing international experiences without a pedagogical framework that helps students to reflect on self and others can be a wasted opportunity and runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypical thinking and racist attitudes". Students are alert to this particular direction of their learning, often noting the struggle or challenge involved in such learning:

*But I just think that you're critically reflecting about things, then you have to look at the challenges of what have made you a more open person. So these challenges and conflicts make you a better person (Clara).*

The engagement of students in reflective **critical preparatory tasks** prior to even short-term immersion experiences like those discussed in this case study is an essential element of developing global consciousness through international exchange.

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### Established Reciprocal Partnerships

The international student exchange program in social work at James Cook University is embedded in strong relationships with partner institutions in Thailand (NRRU) and India (DIST). These partnerships have created opportunities to take a focused and thoughtful approach to international student mobility, and to design curricula around the mobility experiences not only before but also during the exchange activities. Both of these partnerships are underpinned by institutional MOUs and over time have developed into multi-faceted and complex collaborations, with the student mobility initiatives just one dimension of the partnerships.



The partner organisations have made clear commitments to establishing ongoing and sustainable relationships, with a view to the continual development and growth of collaborative activities. This security of relationship has allowed longer term thinking and planning about the mobility projects and other activities and has provided JCU students with mentorship and **opportunities for dialogue** and deep learning as is indicated in the student comment below:

*What has been most helpful to my learning has been the continuous contact with the students and teachers during the experience. A once off meeting only touches the surface of what there is to learn and it is quite overwhelming. Being able to continuously learn from these people has allowed us as students to continuously ask questions, to observe daily life and [given] more opportunities to hear the knowledge that people have to provide us (Tiffany).*

Staff involved in the mobility exchange highlight the importance of embedding the experiences in **reciprocal partnerships** as an opportunity to model relationships that can challenge assumptions and impact all aspects of social work practice.

*I think the notion of partnership has be core to everything we do within this and that the students also think of themselves as partners in the process with the people that they are going to work with rather than 'them and us' and ... all of that sort of thing ... we need to build that in so that [the] organisations work as partners, the participants work as partners, and then it goes even beyond reciprocity, [so] that actually you know we are doing it together (Academic: Nina).*

Importantly, the length and depth of relationships developed in this project has also created collaborative spaces where partners can honestly raise concerns and address issues in ways which simply would not be possible in shorter, more transactional situations. It must be noted, however, that such strong relationships do not arise spontaneously. They require a significant investment of time and energy, a commitment to learning from partners, and a well developed and continuously reviewed communication strategy.



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### EMERGING THEMES

Although the goals of the internationalisation activities within social work at JCU align very closely with the vision and strategic intent of the university and its various organisational levels, there has been very little direct institutional support for these activities. Fundamentally, this has meant that the design, planning, relationship building, facilitating, assessment and review of these activities have been dependent on the commitment and goodwill of staff above and beyond recognised workloads. While staff involved in the project no doubt reap some personal and professional benefit and individual satisfaction from their efforts, this situation creates significant vulnerabilities in terms of the sustainability of the initiatives.

*... the way that [the mobility project] is embedded in the institutional organisation and context is quite challenging so, despite the absolute alignment of that project with university and division and college goals across a number of different dimensions, we don't receive any support, organisational or financial support, to run that project. That has quite significant implications in terms of people's workloads and the ability to get things organised etc., so ... that in itself is an organisational challenge (Academic: Jacob).*

Another theme emerging from this research is the impact of curriculum design on the goals and intentions of the international exchange activity. The present mobility activities exist within the framework of a single elective unit within the BSW degree. While this is effective in meeting the organisational responsibilities for funded travel, it does pose an issue in terms of wider internationalisation of the curriculum

and the integration of intercultural learning into the entire degree. As highlighted by staff in the focus group:

*I guess another one that I am not sure if we have been as successful in doing was ... that people that had the opportunity to go on this trip would bring that experience back with them, and somehow disseminate it, ... into the broader study body, that there would be benefits that would flow from that, not just for the travelling students but for other students as well. So I think those things were parts of the purpose that still remain valid (Academic: Nina).*

The single unit approach risks being a 'bolt-on' solution to the question of internationalisation and to date excludes opportunities to engage non-travelling students in critically reflective intercultural learning.

Offsetting these 'barriers' of institutional support and curriculum design limitations, it is clear that a major enabler of the project is the involvement of committed staff that are willing to contribute time, effort and even financial resources to the project. Without such a staff commitment the projects would stumble at the first hurdle. It has also been exceptionally valuable to have staff involved in the projects who are well connected with others within the partner organisations and countries. In the projects under consideration here, close personal experience and contacts in Thailand and India were the foundation for the initial interest in, and subsequent development of, the student mobility project. These personal relationships and connections continue to play an important role as enablers of the projects.



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### LESSONS LEARNT

The curriculum design discussed in this case study:

- Encourages students to view themselves as global citizens,
- Creates opportunities for students to develop agency and resilience as they engage with opportunities for learning and with the related challenges, and
- Enacts preparation, action and reflection phases of service learning.

The case study is an example of a purposeful approach to promoting internationalisation of the social work curriculum, and in particular, the facilitation of inter-cultural learning amongst social work students through:

- The establishment and ongoing development of long-term, **reciprocal and sustainable relationships** between social work staff and students at JCU and partner institutions in Thailand and India,
- The development of a set of focused preparation materials and processes which **intentionally encourage student awareness of a critical and post-colonial lens** through which to view their international and intercultural experiences,
- The provision of in-country activities which expose students to potentially disruptive experiences (i.e. **troublesome knowledge**) as well as practical opportunities for meaningful professional and intercultural experiences and interpersonal relationship building,
- The **facilitation of opportunities for in-depth dialogue** and relationship building through direct support and facilitation by JCU staff while in-country.

Based on the findings from student surveys and staff/student focus groups, our experience at JCU indicates that international student mobility experiences are beneficial when the following curriculum design elements are included:

1. Opportunities for meaningful intercultural learning. These opportunities facilitate the movement of students along the 'continuum of global citizenship' from the position of 'learner' towards the position of 'agent' (Engberg 2013). The critical intent inherent in the curriculum supports students in shifting from a purely abstract, cognitively oriented understanding of culture, towards more reflective and reflexive understandings. These tend to include a greater critical awareness of the student's own culture and identity, and the impact of these on the students' own cognitive, affective and behavioural processes. The most significant examples of movement along this continuum are represented by those students who begin to see themselves as capable of engaging in relationships and actions in global society, who are capable of recognising dynamics of injustice and oppression, and who make commitments to being part of a movement to address these through their own practice as **agents of change**.
2. Opportunities which promote students' agentic learning capacities (Richards, Sweet & Billett 2013) across a number of different dimensions. For example, the combination of critical preparation materials, and a focus on reflection as a tool and process for understanding leads to the **development of students' personal learning goals** as they develop a

deeper understanding of how they learn and make sense of intercultural experiences. Resilience, as another agentic capacity, is also addressed by this approach to curriculum design, as students are placed in new, unfamiliar, and challenging situations and expected to develop strategies to cope with and learn from these '**troublesome**' challenges, while at the same time being supported and encouraged by project staff.

3. Processes which model authentic attempts to establish **reciprocal relationships and meaningful dialogue** at the institutional level provide opportunities for students to consider and build such reciprocity-based relationships themselves through their participation in project activities.

Based on our experience of planning, designing, enacting and reflecting on curriculum related to this project, and taking into account the material emerging from staff and student reflections on their intentions and experiences, a number of recommendations and suggestions for future practice can be made:

- Successful international mobility and intercultural learning projects depend to a great extent on the nature and quality of the relationships between partnering institutions and staff. To this end we cannot over-emphasise how important it is to devote adequate time, energy and resources to building and developing these reciprocal relationships and to making commitments to do so over longer, more sustainable timeframes.

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- Some type of learning will almost inevitably occur when students travel to culturally different locations. However, our experience has taught us that greater congruence is likely to occur between the intended and experienced curriculum when adequate preparation is done prior to travel. In particular, we believe that the global realities of cultural imperialism, colonialism, racism and privilege need to be brought into focus for students as part of this preparation. We, therefore, recommend a preparation process which goes beyond practicalities and **equips students with a critical lens** through which they can make sense of their intercultural experiences thus promoting their self-awareness as globally-agentic learners.
- Disruptive and disorienting experiences (i.e. '**troublesome knowledge**') are common during international study trips and often serve as important catalysts for significant learning. In an increasingly risk-averse environment we recommend taking care to not eliminate the possibility that such challenges could arise. However, our experience has shown that the potential for such experiences to lead to transformative learning is greatly enhanced when **facilitated group dialogue** and reflection is possible and strongly recommend that student groups be accompanied by staff and that regular reflection and debriefing be conducted during the travel. These reflection and debriefing processes require skilled and experienced staff. It should be noted that staff travelling to new, unfamiliar, and challenging destinations might themselves struggle and feel overwhelmed by the experience, thus impacting on their ability to engage in such skilful facilitation.

- Securing **institutional support** is essential for the sustainability of student mobility projects. The project described here, while successful by many measures, remains vulnerable because of the lack of institutional support. Funding and resource support would ideally be accompanied by adequate workload recognition for the time and energy required to build relationships, plan and design curriculum, facilitate effective student preparation, organise appropriate in-country activities and promote reflection and active learning. We recognise that in many institutions this will represent a significant challenge in the current, financially constrained, environment.

### Future Research

As we continue to develop and refine our approach to curriculum as part of the internationalisation activities within social work at JCU, a number of areas that warrant further research are emerging. One such area is to examine the degree to which the impacts of such intercultural learning experiences (positive or negative) persist over time and influence students' future actions. We are also particularly interested in exploring the concept of reciprocity and how this does or doesn't manifest in the personal and institutional relationships that form the basis of international mobility projects. This seems particularly relevant to us given the critical literature emerging about the one-sided relationships that often seem to characterise international exchanges between the Global North and Global South.



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