Problematising international placements as a site of intercultural learning

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Abstract

This paper theorises some of the learning outcomes of a three-year project concerning student learning in international social work placements in Malaysia. The problematic issue of promoting cultural and intercultural competence through such placements is examined, where overlapping hegemonies are discussed in terms of isomorphism of social work models, that of the nation-State, together with those relating to professional values and knowledge; and the tyrannies of received ideas. A critical discussion of cultural competence as the rationale for international placements is discussed in terms of the development of the graduating social worker as a self-reflexive practitioner. The development of sustainable international partnerships able to support student placement; and the issue of non-symmetrical reciprocation, typical of wide socio-economic differentials across global regions, is additionally discussed.

Keywords: international placement, cultural competence, hegemony, self-reflexivity

Introduction

This paper theorises some of the learning outcomes of a three-year British Council funded project[i] promoting UK student mobility to Malaysia. The funding served to support an evolving programme of international placements for social work students at Bournemouth University (BU), UK, in keeping with the University's strategic aim of the internationalisation of the curriculum.

Cultural and intercultural competence is an oft-promoted end within social work learning throughout the world but remains a contested area and multi-nuanced (Laird, 2008; Bartoli, 2013). It has attracted criticism for its tendency to homogenise cultures, behaviours and ethnic groups with calls made to develop anti-oppressive or anti-racist practice as alternatives. In this joint Malaysia-UK project we were seeking to foster awareness and appreciation of difference and diversity and to challenge preconceived notions of homogeneities of cultural differences from all quarters. We understood cultural competence to represent the ability to negotiate different cultures challenging one's assumptions and reflecting on the transferability of learning to other settings. We did not view cultural competence as a naïve attempt to homogenise or 'essentialise' stereotypical characteristics of different ethnic and cultural groups, and chose the term for its positive emphases on human understanding, as opposed to the more potentially reactive approaches enshrined within some approaches to anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice.

Background to the study

Optional international placements at BU, commencing in 2009, were an innovation for this particular social work degree programme, and were therefore largely experimental. Over time the number of days offered increased from a 20-working-day placement in Malaysia, to 25

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days. Debate among the academic Practice Learning team at BU regarding optimal

timetabling resulted in this opportunity being opened to final-year students in its first year of

operation, and then moving to second-year students solely, and subsequently first-year

students. The impact of these differentials has yet to be fully analysed; however, each cohort

of selected applicants remained consistent at 10 students per year, totally 30 in all.

The Malaysian placements were designed to follow immediately on from local UK

placements and formed a fraction of the standard field practicum required for social work

degree conferment in the UK. In order to enable students to experience a smoother learning

transition, practice teachers supervising students on local placement were then used for the

Malaysian placement, supplemented by BU academic support of such students. In addition,

students received supervisory support in the local Malaysian welfare agencies they were

attached to, together with group supervision from qualified social work academics at the two

participating Malaysian partner universities. These being, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) -

a premier research university in Penang and the first Malaysian university to offer social

work degrees; and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in East Malaysia, which offered

a well-established social work undergraduate programme with a longer history than that

offered by BU.

Application for the international placements was competitive and involved rigorous selection

of candidates, who were expected to have achieved a good academic performance to-date. Of

equal importance candidates needed to evidence aptitude in terms of attitude, self-knowledge

and disciplinary knowledge, as well as satisfactory health status sufficient to cope with a

demanding climate and different socio-cultural lifestyle. Although it was initially assumed

that prior and robust travel experience was an indication of such aptitude in students, it was found that this by no means always a true indicator of authentic potential in this regard.

Placements identified over the years by academic staff at USM and UNIMAS were comparatively diverse, given the restrictions of accommodating UK students with their limited language abilities and lack of local knowledge. The majority of placements were non-government organisations or charities with religious affiliations. Accordingly placements consisted of mental health support services, learning or physical disability rehabilitation services, children's residential and non-residential services, elderly care services, and finally, an innovative HIV/AIDS outreach service developed by USM.

The study

Participation in the project included an important research element, which focused on processes of student learning in an unfamiliar cultural context. Students were asked to complete a written reflective daily log and a critical incident analysis. This raw data collected by the students was shared with the academic team supporting the students and offered a rich source of data to analyse, providing key insights into the complex constructions, contradictions and revelations that students grappled with in their deep immersion into the new and unfamiliar social, cultural and professional contexts (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2012).

Students were fully apprised of research element and were given bespoke sessions concerning writing critical incident analyses and reflective logs. Completion of the analysis and log was a requirement of the placement of which students were aware from the outset, giving informed consent by acceptance of the placement opportunity. Students retained ownership of

their daily reflective logs but were aware these would be seen and analysed by two of the authors. The authors were not involved in the practice learning element of the placement and students were assured that this research concerned cross cultural learning not practice assessment and honesty was encouraged. Any concerns for social desirability responses or concern about submitting reflections that represented assumed 'politically correct' positions was countered by the evidence as shown below.

In this paper, student responses to the new cultural environment and adaptation to it are explored and theorised, as are their confrontations with professional and personal values which may differ markedly from their own, and how these are duly reflected on in terms of the mediation of the domains of familiar and unfamiliar 'cultures' and disciplinary practices. Some of the issues arising from intercultural difference, within individual students, often dependent on backgrounds and experiences, and between placement sites are explored and the problems of intercultural knowledge and cultural competence are highlighted at a comparative level across programmes and cultures. Such value-based approaches represent received wisdom within social work education but are often under-researched. Also, this paper challenges the (seemingly) apotheosised wisdom of Western intercultural competences in education and calls for a deeper, honest reflection of personal experiences of being-in-the-world to enrich social work learning across and within diverse cultures at all levels – student, academic, HEI and NGO.

The context of international placements

International placements in social work are increasingly popular as shown in Panos' (2004) survey of US social work faculties. This popularity, alongside the growing interest in international social work in general (Hugman, 2010), is associated with a burgeoning

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awareness of the impact of globalisation regarding political and economic influence and the migration of populations, as well as the tremendous social and emotional adjustments and dislocations that result (Baba et al., 2010;'s Parker et al., 2012).

However, globalisation also underpins neoliberal ideologies championing the icon of the transcultural professional armed with transferrable knowledge and skills, able to compete in global markets and embodied by the idealised concept of the 'global citizen' (Caruana, 2007). Globalisation also creates demands for graduates in all subjects who have 'glocal' knowledge and capabilities, which, elsewhere, we define as an awareness of how global issues impact upon the fragile interconnections between people and their environment (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2012; Caruana, 2007). For many universities across the world this iconic creation equipped with 'competences and tolerances' fit for culturally diverse contexts, is aspired to in terms of the graduate end product of tertiary education (Montgomery, 2009).

Tangentially, and crucially linked to this ideal, is the issue of internationalisation, which has captured the imagination of many Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in their bid towards the development of their profiles regionally, nationally and internationally (Caruana and Handstock, 2008). However, the endeavour to embed internationalisation at curriculum level is problematic, especially because this is a contested and ill-defined concept for many HEIs (Caruana and Handstock. 2008). A number of different strategies have been used at the British HEI under discussion, including adaptation of the curricula to reflect global concerns and international evidence-based research. In this vein, Williams and Nelson (2007) comment on the importance of encouraging students to reflect upon their own cultural assumptions to address hegemonic constructions. This is a point with which we would wholeheartedly

concur, and would argue that this process is engaged with in the international placements

discussed here, forming another important strand of internationalisation (Panos et al., 2004).

For UK social work education, despite one of the paradoxes of globalisation in leading to

devolution, a tendency towards an ethnocentric and often highly localised viewpoint is being

broadened. This recognises the wider influences of cultural diversity in relation multi-

ethnic/multi-faith perspectives within multicultural societies and the consequent implications

for anti-oppressive practice (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2008; Gilin and Young, 2009). There are

many positive attributes associated with international placements, especially the intention of

developing cultural competences (Abram et al., 2005; Barlow et al., 2010; Faurchild et al.,

2006; Gilin and Young, 2009), despite that term remaining somewhat contentious. Laird

(2008) promotes the importance of cultural competence, recognising the anxieties many

practitioners have in working with diverse cultural groups. Whilst cultural competence

approaches have been criticised as naïve attempt as profiling and in danger of essentialising

or stereotyping, Laird sees the necessity of recognising and seeking to understand and work

with difference and diversity and believes that anti-racist practice can be too narrow.

Difference and diversity is seen not only across groups but also within groups. She states:

> Working towards cultural competence is difficult because it requires social-care
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> professionals form the majority white population and other ethnic groups to step
>
> outside their own cultural context and relate to service users and carers within the
>
> frame of their cultural contexts… Cultural competence is not about presumption or
>
> the deployment of specific information about each ethnic group. Cultural competence
>
> is founded on a comprehensive understanding of the broad nature of potential
>
> differences between people of diverse ethnic backgrounds (Laird, 2008, p. 43)

Cross-national and cross-cultural social work research, whilst growing, exposes a range of dilemmas and problems in its design, conduct and analysis similar to the development and execution of partnerships; raising questions of what is being compared, what tools can be used to ensure comparison and what power issues are at play (Belfiore, 2009).

Ling (2004; 2007) has emphasised, in her comparative studies, the theoretical development of culturally appropriate social work within indigenous paradigms. On the other hand, Payne and Askeland (2008) stated the assumed expectation that knowledge generated from research should be universally applicable. They point out that Western higher education pressures for publication in certain journals, for attracting research funding, for domestic as opposed to international research, for enhancing research league tables, for privileging certain methodologies may create an unequal balance in the ways in which research in social work is conducted, channelled and constructed. This can, therefore, lead to imbalance in research partnerships and requires a critique of power relations and diversity issues, such as Westernisation, localisation, indigenisation, authenticisation.

There needs to be at least some transformative element in terms of cultural competence if international placements are to be deemed successful (Lough, 2009; Gilin & Young, 2009). It is recognized that international placements offer powerful learning environments (Barlow, 2007) for cross-cultural comparison (Pawar et al., 2004), but this does not necessarily lead to competence or capability in dealing with cultural diversity. Alongside research extolling the positive educative potential of international placements there are a number of papers reporting on the reflections of those involved in the process, including practice or field coordinators (Pawar et al., 2004), the perspectives of faculty partners (Barlow, 2010), and

personal student reflections (Martone and Munoz, 2009). We have reported elsewhere some

of the processes of learning and the reflexivity necessary for this to take place (Ashencaen

Crabtree et al. 2012; Parker et al., 2012). Growing popularity has led to the development of

models and guidelines for structuring international placement experiences (Pettys et al., 2005;

Rotabi et al., 2006), and for promoting preparation, communication and liaison between those

involved (Mathiesena and Lagerb, 2007), since models may reflect complex and divergent

perspectives of engaging countries and therefore challenge participants to negotiate

appropriate administrative structures around the placements (Orit Nuttman-Schwartz, 2011).

There is a paucity of texts developing a critical discourse on the topic of international social

work (Razack, 2009), especially where this relates to developing regions of the world in the

'Global South' (Hugman, 2010). Razack (2009) builds on Williams and Nelson (2007)

arguing that this is particularly the case when Western hegemony and 'superior positioning'

remains unquestioned in the classroom in reference to colonization, imperialism and

postcolonialism, including the cultural imperialism inherent in 'universal social work values'

(Razack, 2009: 12). Hugman (2008) expands this point to contemplate the scope of social

work internationally that has developed in response to the enormous diversity of societies and

social needs. For example, the micro-level technicalities that could characterise social work

in the UK, can be usefully compared to the meso- and macro-level models in practice

elsewhere (Hugman, 2008). Accordingly, internationalised social work curricula must seek to

adequately engage with these thought-provoking models, but also to consider the polarities of

ethical positions; and the postcolonial rise of indigenised and authenticised practice

(Hugman, 2009; 2010). These critiques are important in informing the development and

practice of international social work placements, and in our attempts to understand them.

These issues demand close scrutiny by social work academics, given the increasing demand by students wishing to undertake practice placements in international settings, and the drive in Higher Education to extend the internationalisation of the curriculum. Panos et al. (2004) observe that international practice learning placements offer an excellent opportunity to gain cross-cultural competence; a rationale that has fuelled our own endeavours in this direction. However, Wehbi (2009) rehearses concerns raised here: that a lack of insight into the personal motivation of students (and academics) may lead to a replication of power imbalances that are implicated in cultural hegemony. Where this happens, the transformative potential of placements may remain insufficiently realised. We also need to negotiate common understandings and expectations in respect of cultural competence development and to take care to explicate the outcomes and learning we hope to achieve.

Although international placements are a popular enterprise among students, administrative, supervisory and logistical problems create barriers to developing further placement initiatives; as do language barriers in predominantly English speaking countries in particular (Panos et al., 2004). Economic considerations have also been an issue, but these have been greater for developing countries. Given the changes in fee structures within UK higher education, the continuing effects of financial restraint and recession it will be important to continue to consider financial issues.

The literature concerning international social work placements is not entirely positive, however, and some of the problems that may arise are recognised. These papers emphasise the need for preparation of all concerned and readiness for the unexpected (Heron, 2005; Magnus, 2009; Pawar et al., 2004; Schwartz et al., 2011). The meanings of international social work itself are open to challenge (Hugman, 2010; Nuttmann-Schwartz and Berger,

2012), and issues arising from the support and need to sustain placements for international students studying abroad may also add to our knowledge base (Zunz and Oil, 2009). Some support structures can be addressed through e-technologies to assist mentoring (Plummer and Nyang'au, 2009) and video-conferencing to maintain communication (Panos, 2005). Questions that reflect on learning for cultural competence, however, are more complex. As Heron (2006) notes the literature dealing with international placements generally concerns students from developed countries undertaking placements in the Global South and suggests we need to pay strict attention to pre- and post-placement learning and rather than consolidating learning students should be encouraged to interrogate their knowledge and assumptions, and, as Wehbi (2009) suggests motivations for undertaking international placements require deconstruction. There needs to be an analysis of Western practices and indigenous needs in these accounts (Hyong and Hwa-ok, 2010). This, of course, needs to be undertaken critically with attention to bi-directional problems and not assuming these are purely one-way.

Findings

Isomorphic tendencies of social work education

There appear to be processes at work globally, or perhaps 'glocally', within social work education in which key objectives, skills, knowledge and values show a tendency to coalesce around increasingly reproduced isomorphs. These seem to reflect Razack's (2009) 'concept of 'superior positioning' in respect of history and politics of social work stemming from its development within Western cultures, especially the US and UK, and being exported with other elements of colonial administration. The following extracts taken from the supervision notes of a placement organiser on the academic team illuminates the gravitational pull towards these positions.

Students felt uncomfortable in Malaysian placements with what they observed as "unprofessional" practice. They observed relationships being built on "friendship", in informal settings, but they also reflected that a professional relationship based on a professional "detachment" would not work in a country in which informality has a high value.

Students who in the UK had been practising from a "person centred" focus and had the framework in place to empower people who use services, felt that people using services in Malaysia were disempowered. They observed that it was common practice to have an elder from within the family speak on behalf of the service users.

These isomorphic and hierarchical positionings need to be further granulated rather than uncritically dismissed as reflecting inequalities and 'wrongs' resulting from neo-Western imperialism. Whilst there is undoubtedly resonant influence from dominating powers (historically, politically, socially and economically), there is also a 'drag down' of novel ideas from others, and also a concern for 'improvement', despite the tension with a desire to develop local and indigenous practices. In previous research concerning curricula developments relating to the contested concept of vulnerability, we noted this tension between indigenous and global practices (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2012). The judgements made are fine and multiply-nuanced.

Movement towards isomorphism can be theorized using organizational analysis of the pursuit of legitimacy and the construction of a range of isomorphic tendencies that seek to create a neo-professionalism (normative), a desire not to appear out-of-step with those assumed to have power (mimetic) and the development of standards, value statements and knowledges (coercive). We see it in the IASSW global standards (2004), the development of professionalism globally and also competencies and audit culture permeating neoliberal democracies adds to this tendency. Whilst it can create problems of working in partnership or

collaborating in assuming likeness, it can also allow international collaborations across academic social work and practice where commonalities exist. Its double-sided nature demands critique and reflection.

Hegemonies of nation-state

There was further 'superior positioning' (Razack, 2009) within the development and operation of the international placement project and partnerships. The funding for this project heavily subsidised UK student travel and subsistence costs on placement and, although we paid some money to our Malaysian partners to assist the students in placement, this reflected the daily placement rates in England at the time, a much smaller amount. Partly, this situation arose because of the nature of the funding grant and the operational practices of UK universities. The funding paid only for student costs up to a maximum and allowed nothing for host countries, relying on established relationships and goodwill. This reflects, perhaps key assumptions relating to operational practices and to the perceived value of UK/British relationships. Reciprocal benefits were there but not in finance, and they supported the pretensions of faculty and university in respect of engaging in international research and producing international publications.

It is important also to note that whilst institutional partnerships were central, they could not have been developed without the initial personal relationships that existed with academic staff who had worked previously in both countries. A person-to-person approach to active collaboration was demanded to cut through the bureaucracy that stultifies or perpetuates an unequal, and at times, neo-colonial approach in its worst sense.

The partnership relationships required the official development of Memoranda of Understanding, which added clarity and provided a degree of transparency and protection. However, these were required, by BU, to be concluded in English law, written in English, using and driven by the UK university protocols. The quality assurance agencies also drive some of this superior-positioning of nation-states.

Once the agreements were signed and the partnership operationalized there were other issues reflecting inequalities. The language competencies of British students are lamentable, and further (unspoken) expectations operated that hosts would be able to communicate and facilitate learning in English. Moreover, these expectations meant that placement agencies needed to operate in English and/or have access to interpreters, requiring a significant commitment on behalf of Malaysian hosts. The hegemony of spoken English, alongside the assumption that language nuances remain the same regardless of context, exerted an influence on the project. However, it also provided a learning tool for students as this extract from the BU practice supervision notes indicate.

> Students expressed how they would have greater empathy with groups in the UK, for example, asylum seekers. Students reflected on their culture shock and how bewildering it must be to enter the UK to seek asylum or to come to work in the UK. It highlighted for them how people who do not speak the local language find difficulty in expressing themselves. How communication can be a barrier that isolates people.

Finally, the economic imperatives of the university in Britain, heralded by changes in funding and responses to recession, meant that little financial support could be offered to sustain the project by assisting in-coming exchanges or supporting out-going students into the future,

although an internal grant was received by one member of the team to negotiate and support the first phase by travelling to the Malaysian partner universities. Latterly, funding was secured to support two faculty exchanges from Malaysia to the UK. This raised issues of the sustainability of education-based partnerships.

Hegemonies of social work: practice & values

There is a hegemonic assumption of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice underpinned by a belief in the universality of social work values (Razack, 2009). This has led to an unquestioned promotion of safeguarding and protection, and assumed best practices by the UK students. However, there was still a perceived experience amongst some of racism and discrimination by the Malaysian hosts suggesting a need for deeper understanding of comparative social policies and cultural norms and a reflection that negotiating these is complex and never one-sided.

The experiences of students travelling with non-EU passports is illuminating. Two male black students travelling on UK travel documents were refused entry at Kuala Lumpur en route to their placement. They were stopped, searched, questioned and placed in a detention centre as potential illegal immigrants – the university in Malaysia rang on their behalf but they were still not allowed to enter. Their phones were taken and they were searched again. One student reported being beaten for asking questions. Detained for twenty-four hours without contact they were then returned to the UK. Their laptops were stolen and luggage never recovered.

A more fortunate student (Respondent CL) commented on her increasing awareness of the socio-cultural context of the host country by saying,

I am saddened about the knowledge I have learnt but am pleased that my experience has highlighted for me, discrimination on a global scale. The UK has a long way to go as attitudes are not always welcoming towards some groups, but the law protects people far more than this developing country.

Tyrannies of received ideas

There are received ideas in British, and, indeed, throughout Western social work that result from anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice and theory. These reflect 'Manichean' assumptions that naively posit that indigenous = good, whilst Western = bad; or conversely within the policy mandates and educational developments of many countries in the Global South there seems to be an 'inverted Manichaeism' of privileging Western, including British, approaches. It is important to recognize within international placements that indigenous practices, non-British, non-White practices, professionals and individuals can also be 'wrong', abusive and open to critique and the questioning demanded of social work students is multi-directional, emphasizing the importance of learning from others in a global context.

Respondent AW

[Prison visit] One question that was asked by my colleague…was 'did you have a choice to come and speak to us today?' When we asked this the Inspector laughed again and said 'This is Malaysia!' In other words, there was no choice. 'We told them you were here to speak to them and here they are.' This made me feel like I was part of this disempowering situation and it made me feel extremely uncomfortable.'

Respondent JL

[Residential care, young adults] In the first room there were roughly 29 females some of which were tied and chained to the wall. This affected me so much emotionally. I was so angry and disappointed that things like this still happen. I was also totally confused as the girls who were tied up were harmless…[this was] against all my understanding of human rights. I know that in England to do something like would be against the law.

Practitioners' awareness of their own cultural background is important (Author's Own). Practitioners bring their own assumptions, beliefs and values to practice, and indeed, as Laird (2008) suggests, social work in Britain is based on Anglo-centric world-views, which may not always be appropriate for people from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Social identities reflect value positions and differential power positions that require critique. Equally, however, the practitioner's who attempts to privilege culture as the locus of identity among service users can paradoxically be lead to overlooking their immediate needs.

Respondent JF

I've been [examining] two incidents, one around culture and mental health and how cultural competence can sometimes be over-compensated and the person is 'missed', as I did once when too busy trying to be sensitive from the cultural angle and forgot to view the guy's mental health needs…People are people at the end of the day!

Ways forward: Self-reflexive practitioners

So, what future is there for international collaboration and partnerships in social work education? If we return to our definitions what we see working is a 'being together with'

active approach that understands the environment and seeks to work through the social, political, economic and environmental barriers that may stand in the way of partnerships. We need to critique partnership arrangements and the basis on which these are predicated, recognizing the power balances (or imbalances) that exist. It is the relational aspect of partnership that ensures they work, and it is this that creates symbiosis – that relationship between close associates who retain their marked differences. However, appropriate institutional resources are also necessary to allow partnerships to flourish.

We need deep, honest reflections on our partnerships. Relationships are the only sure way to develop a positive state from which to act or to collaborate. Social workers, and academics, are well-versed in cooperation, the building and sustaining of relationships and should be able to move forward the relational aspects of partnership and collaboration moving from the descriptive state of the relationship to the active practices needed to evoke change. Reflexivity and challenging preconceived ideas is an important further step to be taken in developing critical approaches to narratives of learning.

Partnerships are on-going as many of our students have retained links with Malaysia, or have gained profound learning that assists them in practice once in employment.

Respondent AW

[Encounter with an AIDS/HIV support worker] "Can you stop the rain falling?" I wondered where he was going with this but we answered "No, of course not!" "So can you stop people taking drugs?" "No". "Then what do you do? You give them clean needles!" So our work began….

Respondent MP

> In my opinion they still practice social work in this organisation, offering counselling support, education, services, and advice. Rather than what social work appears to have become in some departments in the UK, where social workers are grandiose paper pushers who refer people to other services after an assessment and do minimal therapeutic work.

When we analyse collaboration types, we need to consider the power balances and directions, recognising that not all relationships are top-down, bottom-up or even equal but are likely to be fuzzy and plural in meanings and directions. Accepting this allows us to detail our reasons for working together, to allow for change and diversity as partnership relationships develop, and demands that we are more comfortable with the places and spaces we occupy as actors in mutual collaborations. Social work values are contested and are not the *a priori* or assumed givens promoted by some. However, values do underpin our approach to partnerships in social work where we strive to achieve goals, change and development together.

Concluding discussion

The overall evaluation of the placement demonstrated that the majority of students returned to their studies in the UK with positive new perspectives; and where a healthy number described the experience as 'life changing' and conveyed an enhanced level of cultural competence and anti-oppressive awareness.. Accordingly, learning was positive and cross-cultural understanding and competences increased across the student groups, future employment prospects were enhanced and shared benefits enjoyed between Malaysia and the UK.

While this was pleasing and confirmed that the overall collaborative international effort made to provide this opportunity had been worthwhile, the data gathered from the students' learning experiences has also served to 'trouble' the issue of the capability of UK social work education to adequately prepare students to be able to gain from and provide benefits to international placements. It is therefore important to problematise this learning, the mode of learning and the collaboration and partnerships evolved to facilitate the work.

As in the USA (Gilin and Young, 2009), there was considerable welcome sounded following the emphasis on practice in social work education in the 2003 reforms in the UK. Support to retain the levels of practice education held sway within the 2010 -12 Reform Board process. However, it could be argued that the heavily practice orientated, and increasingly restrictive qualifying requirements, militate against the development of a sustainable portfolio of international practice placements that are integrated into the social work degree and curriculum timetable is a demanding prospect. This is strange given the emphasis placed on fostering anti-oppressive, and anti-racist, practices or cultural competence in programmes.

Zeal, therefore, is continually demanded in the promotion of the potential benefits of international placements, coupled with a commitment towards developing mutually beneficial international partnership, where reciprocation needs to be more than a token invitation to return a host's favour. This is a particularly germane point for partnerships where the cost of living differentials are wide across countries and regions. These may be especially advantageous for students from the Western hemisphere, but highly problematic for others; and consequently symmetrical reciprocation is unlikely to take place.

Yet, the drive of universities throughout the world towards internationalisation as an attractive student option takes place in an increasingly competitive marketplace in higher education. This demands that academics need to grapple with the issue of sustainability and to be clear about the pedagogic value of international placements, given the complexities of such arrangements, and the potential risk of imposing hegemonic cultural values and knowledge in often poorly understood cultural settings. Furthermore, the need of students to be able to adjust to and make use of such experiences in their future practice appears to require a flexible outlook in which uncertainties are key in negotiating novel and challenging situations.

Finally, overlapping domains of hegemonic assumptions, as outlined, need to be carefully unpicked and examined, not merely in the prosaic preparation for such placements, but in connection with the entire social work curriculum. Thus, Manichean binaries presented in terms of professional values and assumptions, prevalent in social work and relating to both 'Western' social work and indigenous or authenticised models, need to be critically examined in an iconoclastic and possibly even ludic spirit of inquiry. Such approaches may rightfully be regarded as subversive, and even dangerous to the position of gravitas and authority that is sought by social work – a precarious profession at best. However, this is more likely to nurture and inculcate in students the qualities of receptiveness to new experiences, as well as critical self-reflexivity to explore such, that appears to be essential to the success of such placements. Yet, despite the general popularity of international placements among students and the urgings of British HEIs to promote them, such placements are jeopardised rather than assisted by the increasing instrumentalism and thereby parochialism of professional social work in the UK.

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