ACHIEVING AN ETHICAL AUSTRALIAN-INDIAN RELATIONSHIP THROUGH A RECIPROCAL STUDENT MOBILITY PROGRAM IN SOCIAL WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Establishing a student mobility program between an Australian university department and an Indian organisation represents a process which contains many complex ethical issues and challenges. Amongst these are: how to challenge the more dominant exploitative relationships between minority and majority world countries; how to balance the learning agenda of students from each country and to ensure that there are also community benefits deriving from their respective involvements; how to disseminate the cross cultural learning beyond the particular student mobility program to strengthen the international culture within the school and university; how to reconcile different cultural values, practices, expectations and process to build effective collaboration; how to scale up a student mobility program to include collaborative research and other international social work partners.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The School of Social Work and Social Policy and Rural the Unit for Health and Social Affairs (RUHSA) commenced collaborative work in 1996 with a BSW student undertaking part of his placement in India at RUHSA. Before 1996 the School’s international activities were limited, and dependent on individual staff members’ professional and research interests.

Between 1996 and 2006 over 80 students from the School of Social Work and Social Policy undertook placements at RUHSA. Also, during this time, the University of South Australia’s approach to internationalisation significantly developed and became more sophisticated, well resourced, and targeted, with clearly articulated plans and strategies. This development was driven by the University’s mission, but also by external imperatives in the higher education sector and the increasing globalisation of the sector.

Currently, the activities of SWP in Tamil Nadu are expanding and developing beyond this single bilateral relationship. The newly established Centre for International Social Work is the centrepiece of this development. The bulk of this paper will focus on the relationship with RUHSA, as the ethical challenges, which are the matter of this paper, have arisen throughout the processes involved in this partnership. The current, broader activities, are relatively recent. However, these will be discussed towards the end of the paper because they represent a scaling up, and making sustainable, the gains made in the years 1996-2006.

CHALLENGING DOMINANCE AND NEO COLONIALIST PRACTICE

Any international activity must be seen within the broader and global higher education context. Much current international activity, including student mobility, is driven by powerful economic imperatives. These imperatives derive from policies at all levels, which are formulated within a neoliberal marketplace paradigm.

There is substantial evidence that neoliberalism benefits a relatively few and that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, both amongst countries and within countries.
While human needs continue to be met, they are being met in more inequitable ways within the global marketplace.

In higher education, there is little debate about education as a right. Rather the ability to receive quality education, or perhaps education relevant to participation in economic life, depends on the ability to pay for education. Providers of education compete for ‘customers’ and international and fee paying students are a significant source of income for universities.

Schools of social work and human services are a part of this higher education scenario. As such, they are expected to participate in the higher education marketplace. At the same time, however, these Schools educate their students for a profession of service, one committed to social values such as social justice, equity, liberation from oppression and human rights (Young 1990; Tesoriero 1999; Ife 2001). Much of their research aims to advocate for more just policies and practices. They acknowledge and contribute to addressing structural factors that contribute to disadvantage and exclusion from societal processes and resources.

This should present schools of social work and human services with immense tensions to deal with, if they are to engage ethically in higher education international activities. Juxtaposed with these tensions are great opportunities for social work and human service organisations to embrace internationalism and to more fully reflect universal social values in their activities. The core concern of social work and human service professionals are major social problems, such as poverty, conflict, ill health, the burdens placed on women, the marginalised, and so on. All of these issues can no longer be considered parochially and within national borders. Poverty is worldwide, both in the majority and minority worlds; and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. The plight of children is particularly concerning, where 50% of the world’s children have been affected by preventable diseases, war and conflict and by poverty. Women remain more vulnerable than men and they carry a disproportionate amount of the burden of ill health, poverty, violence and marginalisation.

War and conflict continue to be major issues that have disastrous impacts on people through death, trauma, displacement and the demolition of social and physical infrastructures. The displacement and forced migration of people create repercussions that are widely felt (Cox and Pawar 2006)). Environmental degradation continues at an unprecedented rate and the actions of local pollutants are felt across the planet through global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer and so on. The neglected diseases, such as HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, tuberculosis, malaria and others, are largely the legacy of multinational drug companies who will only research and develop drugs that yield a profit from those that can afford drugs in the rich countries. The global scope of all of these issues powerfully invites schools of social work and human services to embed their activities with a global ethical perspective and so to involve themselves purposefully in international activities. Furthermore, it is imperative that such activities do not perpetuate relations of domination and further privilege western knowledge over indigenous knowledge and wisdom (Illich et. al. 1977; Chambers 1993).

Over the past twelve years, SWP’s involvement in international activities, initially through student mobility, has increased and developed. Its focus has largely, though not exclusively, been in the majority world, particularly India. Here, issues of neo-colonialism, as well as neoliberalism, accentuate the tensions faced by the SWP. Its activities have developed in particular directions over time as a result of a consistent commitment to specific social values. It has also drawn on principles and concepts to guide its activities, directions and relationships with its international partners in India. These are: internationalism; reciprocity and mutual benefit; adherence to social rather than economic values; and a human rights perspective.

The SWP does not claim to stand apart from mainstream higher education international activity and stake out any moral high ground. It does not claim to achieve the ideals implied...
in its social values of social justice, equity and so on. However, the SWP consistently asks itself whether its decisions, actions and relationships progress, or detract from, its value base. It has chosen to act in ways that are consistent with its values. These are human and social values which are ignored by, and so undermined by, economic globalisation. To engage in international activity to explicitly and publicly promote social values represents a challenge to dominant forces which build exploitative relationships.

The SWP approach to its international activities has been celebrated by the University of South Australia. This may seem paradoxical, given the economic drivers in higher education international activity. It is not. Universities embrace ethics, as well as participating in the global higher education marketplace. Different, even contradictory agenda, are always at play within universities, as with all organisations. Consequently, for the University of South Australia, SWP international activity represents one important and effective expression of the university’s commitment to social values and ethics, as it manages the tensions between social goals and ensuring ongoing viability in the global marketplace. This, in turn, translates into active university-level support for the SWP international activities and enables their ongoing development. It is in the university’s interest to nurture this site of ethical international practice.

The principles guiding underlying the SWP program have been crucial components in influencing how the school in the development of its international activities within the context of the broader neoliberal environment.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Internationalism

Internationalism is both a broad perspective and a set of activities which reflect that perspective. It is particularly relevant for schools of social work and human services in an era of economic globalisation because it takes a global perspective which challenges a trend towards more iniquitous international economic relations that characterise economic globalisation. This trend is clear when one compares the Colombo Plan students with today’s fee-paying international students in Australia’s universities.

Internationalism brings with it moral imperatives, not simply an agenda of recruiting international students and thereby securing income. It requires universities to build high quality curricula that are relevant to the needs and contexts of international students in Australia, and to broaden the scope of curricula beyond the local and national for domestic students. Internationalism involves efforts to build global citizenship amongst students, staff and graduates.

Culture and cultural values shape and construct knowledge. A true appreciation of this cannot be achieved simply through cross cultural ‘add-ons’, such as case studies, in academic programs. It can only be achieved by providing opportunities for students to enter other world views and to actively participate in other sets of values and knowledge. The nature of staff-student relationships is an important element of internationalism, where staff actively encourage and support students to explore other cultures’ constructions of knowledge. Here, staff and students both are learners. This begins to build a picture of internationalism being within an organisational culture, not just written into curriculum documents.

Learning become an intersubjective construction of knowledge, not the getting of facts or static views. An understanding of the intercultural involves an understanding of the local as well as the international, that is, an understanding of the learner’s position as a cultural position which shapes knowledge (and power) as much as other contexts shape knowledge.
So, internationalism relates more broadly to teaching practices, staff and school values and an approach to teaching and learning in a diverse and globalised context. It should aim to prepare students for their effective and moral participation in a multicultural world. It should have less emphasis on giving knowledge as a commodity and more emphasis on developing students as users of knowledge across cultural boundaries (International Education Association of Australia 2005).

Reciprocity and mutual benefit

The question of “Who benefits?” is particularly significant for an Australian school of social work and human service when it engaged in partnerships with institutions in the majority world. The history of development has been dominated by relationships between the minority and majority worlds, where donor partners benefit at the expense of the recipient. Policies, such as structural adjustment, have served the interests of those who are already politically and economically powerful. Thus, inequities, poverty and disadvantage are perpetuated, rarely alleviated.

For the SWP, the benefits derived for it from participating in a partnership with an Indian institution were clear. It enriched its curriculum. Students had an opportunity to engage in a cross cultural educational experience which would equip them well professionally, both in multicultural Australia and overseas. The success of the experience for students was due in no small way to the dedication of the local Indian staff and their continuing support of students throughout their placement. But how would the Indian partner benefit?

The issue of reciprocity was raised by the Indian partner at the beginning of the relationship. In the ensuing discussions, the Indian partner identified the benefits it wanted from the partnership. The first benefit was for its staff to have an opportunity to undertake study tours in Australia. The second was for students to undertake work which the organisation would not otherwise be able to undertake because of lack of resources. Related to this, was for students to undertake work which would benefit local communities and which would assist the agency to achieve its service objectives. The third area in which the organisation wanted to benefit was dissemination and publication of its work. In this way, the organisation would play a leadership role in the field of community health and social development and would maintain its high and credible profile in its networks in India and beyond.

The SWP has been able to meet these expectations and so ensure reasonable mutual benefit in this minority world/majority world relationship. Firstly, the SWP has sponsored eleven Indian colleagues to undertake professional development programs in Australia. Funding has come from the South Australian community health field and the Australia India Council. However, apart from funding, the success of these visits has been as a result of the willingness of many Australian professionals and organisations to share their experiences and provide a range of in-kind support to the study tour program. Secondly, students engage in projects that are relevant to the local context. Before their departure from Australia, and as part of their 18-hour preparation program, students are clear that their choice of project must be based on local organisation or community needs, not on their individual interests. This ensures that local decision-making is in the hands of local people and assumes that student activity will make a contribution to the agency’s work and to the health, well being and development aspirations of local communities. Thirdly, all projects have been systematically documented. Since 1996, approximately thirty reports of student projects have been produced, printed and dispatched to India by the SWP. The partner agency has edited and approved final reports before printing and has used the reports in the ongoing development of its work, for experimenting with new strategies (such as in HIV/AIDS education and prevention) and for service planning (as for example, in addressing the needs
of the elderly which are emerging as family structures change). The organisation has also used the reports in its training work with other NGOs and to assist in funding submissions. In these ways, the partnership has ensured a level of mutual benefit as defined by, and relevant to, each of the partners.

Commitment to social values and human rights

From the beginning of the partnership the SWP was clear that its underlying rationale was social rather than economic. In other words, such international activity ought to progress the UniSA graduate qualities, particularly that pertaining to graduates having an international perspective (including indicators such as having a global view of issues and ability to work within multicultural contexts). It was also clear that the activity ought to enable participating students to deepen their appreciation of the structural factors which contribute to poverty, disadvantage and inequity and to develop their ability to address such issues in their professional work.

Students are presented with a human rights approach (Ife 2001) to their work, both generally in their program in Australia, but also in their preparation for their overseas experience. The significance of this approach lies in how it contrasts with a more commonly used needs-based approach. In the current neoliberal context, needs are increasingly met in the private marketplace and access to services is more and more based on the ability to pay. Such things as health and education become commodified. Those who cannot pay are denied access to services. Constructing such ‘needs’ as health, shelter, income, education and participation in civic and political life as human rights challenges students to make strong commitments to address violations of inalienable rights.

In this way, social values and a human rights perspective underpin the overall partnership and inform the everyday activities.

MAJOR ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Balancing student learning and community benefit

Students are required to develop value-based knowledge and skills in social work and the human services in the practice components of their programs. There are no formulaic answers to problematic human conditions and so the ability to engage ongoing analysis and reflection becomes a central tool in effective and ethical social work and human service practice.

Undertaking international placements in a majority world country is a rich opportunity for students to hone their practice on a solid base of human rights and social justice. This is also the case for the Indian social work students who come to Australia to undertake a placement. Bennett's (1993) model of intercultural sensitivity is used as the tool to enable students to develop ethical and effective practice in a cross cultural setting. Briefly, and amongst other things, this model assists students to understand how their work may be ethnocentric (understanding the other’s worldview by reference to their own cultural values and practices), may be culturally relativist (all practices in the other culture are fine) or may be ethnosensitive. Ethnosensitivity entails the ability to understand the impact and implications of cultural beliefs and practices against ‘universal’ measures such as human rights and social justice, rather than culture-specific criteria.
### Ethnocentric Stages

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### Ethnorelative Stages

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Having grasped an insight into reflective practice, Australian students, once in the field in India, are quickly bewildered by the questions “What is the community? What is ‘Indian culture’”? They soon discover the diversity within culture and within communities and on reflection, unravel issues of power and oppression, fractures along gender and caste lines. They discover the different, sometimes conflicting views and agenda of the organisation, local staff, women and men in villages, community members and elected leaders, of members of different castes and of dalits (outcastes), of landowners and of the landless. The impact of caste, gender, hierarchy and economic and political power on human rights emerges as a major concern and challenge for students in their practice.

Issues of domination and oppression are embedded in communities and how to work ethically, but at the same time effectively and strategically within such contexts becomes a central theme in their professional development and in their efforts to ensure that their work benefits the most disadvantaged and oppressed.

Working across cultures entails confronting that which is different, strange and puzzling. Australian social work and human service students, coming from a multicultural context, generally find it relatively easy to appreciate difference as a positive resource (Young 1990). They are likely to approach difference with inquisitiveness and readily engage in dialogue which enriches their understanding. Indian students, on the other hand, are more likely to come from communities that are more suspicious of difference and of different cultures, values and practices. In each case, there are different starting points to supporting student learning, not withstanding the wide differences amongst students within each group.

**Reconciling different expectations across cultures**

Effective student learning is influence by the ability of the fieldwork environment to support learning, in other words, for those who are supporting the learning to accept that students do not know some things, cannot do some things and to create adequate levels of safety for students to be able to take risks into the un-known.
Building supportive environments across cultures is particularly challenging. It requires time, patience and trust amongst the partner organisations. The most significant task in this respect is nurturing mutual respect for cultural differences and having the openness to collaboratively negotiate aspects of difference which create tensions and conflicts. Assisting participants in this process has been a critical role of SWP. How to reconcile the identity of a female student as an independent Australian woman with the need for local staff to protect her in all ways? How to reconcile western feminist practices with male Indian students’ values on gender and their everyday experience in India of male domination? Acknowledging different values, practices, expectations and then managing these through dialogue within a relationship of trust is pivotal to achieving learning outcomes and ensuring students’ work is effective and so of benefit to the local communities in which they are working, whether those be Indian or Australian communities.

**Disseminating the learning from the international activities**

The international activities of the SWP have a direct impact on the students and staff who participate in the program. Their experiences lead to significant change, learning and reaching new understandings. Developing strategies which can broaden the reach of these outcomes beyond the participants to the SWP more generally is a current issue. This is a particularly important issue given the SWP’s desire to build a stronger culture of internationalism in its school community of students and staff. Herein there are two major challenges. Firstly, we have yet to identify a range of workable strategies which can effectively share and use the learning of the participants. These strategies may be ones embedded within the curriculum or they may be in the form of extra curricula activities. The second, and perhaps more difficult challenge, is dealing with the many other competing demands on staff and students. Factors such as high staff workloads and the need for many students to work to support their study, all act as barriers to more widely disseminating the outcomes of the international activities. These factors make staff and students time poor for anything but those responsibilities which are required of them. Of course, on the participants’ return to class after their international experiences, they share their learning in a variety of ways, such as tutorial presentations. There are also many informal conversations which occur amongst students outside the classroom. These conversations are between Australian students and both returning Australian students and Indian social work students doing their placement in Adelaide. Staff presentation of, and references to, the international activities in a range of university arena has also been significant in generating a broader university awareness of the activity and its outcomes. All of these are quite significant in disseminating some of the student experiences in India. However, the SWP is yet to devise more consistent, systematic and pervasive ways to maximise the outcomes across the school and beyond.

Internationalism is a culture that permeates an organisation and that culture is developed and strengthened by particular international activities and the meaning given to these activities in the wider life of the organisation. At present, SWP has developed the activities. However, it can more systematically and more effectively build internationalism into the culture of the school.

**Scaling up/sustainability**

In line with the developments over time in internationalisation at UniSA and with the involvement of SWP in India, and in Tamil Nadu in particular, SWP has actively sought to widen its network of potential Indian partners. This activity has proven to be important as a single, bilateral partnership has the potential of making SWP’s internationalisation in India vulnerable. Investment needed to be more broadly based.
During the latter part of 2006, UniSA signed MOUs with Madras Christian College and its Department of Social Work, which offers a Master of Social Work program. The relationship with MCC has been built over several years, but only more recently has it been operationalised to include student and staff exchange and collaborative research. In many ways, this development represents a necessary and timely broadening of the base of international partnerships for SWP, one which will enable staff and student exchange and collaborative research.

LESSONS LEARNED

The past eleven years have been rich in learning for the SWP, both in terms of its achievements in, and drawbacks of, its international activities and student mobility programs.

The first and enduring lesson has been the critical importance of holding a set of strong social values within the contemporary global context. These represent a moral conscience in the higher education sector and beyond. They provide a yardstick against which activity can be evaluated, a mirror to reflect on developments in an activity which is dynamic and at times, somewhat perplexing, chaotic and unpredictable.

The second lesson learned is the acceptance of strong international relationships as organic, where a seed is sown and opportunistically, the relationship grows. This is more than the signing of MoUs by respective Vice Chancellors. Embedded in organic institutional relationships are relationships between people. Within these personal relationships, such things as trust, commitment, ongoing negotiation of benefits and expectations, and passion can be nurtured to reinforce and strengthen relationships and ensure excellent outcomes from international activities and student mobility.

The third lesson is about the importance of building a culture of international activity within the organisation so that discrete activities are strongly and consistently supported. The extent to which we fall short of this contributes to the vulnerability of international activities and low sustainability.

The fourth lesson centres on the notion of intercultural sensitivity. This implies the need to be open to learning, prepared to constantly negotiate and re-negotiate expectations and to reflect on one’s own practice, as well as various (own and other) cultural practices, against strong social values.

Lastly, lessons have been learned in the development from one bilateral relationship to becoming a participant in a multilateral, international, collaborative partnership with an agreed-upon set of values and objectives, and which has the capacity for, and resources to engage in a range of activities, including student mobility, research and other exchange programs.

CONCLUSION

In 1996, the SWP’s foray into international activities was somewhat naïve. It was also opportunistic and a step into the unknown. Since 1996, there have been achievements and shortfalls. However, both of these are secondary to the processes which have been engaged in, whereby developments have been evaluated against social values and where the significance of holding those values in the contemporary globalised world have been clear.
The process of developing international activities has been an ethical and moral journey, one of balancing tensions and modifying pathways in a cyclical process of action-reflection-action. Alongside this, being open to opportunities as they arise has enabled the last eleven years to be dynamic and flexible, yielding developments that have strengthened a moral internationalism. The new multilateral partnership, the Centre for International Social Work is not the end of the journey, but simply another milestone in a journey that will not end, but continue to evolve and develop, maintaining strong social values but within a dynamic and ever-changing context.

REFERENCES


