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Pacific Islands field education - promoting Pacific social work education & practice across Oceania

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Abstract
The Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative started in 2012 and has developed into an innovative project combining various stakeholders. Over the last 4 years, it has seen 20 Western Sydney University (WSU) students successfully complete a 3-month field education placement in either Fiji, Samoa or Tonga; in an array of agencies working with women, children, families and adult offenders. Apart from mobilising students to undertake international learning opportunities, the initiative strives to support the development of social work education, teaching and learning outcomes with the University of the South Pacific (USP); who has an active MOU arrangement with Western Sydney University. Such an approach is embedded within the desire to also create a more nuanced, sustainable perspective on the professional role of Social Work across Oceania.

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What is theory from the south?

The push behind the emerging scholarship and theory from the South is to invert or subvert the epistemic scaffolding of the western Enlightenment as the wellspring of all universal knowledge, irrespective of time and place. It comes from a place of resistance to the domination of western social history by those living in the metropolis of Europe and North America ignoring the fact that there is a whole new and different world ‘out there’. A world where there is myriad of sites of knowing and self-conscious reflection, places where important ideas, experiences, and theories are also developed. Southern theory highlights a world of rich socio-political and cultural activity existing in the southern hemisphere, whose history of ideas was previously ignored as there was no obvious place in the European social order.

In particular, Connell’s (2007) key text “Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science” centres on how the South is known but never the knower, construed as a source of data mining for metropolitan theorising, while theory that arises from the actual social experience of the South is excluded. Knowledge from colonial settler countries and peripheral societies is contaminated by Eurocentric biases. To become global, current social thinking must democratisé to include significant southern theoretical voices and debates (Connell, 2007) and sharing and understanding of different forms of knowledge.

Theory from the South is about the relationship between settler colonies, peripheral societies and the metropole. Its aim is to shift the ground of social theory from its northern cultural boundaries by opening new connections and avenues for critical thinking, for new perspectives from other ‘lands’ and the ‘ocean’ to emerge informed by a colonial past grounded in political, economic and cultural history of oppression, exclusion and marginalisation but also in hope and renewal with new found voices. Modern social work can take note and this edition gives acknowledgement to social work voices from the South to correct current existing theory and practice; to move southern theory from the periphery to the centre of modern social thinking.


Introduction

The Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative started in 2012 and has developed into an innovative project combining various stakeholders. Over the last 4 years, it has seen 20 Western Sydney University (WSU) students successfully complete a 3-month field education placement in either Fiji, Samoa or Tonga; in an array of agencies working with women, children, families and adult offenders. Apart from mobilising students to undertake international learning opportunities, the initiative strives to support the development of social work education, teaching and learning outcomes with the University of the South Pacific (USP); who has an active MOU arrangement with Western Sydney University. Such an approach is embedded within the desire to also create a more nuanced, sustainable perspective on the professional role of Social Work across Oceania.

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Therefore, the PIFE initiative operates with the following three key components; 1) to provide opportunities for global mobility through international social work placements, 2) enhance social work education practices and approaches in the Pacific, 3) Develop professional reputation and reach of social work in the region. This feature article will further explore the various aspects of social work education and practice in the Pacific, highlighting the importance of student preparedness, and the development of new skills and perspectives when undertaking a field education placement in the Pacific. Additionally, the article will further highlight the importance of student preparedness, and the importance of working collaboratively with local agencies to meaningfully obtain positive outcomes for students and the wider community.

Collaborating across the Pacific

Learning opportunities for students

International learning opportunities for students is a growing goal for Australian Universities (Dall'Alba & Sidhu, 2013; Fairchild, 2006). With the creation of the OS HELP loans in the last 5 years from the federal governments, students have the opportunity to access an additional student loan of either $3000 AUD or $6400 AUD (Australian Government, 2016). Applications for funds are respectively endorsed by the University; on the premise that their overseas learning opportunity is connected to specific learning outcomes within their coursework.

A formal Expression of Interest (EOI) process occurs in November each year, opened to all undergraduate Social Work students at Western Sydney University. Applications for EOI are vetted, with eligibility to undertake their second field education placement in the following year. After completing this online process, applications are reviewed. If deemed suitable, the applicant is offered a position in the student team, and then matched to a particular country and agency within.

Models of student participation in international field work education vary, with general reference to four approaches overviewed by Pettsys, Panos, Cox, & Osthusyens (2005); 1) independent / one time placement in a specific geographical location; 2) Neighbouring country model, where students were resident or citizens; 3) On-site model where adjunct faculty member in host country could stay as on-site field educator; 4) Exchange / reciprocal model, in which the home university sent faculty members to the placement site at their own expense (p 282 – 287). The Pacific Island Field Education (PIFE) model transcends key elements of approaches 2 – 4, with a view to promote sustainability through the access of OS HELP for individual students, alongside a commitment to expand across other Pacific Island states in the coming years. Apart from the three Pacific Countries Western Sydney University is currently sending student

Feedback provided by students in PIFE 2016

Collection of information from students

To support this article for Social Dialogue, the eight Western Sydney University students undertaking placement in the Pacific from July – October 2016 were invited to provide feedback on the role of social work in the Pacific, whilst reflecting on their contribution to the development of social work education and professionalism in the region. All students agreed to be involved, and provided their feedback via video, recorded in their respective Islands during their mid placement visit with the author. Three questions were asked: 1) How is Pacific social work practiced? 2) How can you contribute to its development in the region? 3) How can you implement what you’ve learned so far back home? To honour our commitment to Indigenous methodologies, the key findings presented below are given in quotation form, enabling participants to directly shape the outcomes of such perspective feedback on curriculum content, and assisted in the goal for international accreditation.

In addition to this approach, Western Sydney University students are generally paired with the University of the South Pacific students in local agencies. A reciprocal learning exchange occurs within this space, enabling WSU students to develop a greater insight into local & indigenous perspectives whilst supporting USP to enhance their evolving knowledge of social work in a global context.

Development of local services and organisations

Supporting the development of how social work is professionally applied through practice, policy and research is another key feature of the PIFE model. This has involved working closely with local agencies in each Island state to create a clearer understanding of the role of social work as a viable profession, and supporting its adaptation into organisational outputs. That is, students from both Universities are supporting the creation of programs that reflect social work principles, in turn enhancing models of service delivery and provision within each respective agency. For example, for students undertaking a placement in Samoa, they have pioneered the development of welfare programs for inmates within their Correctional facilities. This includes the integration of perspectives like strength based, solution focused and narrative perspectives that strive to promote an anti-oppressive approach. However, the implementation of such social work discourse is still in the context of Pacific perspectives, and the desire to make sure it is responding to local and indigenous communities.

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Students also highlighted the way in which social work is still emerging as a recognised profession, with various approaches and principles being adopted and adapted to current service models:

"There are elements of Social work practice - from basic interviewing to the care factor and empathy and understanding" [SE]

"Through our work with FACSW [Fiji Association of Community and Social Workers] and our agencies it is evident that people are pushing for it to be a profession and not just doing nice things for people who need it. They are starting to realise that it is a necessary profession and it's also something that people need to know as it can be quite dangerous for people who are not equipped to deal with situations that are of a high level" [SM]

"Once we explain it, they really do understand. Some may think that it's like a counselling degree but when we try and speak to them and say what it involves they understand and seem really happy about it, and want us here, and want our input on everything" [EW]

"I've meet a lot of Tongans who ask 'what is social work?' as they think its counselling or they think it's to do with nursing, but it's not. It's totally different, so it's hard. We need it!" [JV]

However, in a Pacific cultural context, our social work students also saw the importance to evolve social work education and practice through a Pacific lens:

"I think the understanding of how we can best utilise the culture here to enhance the outcomes of social work is being recognised and starting to really take shape and beginning to really grow... and if you match the culture with the social work initiative, there is potential for really great outcomes; it's definitely there" [SL]

"Working together in collaboration with the people to be able to create a framework or guidelines or organisational structures to hopefully help develop the social work profession" [SE]

"...the culture here in Samoa is so strong and it is embedded from birth, and so they carry it around in everything that they do. It is underpinned by culture first, and being able to relate social work methods, social work messages through its community values and methods is important." [CJ]

Like any profession, it is important for social work in the Pacific to be dynamic, and to challenge the risk of becoming static, which may occur when practitioners are not committed to working with client groups to meet the ever changing, and complex nature of social and welfare needs.

2) How can you contribute to its development in the region?

Skills development for local workers was an important focus in creating professional approaches across the Pacific, specifically in the development and implementation of strategies that best suit client self-determination and empowerment. This included drawing from the client's worldview, and their ability to contribute to outcomes:

"...to focus on the client strengths instead of looking at the problem and looking at how good the child is going even in the Juvenile Justice Centre" [LR]

"It would be helpful if they could acquire more knowledge through training. Good if we could develop and implement more training programs for women to look at what is causing the disadvantage in the particular family." [KM]

An acknowledgement of current workers utilising social work skills, despite not previously labelling it in that manner was evident:

"It's been really cool to see them realise "Oh my gosh! I actually am doing motivational interviewing!" But just refining it a little bit to be more effective; so I've really enjoyed being able to teach as well as learn and I think you can learn from teaching... I've had to rethink a theory that I think I know from the back of my hand but to explain to someone in a different culture, you need to actually put it in their context. I really enjoy doing that and just being an advocate for the importance of social work" [SM]

Students also expressed a sense of purpose in being able to assist in a positive manner; now and possibly in the future:

"I think that I'm already contributing by just being here and kind of pioneering the idea of social work in Tonga and I'm happy that I got to do this opportunity and now students can come here years on, and it will grow from there" [EW]

"I've meet a lot of people who ask what social work is; and it's kind of help me to redefine what social work is in this context" [JW]

"...being more mindful of dealing with people from different cultures and being able to communicate in different ways and a better understanding as to why people may do things differently" [URI]

One student, who comes from a Fijian heritage herself, continued to see the importance of empowering Pacific women to be proactively involved in the process of social change and justice:

"...women need to be included in decision-making not only in family but also to further their education. Education could be the best approach women can take to help them look after themselves mentally, physically and psychologically and also boost their confidence to have greater self-esteem to achieve their goals" [KM]
Another student has developed a greater appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of identity, and the role of culture; changing their ability to engage as professional practitioners:

“Having this conversation with people is important as people think this is more of a holiday destination rather than seeing needs that are required to be met.” [SM]

Students also valued the way in which their participation in the Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative has transformed their own understanding of identity and the role of culture; changing their ability to engage as professional practitioners:

“That they’re in, [and] being able to do that would be invaluable to my career and to impacting people on a personal level.” [CJ]

Students also valued the way in which their participation in the Pacific Islands Field Education (PIFE) initiative has transformed their own understanding of identity and the role of culture; changing their ability to engage as professional practitioners:

“I think I’ll be more mindful about the way I act in the workplace...and just have a greater understanding that will be shown through my actions.” [JW]

Another student has developed a greater appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of identity, and the role of culture; changing their ability to engage as professional practitioners:

“My understanding of culture and its role in how it shapes people’s interactions with the world has grown exponentially... Respecting culture and certainly not underestimating its potential to create positive change has grown.” [SL]

I argue that the concept of Melanesian way enables us to view the researcher’s relationship to the context and research participants as important in balancing the restrictions of exclusive insider and outsider identities, a position sometimes argued as detrimental to ethical research (Greene 2014; Kersetter, 2012; Dwyer & Burke, 2009). Following from my experience and analysis I suggest that research in PNG and other similar contexts should be inclusive, flexible and open in order to embrace the value of local culture, community norms and values, traditional knowledge, as well as accommodating the situational approaches and researcher positional shifts throughout the research process.

Insider and outsider discourse

There is limited epistemological understanding of insider/outside research in Melanesia. For this reason my research can contribute to building that knowledge base in the region. Recent research (Lawihin, 2016; Greene, 2014; Kerssetter, 2012) has indicated that the insider-outside researcher role that exists in any research in any context is multidimensional in nature. Kerssetter (2012) argues these roles as: insider, outsider and/or somewhere in between. These researcher roles are significant in determining the accessibility of data sources and the quality of research data and outcomes. However, it is the “space in between” that I identify as ‘safe identity’ in my current research (Lawihin, 2016); this space too is complex and multidimensional. Safe identity is synonymous with the ‘space in between’. Therefore it is a situation where research participants and researchers identify themselves as both insiders and outsiders, recognizing that they occupy a “space between” (Serrant-Green, 2002) enabling flexibility to alternate positions throughout the research process.

Ethical research in Western liberal democracies calls for the exertion of relationships researchers have with contexts and participants to ensure greater research integrity and credible outcomes (National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), 2015). This notion however, is challenged by the Melanesian view that researchers must be seen to have direct and respected level of relationship with research participants and the context in order to enable access to appropriate data sources, and gather relevant research data in an open and honest way. In Melanesia, this position is exemplified through the values of acceptance, respect and trust afforded by past and existing relationships which are integral to the dominant principles of moral collectivism (Maladele, 2006). Moral collectivism denotes shared values espoused by community members that define what is right and what immoral is.

The multidimensional nature of researcher identity in the Melanesian/PNG context: A personal account of my journey through a Master of Social Work (research)