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International Field Placements- which model will fit me, my team and my students?

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Publication Details

M. Fox 2016 International Field Placements- which model will fit me, my team and my students? *New Voices in Social Work Research*
<https://newvoicesinsocialworkresearch.wordpress.com/2016/11/30/international-field-placements-which-model-will-fit-me-my-team-and-my-students/>

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Abstract

International field placements have become increasingly popular, in line with globalisation (Panos, 2005), and global interdependence (Petty et al., 2005). Key areas of learning for social work students undertaking an international field placement include international comparison (Healy, 2008), cross-cultural skills and anti-colonialist practice (Gray, 2005), and the development of cultural sensitivity and ethnorelativism (Engstrom and Jones, 2007).

Keywords

students?, which, team, placements-, field, international, my, me, fit, will, model

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

M. Fox 2016 International Field Placements- which model will fit me, my team and my students? New Voices in Social Work Research <https://newvoicesinsocialworkresearch.wordpress.com/2016/11/30/international-field-placements-which-model-will-fit-me-my-team-and-my-students/>

A blog for HDR & ECR researchers in Welfare and Social Work in Australia and New Zealand

New Voices in Social Work Research

International Field Placements- which model will fit me, my team and my students?

Dr Mim Fox is an early career researcher and Lecturer in social work at the University of Wollongong. Dr Mim Fox graduated with her PhD from UNSW Australia in 2015. Mim explored the relationship between international field placements and the development of a professional international social work identity. Mim's research interests, post-PhD, are focussed on the development of professional identity, the practice of international social work, social work education and the learning process. Mim maintains a professional and research interest in health social work. Contact Mim at her email mfox@uow.edu.au

International field placements have become increasingly popular, in line with globalisation (Panos, 2005), and global interdependence (Pettys et al., 2005). Key areas of learning for social work students undertaking an international field placement include international comparison (Healy, 2008), cross-cultural skills and anti-colonialist practice (Gray, 2005), and the development of cultural sensitivity and ethnorelativism (Engstrom and Jones, 2007).

Despite some universities establishing an environment conducive to international partnerships and universities recognising the benefits to including international field placements in social work curriculum, support for international field placements by social work programs can be variable and subjective in nature, with the inclusion of international field placements being social work program specific across the country. Each social work program is in a position to determine whether or not they choose to include international field placements in their curriculum, and when doing so the nature of the model they include. Hosting agencies are even less likely to have an international mandate, it is often a decision made by an individual social worker as to whether they supervise an international field placement. Given these factors, it is timely that an argument is made for social work programs to implement a planned approach to international field placement provision.

As part of my PhD, I surveyed 28 social work programs in Australia. Of those surveyed, 15 indicated that they either accepted students internationally for international field placements in Australia, or sent Australian students overseas for placements. Fifteen social work programs were then interviewed about these placements and the results showed that although there is no consensus as to how to organise an international field placement, there are 4 models that academic and professional staff use when doing so. In addition, many programs discussed using a combination of these models at different times, dependent on the capacity of the social work program to support the international field placement, and dependent on the capacity and previous skills of the student involved. Ethics approval was gained from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee for this study initially in 2009 and data analysis was complete in 2012.

The table below provides a snapshot comparison of the various models operating. By defining the relevant variables involved in the organisational context of the international field placement,

university staff and hosting agencies are able to compare and contrast the models in order to plan in advance for their involvement. Whilst some universities have an overt internationalised agenda, this is not the case for all. Similarly, while some social work programs are willing and able to invest the time and resources in supporting the international field placement, others are not. For some hosting agencies, they are not able to shoulder the total delegation of risk management or supervision that some models require. For others this is possible. By considering these variables in advance the final success of an international field placement is maximised for both the student, the hosting agency and for the home university.

Model	Builds on academic collaborations or international relationships	Contributes to university's international approach	Reciprocal relationships	Delegation of risk management to hosting university	Delegation of educational input
Formalised university to university agreements	Can be developed for a single student or ongoing students.	Requires an MOU or legal agreement between universities.	The relationship between the two universities can involve reciprocal student travel, the provision of educational or liaison support to travelling students, or the provision of practical support including immigration, housing, etc.	There can be an inequity in how much educational or liaison support the home or host university will provide but there can also be a strong sense that the partner university has a duty of care for the travelling student.	The student is enrolled in the hosting university and subject to their assessment and administrative requirements as well as their home university. This can lead to pedagogical and administrative confusion.
Formalised university to agency agreements	Often builds on long term research collaborations that academic staff has fostered.	Can bring international reputation and further collaborations to both the university and the international agency.	There is an ongoing effort and resourcing required by the home university in maintaining these relationships.	Total delegation is not possible in this model. Risk and safety issues can be present for international agency staff that can impact on the placement.	Familiarity can develop over time between the international agency and university field education staff providing ease of placement organisation.
*Linkages between Australian social work programs	A high level of support and professional validation can be developed between academic and professional colleagues when they collaborate on international placements.	Although this does contribute it is not fundamental to this model.	Inter-university relationships can mean a decreased need in the individual universities' time and resources for each placement.	This model can involve complete delegation of risk management which can be a source of tension if there is an inter-university disagreement.	This model can involve complete delegation of educational responsibility, including liaison and supervision, which can be a source of tension if there is an inter-university disagreement.
**Informal linkages for the purpose of individual students	Placements are usually initiated following guest lectures or other one-off events, or are organised via academics international relationships and collaborations.	There is no formalised agreement involved as this model is situation dependant.	Placements are organised by the student or by the university and are tailored to the specific student. The students' circumstances are usually the impetus for the placement (eg. family migration). Students use their language skills in the organisation of the placement.	Field education staff ensures individual negotiations regarding risk and safety matters prior to departure with international agency. Students who have local language skills are often involved in these negotiations.	Field education staff ensures individual negotiations regarding supervision, liaison and educational support prior to departure. Students who have local language skills or local organisational contacts are often involved in these negotiations.

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November 30, 2016

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