

# “DIFFERENT WAYS OF LOOKING”: A STUDY OF PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL AND CIVIC REWARDS FROM INTERNATIONAL WORK-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR COMMUNITY YOUTH WORK STUDENTS AT ULSTER UNIVERSITY, NORTHERN IRELAND

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## ABSTRACT

Northern Ireland is emerging from a 30-year local conflict, with new democratic local structures and a new landscape for civic engagement having been established. Community youth workers are well positioned to nurture these new political and civic structures; however, after decades of insular living and thinking, global skills and attitudes are acutely needed. This study gauges the extent to which the international placement of Ulster University (UU) students can help build a population who is “forward- and outward-looking” and how these students’ new perspectives, skills and knowledge can be used for and beyond a “new” Northern Ireland. This mixed-methods study explores the impact of international student placements and their effectiveness in fostering “global-ready citizens”. Findings from this study suggest that the preparation phase must attend equally to both *the fear* and *the opportunities* of internationalisation that face the departing student. The study also points to key elements needed in the preparation of students to develop their role as *cultural nesters* rather than *cultural visitors* (in their new context). The study illustrates an alignment between the development of intercultural competence and the vocational competence of the community youth work profession. This natural alignment suggests that community youth work students and professionals could further embrace and extend their intercultural skills abroad and their multicultural competence at home for wider and deeper impact.

**Keywords:** cultural competence; youth work; international; conflict; work-based learning; civic engagement.



## INTRODUCTION

International placements have for 40 years been an optional feature of undergraduate training of students enrolled in the Community Youth Work (CYW) course at Ulster University (McCready and Loudon 2015). These placements comprise European study visits and placements abroad. In the first two decades, the evolution of these learning opportunities was less by design and more opportunistic; however, over the past 20 years, formal international partnerships have been established. Currently, the second work placement of three is normally in a country outside of Northern Ireland. Against the backdrop of hard-pressed university resources, this study seeks to build empirical evidence on the impact of international placements<sup>1</sup> on CYW students, on their professional formation and on the internationalisation of their practice.

## RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The pursuit of the global-ready citizen or global-ready graduate (Paige and Goode 2009, 333) is a growing expectation of education at graduate and postgraduate level. Research about this expectation in the international work-based context has been conducted in some clinical disciplines, particularly nursing (Balandin et al. 2007; Callister and Cox 2006; Haloburdo and Thompson 1998; Standage and Randal 2014). Other research has focused on expeditions or exchange visits where the focus is the group experience rather than the integrative or immersive experience (Allison and Von Wald 2010). Research into social work students undertaking international work placements (Lough, McBride, and Sherraden 2012), while different in ethos and approach, provides insights useful to the international CYW experience. International research, in focusing attention largely on the student who *undertakes an international university course*, has neglected investigating the evolution of the *international work-based learning student experience*. This study focuses on CYW students' *international work-based learning experiences* as opposed to their engagement in international *study* experiences to identify the degree to which students' internationalisation is deepened and internalised.

## THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONTEXT

Geographically, Northern Ireland is part of a small island but constitutionally it is part of the United Kingdom. The “smallness” of Northern Ireland (its population is about 1.85 million) has led to an accepted wisdom that citizens will benefit from greater connections nationally and internationally. Northern Ireland is emerging from a recent conflict, known as the “Troubles”, which lasted from the late 1960s until 1998. The Good Friday Agreement (Northern Ireland Office 1998) heralded the beginning of a

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1 The term international placements and the term international work-based learning student experience will be used interchangeably in this paper.

peace process for the region, with paramilitary ceasefires, new democratic structures and opportunities to develop a healthy civil society.

The Troubles have left many psychological marks on the population, including a stubborn parochialism and sectarianism, which threaten to keep the Northern Ireland conflict simmering at low levels for the foreseeable future. The solution most keenly presented is for Northern Ireland to develop into a “forward- and outward-looking region”, a phrase coined by the European Commission as part of its peace and reconciliation funding programmes (Youth Council for Northern Ireland 2015, 12).

This is the backdrop against which international study has developed at UU for CYW students. The development of international placement opportunities was less influenced by ideas and literature on intercultural competence, global citizenship and internationalising the student (Allison and Von Wald 2010; Blum and Bourn 2013; Duffy et al. 1999; Standage and Randall 2014). Its development relates to the rewards that the Northern Ireland peace-building agenda might reap from international engagement.

The international platform offers people from Northern Ireland an opportunity to gain new perspectives on growing up in a society of conflict and bring “home” new skills and models relating to citizenship and conflict transformation. They can return home with international stories to tell of new peoples and communities, stories of equal weight and pain to their own.

Furthermore, the demographics of the Northern Ireland population are expanding to reflect multicultural and multiracial diversity. These new communities of ethnic diversity require CYW professionals to be adaptive and responsive to a range of needs. The international work placement experience is an opportunity to develop professional intercultural skills abroad for direct transferability to the local multicultural context (Fenton 1997, cited in Grant and McKenna 2003, 530).

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative and quantitative study used purposive sampling in targeting previous and current UU CYW students who undertook international work placements. A questionnaire was distributed by way of the online service company SurveyMonkey to 60 ex-students, of whom 39 responded. All respondents had completed a 10-week international work placement. Through the use of SPSS, the quantitative data obtained was analysed using frequency analysis and cross-tabulation. Respondents made effective use of open-ended questions to provide views, criticism and opinions. The themes were contextualised by data collated from three semi-structured interviews with chief executives and practice teachers from international work-placement agencies and four focus groups of students and ex-students at pre- and post-stages of their international experience. The total sample of respondents was 69.

## PROFILE OF INTERNATIONAL WORK-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Students experience three work placements throughout their CYW course, with the second work placement of three in a country outside of Northern Ireland. Three English-speaking countries are currently used for international placements of students enrolled in UU's BSc in Community Youth Work: South Africa, the United States of America and Australia. In South Africa, students are engaged in the work of Youth for Christ, Durban, and work in orphanages, with street-connected children, and assist with programmes that focus on HIV and AIDS and drug rehabilitation. Two agencies in Australia (Southern Youth and Family Services<sup>2</sup> and Dunlea) feature prominently, offering on-site accommodation to students and work experiences either in a large homelessness agency or an alternative education project. Placements in Chicago, Illinois are in youth justice, probation agencies, or residential units for young people with substance addictions. All three sites offer culturally distinct practices in working with young people, and their organisational cultures are reflective of their respective geographies and socio-economic contexts.

## MANAGING THE FEARS OF THE "INTERNATIONAL" EXPERIENCE

Maslow (1943), in theorising his hierarchy of needs, proposes that in order to motivate people, basic human needs must be met before an individual will focus on a "higher" need. Needs related to physical comfort, warmth, hunger and thirst alongside the need for safety and security must all be met. For people to achieve a set of "higher" cognitive or self-actualising goals, an environment in which they feel secure and in which their growth and wellbeing are promoted must be developed and maintained. For students embarking on international placements this means addressing their fears and practical issues to unburden themselves of anxiety and conditions that might hamper their journey.

Preparing to negotiate difference and diversity is more often than not about mastering a fear of the unknown and of a new setting (Kleehammer, Hart, and Keck 1990, 186; Yong 1996, 78). The international experience offers a useful vehicle through which strategies to master fears can be tested. Illustrative of this is the prominence given in research sources to navigation and transport issues within the work placement experience (Root and Ngampornchai 2013, 520). References are made to a combination of mastery (including knowledge of the transport system, possible language and money skills, time-keeping) and fear of the unknown. Cooke (1996, 1282) identified the levels of anxiety felt by students faced with complex and challenging clinical work experience

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2 Southern Youth and Family Services, Australia was awarded Placement of the Year 2012 by Ulster University in recognition of its contribution towards the professional formation of would-be graduates and a strong learning partnership with the community youth work team.

situations. A student's fear of making mistakes amongst new colleagues might lead to others forming a negative opinion of the student's competence. This fear is a naturally occurring one in any new setting, irrespective of the international dimension, but fears can be mastered. For example, survival language skills and basic living skills (Root and Ngampornchai 2013, 522) evolve within the international student experience. Respondents commented on how they had managed to learn to cook, live in crowded spaces, wash and clean and exchange money. One respondent remarked:

I have always lived with my mum and I have always had a free meal on the table but over there I was able to go out and cook my own food and do my own washing. (Student 8)

The impact of fear and instability can mean that the learner focuses on survival rather than on extracting deep learning from the process (Biggs and Tang 2011, 33).

## MEASURES TO ADDRESS FEARS AND INSECURITY

Pre-departure training has been criticised for the over-emphasis on practical measures and logistics of travel and arrangements (Paige and Goode 2009, 346; Root and Ngampornchai 2013, 524). This perspective, however, lacks due consideration for Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The findings of the current study highlighted a number of pre-departure practical considerations. The main issues were cost and visa applications. Finance was a prime determinant as to whether a student could shoulder the cost of going overseas for 10 weeks. Whilst accommodation was provided (for at least 34 respondents), students had to incur the cost of travel, food and spending money:

The cost was a difficult factor in the process. (Student 12)

In addition, visa processing generated much attention and anxiety in the pre-departure phase:

The application process for applying for visas was quite stressful. (Student 6)

At one stage I thought I wasn't going because we had problems with the visa. (Student 15)

Once the students arrived at their international destination, placement providers continued to address the needs of students, beginning with the needs indicated at Maslow's lower level and progressing to those on the higher levels. This continued care and support were not accidental but the outcome of much groundwork and investment in these relationships, built on mutual trust and mutual benefit, which were crucial for a strong partnership:

There is a relationship with the university and ourselves and there is trust. (Practice Teacher 1)

I think there is something about ... [the university] having a relationship with the Head of the agency. There is an ongoing relationship. (CEO)

We have seen your place of work and you have seen ours—so everyone understands where each is coming from. (Practice Teacher 4)

Respondents outlined the role of the placement provider in offering support with homesickness and, where appropriate, using this discomfort as a learning opportunity to build greater resilience:

I did find it very challenging. I was very homesick when I got to Australia but my practice teacher and colleagues helped me. I learned so much about myself as a person and grew really strong with the experience. (Student 24)

She even surprised herself because she thought she was going to be very homesick and she just got into it and felt really at home. (Practice Teacher 3)

Not all students were able to overcome their homesickness but the support of the placement provider to resolve this difficult situation became more important in these circumstances:

We had an unfortunate experience last year with a student who came and left within the first couple of weeks and I think it was just homesickness because it was the other side of the world. (Practice Teacher 1)

The measures needed to maintain a secure international learning environment and holistic student-centred support lie in building a strong triad of support between student, placement provider and university staff. This factor is commonly known, but rarely achieved.

## BEYOND SURVIVAL—MAXIMISING THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

For the student, the challenge is to move beyond fear and survival, to see the opportunities for personal and professional development. This paradox of fear and opportunity is a central feature of international work. The threat lies primarily in the personal and social vulnerability one might feel from how “globalisation” can intrude into “one’s world”. Fear can escalate based on the suspicion of difference and diversity (Dunn et al. 2004, 418; Schultz et al. 2009, 1024).

Educators’ main aims are to broaden the knowledge and skills base of students to equip them for leadership in national and international settings (Grant and McKenna 2003, 534). Central to building this leadership role is scrutinising different practice delivery and exploring the effectiveness and quality of intervention in a new cultural backdrop (Goldberg and Brancato 1998, 34). To achieve this global-ready worker, higher education is increasingly being driven towards the “*internationalisation of the curriculum*” [italics added] (Haigh 2002; Rizvi and Walsh 1998, 10) whereby curriculum developments align with global developments and themes. The driving vision is to build

a “culture of innovation, embracing new directions, ideas and opportunities” (Grant and McKenna 2003, 530).

Study respondents reported widening of perspectives through exposure to new cultural situations that might challenge personal and professional values:

I think there is racism in both countries but I think there are different ways of looking at it. So I think the experience of seeing how we treat our indigenous people ... those sorts of things are useful for them to learn. (Practice Teacher 3)

Techniques, work practices and professional approaches form part of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are returned to the work context of Northern Ireland. Although many of these are not new processes, their application within mainstream youth work may not have been previously encountered by students:

We may work alongside a young person and try to get them to reduce how much pot they are smoking. We don't have a policy of “just cut it out”, which I guess can be a new concept if you have never been exposed to drug and alcohol use. (Practice Teacher 1)

A driving vision for the internationalisation of the CYW student is the changing face of the Northern Ireland demographic. With a growing multicultural population, the need to adapt current skills, knowledge and attitudes to a more inclusive perspective becomes paramount. The international placement is seen to expand the repertoire of the CYW graduate for this new world:

I enjoyed every aspect of my placement, but particularly enjoyed experiencing the different cultures. (Student 13)

and

I think my placement in Australia made me a youth worker. It opened my eyes to new ideas and ways that youth workers can bring back to their practice here in Northern Ireland. (Student 14)

This exposure to new systems and approaches is a key feature of the study and has implications for developing empowering and innovative practices in a local context.

## ALIGNING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE WITH THE DISCIPLINE OF COMMUNITY YOUTH WORK

The development of intercultural competence for international student experiences has become an accepted threshold concept for higher education institutions. For some students and academics, this necessitates additional pre-departure preparation. This paper posits that the CYW discipline is closely aligned to the key components of intercultural competence and that all preparation for the international experience is embedded in the professional formation training of both practice and theory modules of the UU CYW course.

Intercultural competence is a disputed term (Deardorff 2006, 247), with definitions varying in tone and emphasis. Byram (1997, 34) identified the highest-rated definition of intercultural competence as:

Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs and behaviours.

Deardorff (2004, 184) proposed that intercultural competence be defined as:

The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Recurring elements emerge across the field of intercultural competence, which point to some broad agreement on the priorities and factors that interact to achieve effective intercultural competence (Deardorff 2006, 254; Grant and McKenna 2003; Root and Ngampornchai 2013, 522). Statements that received 85 per cent or more agreement contained common features such as those indicated by Deardorff (2006, 248):

the ability to shift one's frame of reference appropriately, the ability to achieve one's goals to some degree, and behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations.

The use of the phrase "intercultural perspective" is indicative of a wider set of elements at play with cognitive skills, combining with adjustments in perspective, attitude and expectation—"the understanding of others' world views" (Deardorff 2006, 248). Where student attitudes and perceptions are broadened, changes in behaviours are observable. Students develop a more sophisticated awareness of self, leading to more finely tuned responses to others.

Spitzberg (1989, 250) describes "appropriate" or "effective" responses as those actions that do not violate cultural rules and build towards achieving specific objectives. These are actions that cause no harm, and the intervention has the potential for empathetic understanding to be shown and grown (Rogers 1980, 115–117).

Community youth work uses a similar framework of knowledge, skills and attitudes in developing interpersonal relationships and professional skills that are applicable within "settings of complexity and ambiguity" (Roberts 2009, 3). Henry, Morgan, and Hammond (2010, 30) describe the development of effective interpersonal relationships as a driving methodology for community youth work practice which requires "the balance of three components: knowledge acquisition; skills development; and self-awareness raising (knowledge, skills and values)". Similar to intercultural competence, the value of knowledge-based learning is most useful when combined with skills and attitudinal competence.



## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACROSS SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES

Noticing and locating the self is a central concept in reflective interpersonal professions, be they clinical or community based (Burnard 2002; McCabe and Timmons, 2013; Wood, Westwood, and Thompson 2015). This self-awareness is best understood within two interlinked strands: firstly, a self-awareness that considers how our sense of self can impact on ourselves; secondly, the impact of self on others, particularly in interpersonal interventions and connections. Both are needed for professional competence across a range of local and international settings. The impact of self on others features consistently in the field of intercultural competence and intercultural communication, with a growing understanding of the intersection of skills, knowledge and attitudinal perspectives. For respondents in this study, growth in self-awareness, and personal and professional development were significant: 35 participants (92.1%) felt their self-awareness had increased; 23 (60.5%) felt they had improved as a reflective practitioner; and 26 (68.4%) felt more competent as a CYW practitioner.

The power of the personal and professional journey as being transformative was referred to by participants repeatedly. Participants described the integrated professional/personal transformative moments that enabled them to be more confident, articulate and resourceful practitioners:

I worked with homeless young people and it really enhanced my confidence and communication skills. (Student 20)

It was a massive developmental experience not just for my work but for life, improving my self-confidence. (Student 14)

A completely new and different experience which impacted positively on my personal and professional development. (Student 9)

A practice teacher noted the connections between personal and professional development:

I think their personal stuff is probably more outstanding than their professional growth but without the personal growth then the professional growth does not occur. (Practice Teacher 3)

There is no causal link to prove that personal development leads to professional development; however, there are indicators that they are intertwined and inextricably linked. The adjacency of personal and professional development is best understood through the intercultural lens of knowledge acquisition, skills development and values exploration.

In terms of *knowledge*, study participants illustrated how theories had been extracted from the teaching and applied to the international context:

I think the TA [transactional analysis] that we learned is really useful even outside of youth work. (Student 19)

The *skills* of the profession that are inherent in intercultural competence include communication and developing boundaries and respect:

Here you are shown how to be really professional, knowing boundaries and relationships between workers, your boss and the young people. (Student 15)

*Values exploration* presents as a centrepiece through which skills development, behaviours and knowledge are filtered. Lynch and Hanson (1998, 510) proposed that knowledge of cultural situations and norms was less of a driver than attitude:

After all the books have been read and the skills learned and practised, the cross-cultural effectiveness of each of us will vary. And it will vary more by what we bring to the learning than by what we have learned.

## CULTURAL EMPATHY AS A ROUTE TO “CULTURAL NESTING”

For community youth workers to facilitate a person’s “actualising tendency” (Kirshenbaum and Henderson 1997, cited in Henry, Morgan, and Hammond 2010, 31), the approach is based on the worker creating three core conditions: congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. For respondents, the development of cultural empathy built on and extended this empathy, using their own lived experiences to understand and appreciate new settings:

The Aborigine issue is a big one and it was good to compare and see similarities [with Northern Ireland] where there is hatred. It is a different topic but the same anger. (Student 9)

and

I found that removing myself from the Northern Ireland context was highly useful as I got to see the social issues which are prominent in Australia; for example, the indigenous communities and the social disadvantages which minorities face. (Student 10)

More often than not, this development of cultural empathy was an outcome of building new cultural knowledge:

I wasn’t really aware of the indigenous people but I was able to make an analysis of what was happening in Australia. I took a real interest into that cultural aspect of Australia and I enjoyed looking into its history. (Student 5)

A concern remains that students develop a limited or surface cultural empathy for the new environment, rather than a deeply felt identification with new peoples and places. The question of whether students are more akin to “*cultural visitors*” than “*cultural*

*nesters*” remains, with students making reference to cultural experiences rather than deeply immersive cultural living:

We participated in an Aboriginal day—you got to paint Aboriginal art and watch people play didgeridoos and dancing. (Student 12)

Goode (2008, 157) points out that pre-departure training often lacks intercultural understanding, and specific teaching on intercultural competence in preparation for the international experience is found to be wanting (Minucci 2008, cited in Root and Ngampornchai 2013, 524; Paige and Goode 2009, 334). Respondents in this study would concur:

A bit more information around the cultural differences (such as Aborigines) and learn more background, before you go, from the University ... that would have been more helpful. (Student 10)

Yet, a doubt remains amongst the placement providers as to whether it is *ever* possible to prepare for the extreme cultural differences that students face:

There is probably no preparation you can give someone for this kind of placement. (CEO)

Earliest theories of acculturative stress suggested that a period of shock was a normal part of the initial adjustment to a new culture (Lysgaard 1955, cited in Mikal, Yang, and Lewis 2015, 205), followed by a steady recovery whereby individuals began to immerse themselves in the host culture and to acquire culturally relevant knowledge. The professional development of respondents attested to this U-curve hypothesis:

Going to Australia was the first time I was ever away from home for any length of time and it really helped me develop my own independence and confidence. (Student 25)

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study point to the close alignment between the discipline of community youth work and the notion of intercultural competence. The skills of the profession are inherent in intercultural competence, and students who make these connections have a greater chance of becoming *cultural nesters* as opposed to *cultural visitors*. The power of this journey towards *cultural nesting* (as being transformative) was referred to by participants, articulating deep cultural empathy and insights into new people and places throughout their personal and professional journey.

Since 2000 there have been approximately 200 UU student placements in South Africa, Australia and the United States of America. The context of Northern Ireland is the backdrop for these students, with the international placement offering new perspectives on citizenship and nation-building. The local vision is that students bring new perspectives and insights back home to build a strong civic society for Northern Ireland. Wilson

(2015, 14) understood and articulated the role of youth work in building democracies and nations through intercultural understanding. He proposed that “Sustaining meetings between different others, and promoting inter-cultural understanding must be a central mental model in youth work practice” and that “Restoring citizenship, whatever our political identity—is a youth work task.”

Wilson (2015, 10) proposed a model of how community youth work could build citizenship and lively democracies. The outcomes of this model are to “Build a civil society, to sustain dialogue (which has healing opportunities) and to promote inter-culturality (which embraces a new world).”

Ultimately these actions will promote and grow interdependence, a concept much needed within peace-building in Northern Ireland. The impact of the internationalisation process on CYW students fits within this role.

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