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# 'Times that by 100': Student learning from international practicum

*International Social Work*

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**Abstract**

International placements are uncommon for Aotearoa New Zealand social work students compared with many other countries. In 2015 five students undertook a 10-week placement in Cambodia. This article explores the students' perspectives on the skills, knowledge and capabilities required for international placements. The findings from this study indicate that questions remain as to whether the associated challenges outweigh the advantages of international placement experiences. We recommend that working with tertiary institutions from countries with more established international placement programmes may be one way of addressing some of the challenges and advancing international placements for Aotearoa New Zealand students.

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**Introduction**

Although in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States overseas placements are somewhat commonplace, the vast majority of practicum for Aotearoa New Zealand social work students occurs nationally. Many social work graduates travel overseas for employment post-qualification; however, the emphasis for practicum, including the competency standards students are required to achieve, is domestically focused. In 2015 a collaboration between the University of Waikato, Massey University and a non-government organisation (NGO), led to a new opportunity for five Bachelor of Social Work students to undertake a 10-week practicum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This article outlines perspectives from the students in relation to the knowledge, skills and capabilities required for a successful international placement. The notion of employability and how this may connect with an international placement experience is traversed along with a discussion on whether the added value of international placements is sufficient to balance or outweigh any associated challenges for the key stakeholders.

**Background**

Social work has been recognised as an international profession since 1951, and organisations such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) encourage ongoing international dialogue, policy development and advocacy. Their joint Global Definition of Social Work endeavours to set parameters around the role and responsibilities of social workers across the world. The term 'international social work' is, however, contested and may infer a field of practice whereby social workers have the skills and knowledge to work overseas or with international agencies, international exchanges or practicum, or be able to understand different contexts of social work practice and global issues or concerns (Fouché et al., 2016; Haug, 2005; Healy, 2008; Hugman et al., 2010; Merrill and Frost, 2011; Midgley, 2001). This article will primarily focus on the second of these definitions, that is, international practicum.

International practicum for social work students in Aotearoa New Zealand is an infrequent occurrence. Geographical isolation means that international travel for placements is expensive. Lack of funding for students and tertiary staff also limits potential international opportunities. With tertiary staff not easily able to accompany or visit students, they may face greater risk than perhaps would be experienced by their European or North American counterparts (Barlow, 2007; Didham et al., 2011; Mathiesen and Lager, 2007). There is, however, growing interest and commitment to the concept of these types of placements, and this can be seen as part of a broader focus within the tertiary sector on internationalisation (Crisp, 2015; Parker et al., 2015). With this international orientation there is an increasing focus on the necessity of students of social work, from whichever country they are studying, to not only be equipped for working cross-culturally in-country, but also to have transferable skills, knowledge and understandings to work effectively in other countries, whether during or post tertiary training (Bell and Anscombe, 2013; Mathiesen and Lager, 2007).

Growing recognition of the global context of social work and increased student mobility and interest in overseas employment has also led to an increasing demand for international placements (Cleak et al., 2016; Das and Anand, 2013). That said, parameters from accrediting bodies or tertiary institutions themselves may limit the type and number of these placements in any given year. The Australian and Irish associations of social work, for instance, only allow one international placement for a student during their qualifying programme (Cleak et al., 2016). In the UK, few universities offer international

placements due to restrictive qualifying arrangements and concerns about supervision and the relevance of the learning from these placements to working in the local context (Cleak et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2015). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), the programmes' approval body, sets parameters around the social work practicum (Hay and Brown, 2015; Hay and O'Donoghue, 2009). In the guiding practicum policy (placement within a recognised social work qualification) there is no mention of international placements; however, other requirements, including that all students are supervised by a registered social worker (RSW), may limit this as a possibility (SWRB, 2015). Individual social work programmes therefore have autonomy to make decisions as to regulations on international placements, while ensuring that these are in keeping with the SWRB requirements.

## International practicum

Field placements in international settings are considered to be a significant learning opportunity for students with value both for them and for the wider social work profession (Beecher et al., 2010; Sossou and Dubus, 2013). Motivations for undertaking such a practicum, however, are varied. Razak (2002) and Webhi (2009) assert that understanding student motivation for an international placement is important to militate against voyeurism and a potential continuation of power imbalances. Motivations may include interest in other cultures or people, extending existing knowledge and experience, making a difference or contributing to the host environment, or, more simply, having an adventure (Cleak et al., 2016; Magnus, 2009; Rai, 2004; Webhi, 2009).

The educational rationale for international placements is frequently connected with the development of students, both personally and professionally. Strengthening the cultural competence of the student is often noted (Fairchild et al., 2006; Parker et al., 2015; Sossou and Dubus, 2013; Sousa and Almeida, 2016). Opportunities not available in their local setting, especially in terms of issues of diversity and the challenging of beliefs, values and biases, are also potential positive outcomes for students (Cleak et al., 2016). Students may offer specialised skills to host communities, including 'assessment, case management, community development, cultural awareness and crisis intervention' (Cleak et al., 2016: 11), and also learn about alternative social and cultural contexts, problems and solutions. Placements in developing countries often focus on meso-level interventions, including community development, poverty alleviation and capacity building, and enabling students to develop unique understandings of the global context of social work (Cleak et al., 2016).

The literature on international placements raises legitimate challenges. The pre-placement preparation and reintegration of students needs to be thoughtfully planned, and include a thorough exploration and analysis of the context of the placement, indigenous practices, social work ethics and values as well as influences such as globalisation and colonialism (Heron, 2005; Sossou and Dubus, 2013). As Sossou and Dubus (2013) note, students may face challenges with understanding the 'causes, consequences and dynamics' of the array of social issues, including human rights abuses, without appearing judgemental due to their Western perspective of such matters (p. 15).

Also necessary are the preparation of all parties, an ability to expect the unanticipated, and robust support structures either in-country or from afar (Hugman, 2010; Parker et al., 2015). Sossou and Dubus (2013) question the value of international placements that are not grounded in the needs and preferences of the communities in which students are placed. How this is ensured requires continued thought. Having a sufficient level of local language may also significantly affect the ability of students to effectively communicate with many of the local people (Sossou and Dubus, 2013). Travel to and within the host country and adequate finances are also noted as issues or barriers to international placements (Sossou and Dubus, 2013).

These issues require close attention by social work educators, especially if the demand for international placements continues, whether precipitated by students or the internationalisation agenda. Parker et al. (2015) have emphasised that while students in their study were positive

about their international placement experience, and frequently cited it as 'life changing' and enhancing their employability (p. 393), they question whether social work education adequately prepares students for these placements. The success of such placements relies on the social work curriculum to prepare them for contributing to and gaining from these experiences (Parker et al., 2015). Furthermore, they highlight the importance of further consideration of the sustainability and pedagogic value of international placements, and ensuring these are truly reciprocal and anti-oppressive in nature.

## **The placement**

In August 2015, two students from the University of Waikato and three students from Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand began a 10-week placement in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Four of the students were in their final, fourth year of the Bachelor of Social Work, with the remaining student in the third year. The students were placed with a local NGO, which sits under the umbrella of an international NGO. The purpose of the placement was to undertake a scoping exercise to explore NGO, community and government responses to child trafficking, as well as current initiatives, challenges, gaps and opportunities for future development in this field. An RSW from Aotearoa New Zealand accompanied the students, and provided weekly supervision and mentoring throughout the entire placement. University staff worked alongside the students in Cambodia for 4 weeks of the 10-week placement. An on-site field educator from the associated NGO was expected to support the students on a daily basis and guide them through the placement. This, however, did not occur, and the students became self-directed and only supported by the RSW. Prior to leaving for Cambodia, the students had 4 days of placement preparation with the university and the NGO staff based in Aotearoa New Zealand. The students began to build relationships with one another and engaged in learning around the project as well as aspects of Cambodia's cultural, social and political environment.

Given the challenges raised in the literature as to the preparedness of students to contribute to and gain from international placements, the university staff were interested in undertaking a small piece of research alongside the placement to explore student, supervisor, agency and academic perspectives on the knowledge, skills and capabilities valuable for international placements as well as employability and recommendations for curriculum development. This idea was discussed with the students and the NGO during the pre-placement training, and there was agreement that this would be a useful learning exercise throughout the placement. Each student and the student supervisor agreed to participate and be acknowledged as either contributors or co-authors in any ensuing publications. Offering the opportunity of co-authorship affirmed the students' and supervisor's role in the research and helped the lead authors manage the ethical consideration of confidentiality. This was important as the identification of students would otherwise be relatively easy, given the scarcity of international placements.

## **Method**

After ethics approval from the two universities, open-ended questionnaires were given to the five students, the RSW, two agency staff (based in Aotearoa New Zealand) and the two academics at the beginning, middle and end of the placement. Consent was indicated by completion of the questionnaires. All five students and the two academics completed the first questionnaire. Four students completed the mid-placement questionnaire, and three students and the RSW submitted the final questionnaire. This article explores only the student perspectives from the questionnaires.

Four of the students were female. The students were aged between 22 and 40 years. One of the students identified as tangata whenua (Māori).

## Data analysis

The questionnaires were initially sorted according to the questionnaire items and the stage of the placement. Coding then occurred across the emerging themes as patterns became apparent. Similarity of responses across the time span of the placement also led to the development of broad themes that are illuminated below (Spencer et al., 2014). Given the small sample size and qualitative approach, generalisation is not possible. The generated data do however offer insights into the student perspectives on this placement, and consequently provide some transferable ideas for potential future developments in international placements (O'Leary, 2010). Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality of the individual students' perspectives.

## Findings

Several themes were identified from the questionnaires completed by the students. These included knowledge, skills and capabilities, employability, identifying gaps, and recommendations for future students. Each theme will be discussed in turn.

### Knowledge

The students identified different types of knowledge as critical for an international placement. These related primarily to the context in which they would be working, social work knowledge and self-knowledge.

Understanding the broad cultural context of the placement and how to work appropriately within that setting was mentioned by all students as important. This knowledge included some understanding of the historical, ethnic, cultural, social, economic and religious context of Cambodia as well as very basic language, especially greetings. In addition, the students emphasised the importance of understanding their own culture so that recognition of difference and similarities could occur. Isabel commented, 'having knowledge of working cross-culturally and knowing your own culture is particularly important when working in a foreign country'. She also emphasised the concept of empowerment as 'there is a risk of continuing to perpetuate a system that has disempowering effects on local people'.

Knowing and using social work theories and models, both within their practice and as tools for understanding the experience, were also considered important, as discussed again by Isabel:

Theories like ecological systems have enabled me to look at the wider picture of an issue. Strengths based perspective has aided helping me to look for the strengths existing in the local cultures, all the while researching a horrific subject, child sex trafficking.

Another student also highlighted, '... having a good understanding [of] the social work ethics and the code of conduct ... realising that although you are going to be in a different country, it still applies and is important' (Eden).

Self-knowledge, particularly the ongoing development of self, was a common thread across the students' comments illustrated by Eden: 'I have learnt so much about myself and how I should and need to change some of my perceptions on the world.' Lee also elaborates, 'This placement has put me ... in a position where we were required to be completely autonomous ... develop our own systems and networks and build relationships – employing interpersonal skills'. Isabel recommends that students have good self-knowledge prior to the placement with a '... good understanding of yourself, how you manage stress, change, unknown situations and unpredictability and what will help you to manage them, self-care, boundaries etc.' Similarly, Eden notes that '... having a good understanding of what self-care is and how they deal with their own self-care is important'.

## Skills and capabilities

The students highlighted multiple skills and capabilities required for an international placement. These often overlapped and focused on interpersonal and professional attributes. Communication skills were emphasised by all the students as critical, and as Olivia noted, ‘... communication is the precursor for rapport building, engagement and relationship building’. Being flexible, self-motivated and open to learning were also suggested by most of the students including Isabel: ‘Openness to new things, experiences, change and being able to “go with the flow” when unanticipated events and things arise are invaluable qualities for completing a placement in a foreign context.’

The student capabilities were linked to the challenging circumstances of the placement, including living and working in the same space with minimal time away from one another and the lack of agency staff presence in the day-to-day tasks of the placement. Eden, for example, mentioned, ‘My personal capabilities would include ... balancing personal and professional relationships and understand when it is too much and when I need to back away’. Other interpersonal capabilities such as resilience, leadership and self-motivation were evident in these student comments:

Due to the nature of the placement, lacking in a field educator overseeing the placement, much of the leadership and decision-making has been placed upon us as the student group ... seeking to work through the team tensions has been a stressful process ... I think this is likely to have developed in me a greater resilience than I had before. (Isabel)

Students need to be resilient and adaptive to rapidly changing circumstance. Self-motivated and able to work autonomously. Aware of their own personality, characteristics, strengths and limitations and how those affect working in a team and in the field. (Lee)

Four of the students indicated that conflict resolution and teamwork skills were also utilised. Aylish commented that the students needed ‘... the in-depth ability to work as a team and reach agreements but also make sacrifices’. Similarly, Lee noted, ‘I think my current skills have been put to the test and my ability to be part of a group and resolve conflict has improved’. Eden also suggested the need to ‘... know own limits, understand conflict and conflict resolution, cool calm and collected. All everyday skills that a person needs to survive and times that by 100’.

In terms of specific professional skills developed during the placement, Isabel and Lee discussed interviewing, note taking, networking and writing-up brief reports.

## Employability

All but one student were in agreement that doing an international placement would likely enhance their employability. They emphasised the development of cross-cultural skills and a wider worldview than students who had had placements in their home country. Furthermore, they believed that employers would recognise the skills and strengths that they had acquired during the international placement. One student emphasised the transferability of some of these skills, including ‘the adaptability of students and ability to work autonomously’ (Lee), and another mentioned that ‘working with another culture in a culturally appropriate way will be very relatable to [the] New Zealand Māori context’ (Aylish). Two of the students emphasised the particular challenges of the placement, and how these enabled them to develop a specific skill set around conflict resolution and stress management that would also be of value in other practice contexts.

Another student cautioned that while the international experience may be positive from an employer perspective, the consequential limit to her Aotearoa New Zealand social work practice may be a disadvantage with employers. In particular, she noted that her experience with working with Māori clients was less than that of other students due to only one placement taking place in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The student who was unsure that the experience would directly enhance her employability suggested that instead it would change the way she practised in the future. She explained, 'This is because of the personal experiences and beliefs that I have gained from the placement and ... how the situations I have been a part of have positively impacted my life and my perception on the world' (Eden).

### *Identifying gaps*

The students identified specific gaps around their knowledge and the structure of the placement. The primary focus of the placement was a scoping exercise that required both project management and research skills. One student noted that she would have benefited from further skill development in these areas prior to the placement.

Understanding the international environment and its influence on the construction of social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as how NGOs operate in the global context, was seen by another student to have been a gap in the teaching curriculum. Increasing teaching on the effects of drugs and alcohol on a diverse range of client groups and more bicultural practice teaching was also noted by two other students.

The absence of a field educator who could offer daily support and guidance was mentioned by the majority of students as a significant challenge. While the RSW provided regular supervision and mentoring, she was not from the sponsoring organisation, and therefore could not fulfil the field educator role.

### *Recommendations for future students*

The students all had several recommendations for other students interested in international placements. Three of the students recommended that future students be prepared and open minded, or in the students' words: 'as ready as possible' (Olivia), 'willing to grow and be challenged' (Isabel) and to 'keep in mind the negatives that will also come with the placement' (Eden). Furthermore, having an understanding that the experience will be life changing, both personally and professionally, was highlighted by two of the students.

Strong support networks were seen as critical. Isabel commented, '... have people at home who are willing to support [you] in an intentional way. This support whether it be regular phone calls, skyping, facebook or emails will be so important to overall well-being'. Another student signalled that professional support was also important. Finding out how the university and the sponsoring organisation would support and guide them during the placement was recommended by three of the students. In particular, they suggested other students ask questions about 'what is required of you and what you will be doing while on placement' (Aylish), and 'ensure that the organisation has the correct intentions, proper evaluative processes and reports on their work, have a developed structure on the ground and can prove their effectiveness/show a track record of good work' (Lee). Having adequate finance was also noted as important, as Eden notes: '... there will definitely be times where you need to self-care properly and to do that it will usually involve money'.

## **Discussion**

An international practicum can contribute to a student's personal and professional development (Sossou and Dubus, 2013). Questions remain however as to the added value of international placements, given the significant associated challenges for students, the sponsoring organisation and their community/clients, and university staff (Cleak et al., 2016). There are many lessons to be learned.

Pre-placement preparation and establishing 'congruence of expectations' across the stakeholders contribute to successful placements (Hay and Brown 2015; Todd and Schwartz, 2009: 392). In this

situation there were unanticipated circumstances that were not easily addressed due to the practicum being in Cambodia. The minimal support from the sponsoring organisation after leaving Aotearoa New Zealand was unexpected and affected the entire placement. Despite considerable preparation and ongoing communication by the university staff, the assurances given by the sponsoring agency were not upheld and consequently the students did not have an office space to go to each day or have a field educator to support, guide and teach them in the Cambodian context. Instead, their accommodation also became their working space and their project work was largely self-directed with support from the RSW who accompanied them and the home-based university staff. This was unsatisfactory, and in the first week of the placement the students were provided with an opportunity to decide whether they wanted to continue with the placement given the changed circumstances. The students all decided to remain in Cambodia and continue with the planned project.

While unexpected events often occur on placements and students are encouraged to use these to develop resilience, flexibility and adaptability (Hay and Brown, 2015; Su, 2014), when students are overseas it is more difficult for them and the university staff to address these challenges. The expectations of them can become significantly more than those of students doing home placements. Similar to the study by Parker et al. (2015), the students indicated that the experience had been positive overall in terms of their personal and professional development; however, this was not without considerable stress – both emotional and financial, lack of agency support and at times challenging group dynamics. This also led to the need for more extensive and ongoing involvement by the university staff than is common for most placements.

Future planning and teaching for international placements should therefore incorporate a focus on these potentially difficult aspects of placement so that students are better prepared for not only the positive but also the negative features of the experience. Current literature on pre-placement preparation largely focuses on intellectual or academic preparation (Sossou and Dubus, 2013) rather than the understanding and development of personal and interpersonal capabilities that may support students in challenging situations.

Learning about cultural diversity and how to build cross-cultural relationships and develop interpersonal communication skills is critical for students undertaking international placements and reinforces previous research on the benefits of international placements (Cleak et al., 2016; Fairchild et al., 2006). Living in accommodation owned and managed by a Khmer family became an opportunity for the students to learn some basic language and customs as well as become somewhat integrated in the street and local neighbourhood. Becoming part of a local community can be a transformative element for students as they can notice and endeavour to appropriately challenge potential power dynamics (Gilin and Young, 2009). This may also lessen the opportunities for voyeurism as students can become more immersed in the local context and build genuine relationships with the people they encounter on a daily basis (Webhi, 2009). Contributing in an authentic way to a local community was a key concern for the students, and this resonates with the work of Sossou and Dubus (2013) who emphasise the importance of meeting needs that a community has identified and having sufficient language and cultural understandings. The students had an opportunity to accompany the local university social work students on field trips, which was extremely beneficial for their learning. Such relationships could be further strengthened, although reciprocity of learning for both groups of students is an important consideration so that power imbalances are not perpetuated (Parker et al., 2015; Razak, 2002). As Sossou and Dubus (2013) highlight, university staff also have a responsibility to ensure that they are working ethically and sustainably with local organisations so that arrangements are mutually beneficial for all stakeholders in the practicum.

Employability has also been noted as a potential advantage of an international placement (Parker et al., 2015). On completion of the placement, one student chose to stay in Cambodia and begin working at another NGO where employment had been offered. One of the students returned home

to continue study and the other three students also returned home to graduate and seek employment. These three students were all employed shortly after applying for work, and one of the employers indicated that the overseas placement had in part influenced the decision to employ the student, primarily because the student had demonstrated a willingness to step outside their comfort zone and take on a challenge. Subsequently, the fifth student has been employed in an agency that directly reflects the experiences that the student had in Cambodia. Whether the international practicum significantly affected their employability is unknown as most social work students at the universities are employed on completion of their qualification. Further research with a cohort of students/graduates and employers from Aotearoa New Zealand on the effect of international placements on employability is warranted.

The drive for internationalisation has certainly contributed to the increasing number of social work students in Aotearoa New Zealand and in other countries such as Australia being interested in international placements; likewise, the requests for international placements in Aotearoa New Zealand from overseas students are increasing (Cleak et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2015). Parker et al. (2015) encourage academics to 'grapple' with the issues around sustainability, pedagogic value and the possible risk of continued imposition of Western values and practices in other cultural settings (p. 393). We agree with the importance of tackling these issues and in addition suggest that elements of risk also need more careful consideration. Students on placement often face risks, and these are usually associated with clients or being in potentially dangerous situations (Didham et al., 2011). In an international environment this risk is heightened as students may not understand what exactly the risks are, who might create a risk or where risk might occur. Limited knowledge of the local geographical environment, historical events as well as cultural norms, mores and language may also leave students more vulnerable. As students are living in this international environment for the placement period, they also need to understand any potential risks in their 'out of hours' time, and remember that they are attached to a university rather than considering themselves to be independent travellers. This brings additional responsibilities for the students not only during the placement day but also in their leisure time. University staff also have a responsibility to ensure that students are well prepared and equipped to understand and manage risk as well as be adequately supported both from their country of origin and in the international context (Parker et al., 2015). These issues again emphasise the importance of the students' pre-placement preparation, university procedures that require the student to sign agreement to appropriate boundaries and conduct while on placement, their own self-knowledge and capabilities for the context in which they will be working, and the support of the local sponsoring organisation. Teaching students about risk matrices as well as other appropriate tools that are relevant to the international environment is essential. Knowing how to transfer these to different contexts is equally important, and further consideration as to how such tools can be incorporated into current curricula is necessary.

## Conclusion

The benefits of an international placement are widely acknowledged and may include exposure to new learning experiences, cross-cultural learning, self-awareness and greater understanding of global issues and social justice. That said, the future for international placements of social work students in Aotearoa New Zealand is uncertain. At the present time, small numbers of students undertake these experiences each year and each placement must meet the standards required by the SWRB, including supervision by a RSW.

There are, however, myriad challenges, especially for the university staff who are seeking quality learning opportunities for their students. As there is limited history of these placements from Aotearoa New Zealand, university staff are usually building new relationships and employing

considerable trust in the sponsoring organisations. This may also be so for local placements; however, any challenges can be more easily addressed when there are not several thousand miles between the students, the agency and the university. Building long-term rather than one-off relationships is more likely to lead to sustainable placement opportunities that have ongoing benefits for the sponsoring organisation as well as for the students and universities. However, the time and effort involved in developing these international relationships, for what is likely to be very few students, is perhaps questionable when energies could be better directed into the Aotearoa New Zealand placement context. Connecting with other tertiary institutions from other countries with more established international practicum programmes could be one way to mitigate this challenge. Further, when assessing future international placements university staff need to carefully consider the potential and actual risks for the student, the sponsoring agency and its community and clients, as well as for the university. A question therefore remains as to whether the value of international placements outweighs the associated challenges for all of the key stakeholders.

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Dr Kathryn Hay is a Senior Lecturer and the Director of Field Education in the School of Social Work at Massey University. She has published in New Zealand and internationally on field education and in 2016 co-authored the text: *Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand: Exploring fields of practice* which includes 37 videos of practitioners explaining their practice.

Simon Lowe is a registered social worker, employed by the University of Waikato Social Work programme as the Field Education Coordinator. Simon has worked in social work for nearly 30 years in a variety of roles in New Zealand and the UK. Currently Simon is working towards his PhD with the University of Canterbury, completing a critical review of social work competencies in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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