



# *Good practice in international placements: Ideas for students and tertiary staff*

Simon Lowe and Kathryn Hay



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Authors: Simon Lowe and Kathryn Hay

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# ***International placements: a social work student perspective***

The practices described in this booklet have been developed after analysis of previous research undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand on social work field education (Hay & Brown, 2015; Hay, Dale & Yeung, 2016; Hay, Keen, Thompson & Emerman, 2011; Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2011); implementation of much of the empirical evidence from this and other field education and work-integrated learning (WIL) literature; and, importantly, after the completion of an action research project in 2015 (Hay & Lowe, 2016 under review).

Seven students from the University of Waikato and Massey University completed ten to twelve weeks on international placement as part of their Bachelor in Social Work (BSW) programme. Five students worked together in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, one in Kerala, Southern India and another in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The good practice indicators outlined in this booklet are not only based on the newly

documented experiences of these students in Cambodia, India and Thailand but also on existing literature on ensuring quality learning experiences for placement students (see above). The authors have presented the action research findings that underpin the good practice indicators at the New Zealand Association of Cooperative Education conference and an international social work conference, held in Seoul in 2016. The presentations received a positive response, leading to further discussions on good practice, specifically in managing effective student learning while maintaining the ethical position of maleficence (doing no harm). Both occasions evidenced that the research was considered as contributing to the good practice of international placements and improved student learning outcomes. The findings from this research have also been implemented into situations with Aotearoa New Zealand students on international placements in 2016.

## ***About this resource***

The intention of this resource is to help guide educators and students who are considering or developing international placements. The experiences described in this booklet were with social work programmes; however, it is expected that the information can be applied to courses across a spectrum of disciplines. This booklet considers seven key aspects that drive good practice in international field education (refer to Figure 1). The template for good practice is adapted from

Martin, Rees and Edwards (2011) with the additional elements of skill development and placement debriefing, as these are essential aspects for good practice in international placements (and arguably, all placements) (Hay, Keen, Thomson & Emerman, 2011; Hay & Lowe, 2016 under review). The inclusion of student perspectives adds a personal and experience-informed voice to each of the elements.



Figure 1: International Field Education Good Practice  
Source: Adapted from Martin, Rees, & Edwards (2011)



## *International field education*

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To enable good practice in international field education, strong partnerships between students, workplace organisations and tertiary educators are essential. International placements require particular attention to detail and closer communication between those involved in order to ensure the safety of participants and quality of learning.

Key points for preparing for a successful international placement include:

- careful planning
- careful selection of appropriate students
- careful selection of host organisation
- careful selection of support staff, including external field educators
- robust risk assessment
- high levels of support for all involved
- good quality supervision
- clear but flexible learning goals and opportunities
- suitable student capabilities including resilience, independence and self-awareness
- expecting the unexpected

Drawing on empirical evidence and emphasising student voices, the remainder of this booklet will outline good practice reflections and recommendations in the following areas:

- organisation set-up
- student preparation
- skill development
- supervision
- assessment and pedagogy
- professional standards and competencies
- placement debriefing

### *Student voice...*

The knowledge I have acquired whilst being on placement has been rather extensive. Not only has it been from a professional sense, but also a personal sense. I have learnt so much about myself and how I should and need to change some of my perceptions on the world. It has definitely been an experience and I believe that my knowledge will only continue to grow.

### *Student voice...*

If any students undergo an overseas placement I would recommend that it be something that they are ready to be fully invested in, as it will grow and challenge them both personally and professionally.



## Organisation set-up

Developing strong relationships with the host organisation is critical for the success of international placements. Gaining a clear understanding of the expectations of the organisation and the educational needs of the students is essential. Having close relationships not only helps to ensure good learning outcomes for students, but helps develop pathways to resolve any differences.

There can be differences in interpretation of what represents a good placement. Detailed conversation between the tertiary provider and host organisation before the placement is confirmed is essential. The tertiary staff organising the placement need to ascertain the expectations of the host organisation for the benefit of students. Tertiary staff should ensure that they make adequate inquiries about the working environment where students will be placed. It is important to obtain information such as whether there is office space and equipment for the students, whether students will be expected to join in with the host team for usual work hours and activities, and what additional support the students will be offered by the organisation.

It is important to remember that there will be differences in expectations and students will need to accept this. Knowing what these differences are is critical before the placement begins so students can make informed choices about whether they wish to proceed with the placement.

Understanding the organisation and how they can best support the learning and development of the student might take time; this relationship is likely to develop over a number of placements. Sustaining the relationship is therefore important for student learning but also so that the

host organisation can benefit from the student placement, preferably in respect of collaboration and reciprocity.

### *Student voice...*

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. Unless an organisation has set up processes and procedures to support students they should not be used.

### *Encouraging good practice...*

Tertiary education providers have a significant responsibility in ensuring a duty of care to students undertaking their learning experience in another country. Consideration should be given to: potential or actual risk; regular communication; and cultural differences within the work and living environments.



## *Student preparation*

International placements offer students the opportunity to work in environments that are likely to be unfamiliar in many ways. Preparing students for these situations requires careful consideration. Gaining a greater understanding of the environment into which students will be placed becomes essential. To ensure good practice, students interested in international placements should go through a rigorous application and interview process. These procedures may include a robust induction prior to placement, including workshops about the country into which they are going to be placed.

A written application should incorporate student reflections on how and why an international placement will contribute to their learning. As educators, preventing academic tourism is an important consideration. From the written application, students can be selected and then undertake an interview process. Following selection, a period of orientation and workshops involving external agencies that have particular knowledge on the areas of placement is valuable. This pre-placement orientation process may focus on education around research methods overseas (specifically aimed at a particular research orientated placement); workshops on vicarious trauma (specifically aimed at students involved with complex situations, for instance child sex-trafficking); risk around living in a different environment to try to ensure that students are able to remain safe, including risk assessment; introduction to the placement country; introduction to placement organisation; and specific skill sets such as working with interpreters.

Good practice ensures that student preparation is tailored to the specific placement and the environment in which the placement is set; and it includes risk assessment and management.

### *Student voice...*

Ensure that you totally understand what, when, where, how, etc., of your placement. Have an in-depth understanding of what is required of you and what you will be doing on your placement. Know all the ins and outs of your placement. Meet with lecturers [pre-placement] regularly to discuss any questions that you have.

### *Student voice...*

I would recommend students ask a lot of questions of whoever is organising the placement. It is really important that the student knows the tertiary education institution and that the organisation is going to support and guide them throughout the whole of the placement.

### *Encouraging good practice...*

Preparation is the best resource for overseas placements. Before setting off, access local people who have a good understanding of the culture and environment where students are travelling. Use as many of these resources as possible to develop an objective understanding of the learning environment for the students.





## Skill development

A potential benefit of international placements is that a range of skills can be developed and learned simultaneously. Working in a unique environment presents opportunities for educators to encourage student development in areas that would not be possible in a local placement. Practice in an international setting and environment offer alternative challenges, which enable educators to challenge the students' understandings of practice. Alongside development of competence, educators have opportunities to help students learn about how to mitigate against neo-colonial practices, refine their group work skills, improve their interviewing skills (including the use of interpreters), develop their resourcefulness, advance their understanding of the importance of self-care, improve managing time effectively, develop a greater understanding of self in an alien environment, and cultivate an increased sense of their professional identity (Crabtree, Parker, Azman, & Carlo, 2014; Gilin & Young, 2009; Hay & Lowe, 2016 under review).

### *Student voice...*

The skills and knowledge acquired include:

- an in-depth ability to work as a member of a team;
- reaching agreements but also making sacrifices;
- dealing with stress and conflict in a positive manner;
- effective time management skills;
- the ability to delegate skills;
- recognising strengths in myself and others;
- coping with trauma.

### *Student voice...*

Resilience, team work, and conflict resolution are just some of the new skills I have identified... Seeking to work through the team tensions has been a stressful process, and through it I have been able to reflect on how I manage team dynamics and tensions. I think this is likely to have developed in me a greater resilience than I had before, and I have been able to develop my skills in conflict resolution.



# Supervision

There is a great deal of available literature around supervision in field education and the use of supervision for professional development (Beddoe, 2016; Carroll, 2009, 2010; Davys & Beddoe, 2010; O'Donoghue, 2010; Stoltenberg, 2005; Zuchowski, 2015). Supervision on placements is usually planned using one-to-one regular sessions between a field mentor or field educator and a student. Supervision is a requirement for all social work placements, whether the placement is at home or overseas. Students must have supervision with a qualified and preferably registered social worker. Professional supervision is essential to enable students to process and to critically reflect on their learning experiences and therefore encourages ongoing learning and development (Argyris, 1976; Avis, 2007; Beddoe, Davys, & Adamson, 2014; Boud & Solomon, 2001; Greenwood, 1998). Supervision may occur internally from a suitable person inside the placement agency or externally if there is not a qualified social worker in the agency.

## Agency supervision

Supervision provided by a field mentor or staff member working in the overseas agency in which the student is placed enables:

- the student to develop an understanding of the culture and environment in which they are working;
- the student, with support from the mentor, to critically reflect on differences in work culture, laws, expectations from colleagues and clients and their responsibilities;
- a greater understanding of the boundaries of the student role;

- the student to contribute in a beneficial way to the work of the agency.

## External supervision

Supervision, offered by an appropriately qualified external field educator from the students' home environment, encourages students to:

- critically reflect on differences between the work and country environments;
- maintain the ethical and competence-based expectations of their profession in Aotearoa New Zealand (or their home country);
- practice in a way that ensures cultural competence;
- consider their ongoing personal and professional development needs.

### *Encouraging good practice...*

Enabling students to have access to different types of supervision while on an international placement will offer additional support during what is likely to be a challenging experience.

Supervisors need to be especially aware of challenges for the students: integrating to the new environment, communication differences and culture shock.

External field educators need to be upskilled for supervision of international placements, specifically around competing competency requirements, university expectations and cultural awareness.



## Assessment and pedagogy

Most tertiary programmes will have set academic assessment procedures for students undertaking field education placements as part of their study. These assessments are likely to be standard for all students enrolled on the programme, whether on placement in New Zealand or overseas. Consideration should be made to offer alternative assessments for students on international placements, as the experiences of these students will likely be markedly different. Developing alternative assessments or variations of current assessments may enable a fairer assessment process and one that is based specifically on the experiences of that student. An example of alternative assessment procedures may be the submission of a reflective video rather than a written journal or assignment.

Assessment criteria should be adjusted to take into consideration differences in international placements, including: environmental difficulties such as reliable access to technology, language barriers, cultural differences, additional stress levels, learning through associated experiences, and challenges.

Tertiary staff may also need to be mindful of how they are teaching students both prior to and also during the placement. Consideration should be given to accessibility of technology for teaching purposes, relevance of the teaching material to the student's context, and time-zone differences if synchronous teaching is required during the placement period.

### *Encouraging good practice...*

- alternative assessment processes that still enable students to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes;
- reflections through use of technology such as Zoom, Skype, Moodle;
- recognition of a broader range of experiences requiring potentially different sets of skill and knowledge development compared with local placement students. For example, opportunities to regularly work with interpreters, cross-cultural meetings, accessing resources in a culturally appropriate manner.

### *Encouraging good practice...*

- reciprocal learning is common in international placements; with students, tertiary staff and internal and external field educators all actively participating in the learning process;
- support for external field educators as well as organisation staff needs to be considered by the tertiary staff, especially when cultural and work environments are significantly different to the home country;
- ensuring students understand relevant theories and models for international environments is critical for student preparation, and this may need to occur in addition to the usual curriculum teaching.



## *Professional standards and competencies*

Professional standards, usually set by professional associations, and competencies that are determined by registration bodies and/or employers, can support both the culture of an organisation and that of a profession. Student social workers are expected to work towards meeting these standards and competencies, as well as the learning outcomes set by the tertiary provider. This will include ensuring that students apply relevant codes of ethics and conduct in their practice while on placement.

Competence requires that students practice with an awareness of their developing skills, knowledge, attitudes and values. These fundamentals enable students to work effectively with people who originate from a variety of backgrounds. It is naïve to think that competence is acquired purely from a knowledge base. Competence to work with people from other cultures especially, requires knowledge plus experience (Hugman, 2010; Sue, 1998; Williams, 2006).

One of the benefits of learning in international settings is that competencies can be considered comparatively between countries. The competencies for a particular profession, based in a specific environment, are naturally challenged as students see life and work through a different lens. Working in a new, international environment enables students to critically view the standards and competencies set down by their profession and tertiary institution. The international experiences also encourage the student to challenge their own belief and value structure.

Working towards specific standards and competencies helps students develop professional and personal confidence.

International placements may enable students to develop a number of aspects of practice; especially teamwork, cultural understanding, communication, people skills, and an understanding of the position of their profession within the specific international community.

### *Student voice...*

I think this experience has opened my eyes dramatically to the realities of the world. I believe that I am less naïve, more aware, and more knowledgeable of the international environment.

### *Student voice...*

I believe that for a student to successfully complete a placement [internationally] they need to have exceptional communication skills and be very flexible with their daily schedules. They need to be able to adapt to varying situations and to ensure that they are culturally competent when working with people from another culture whilst in their country. I also believe that people need to understand that they will be with the group for 10 weeks straight, so having a good understanding of self-care and how to deal with their own self-care is highly important.



## Placement debriefing

Debriefing after the learning experience is a critical component of all placements, but is especially important for students doing international placements. Students need to debrief the placement experience itself and also unpack their own re-integration experience back in their home country. Two debriefing processes are important: firstly, in-situ with their organisation and external field educator at the end of their placement, but carried out before leaving the country of placement; and secondly, on their return home.

### In-situ

This debrief can include reflecting on aspects of the placement including: group relationships, information gained, personal and professional learning, personal and professional challenges, critical reflective practices that were used during the placement, positive and difficult aspects of placement, accommodation, cultural aspects of the placement, role of the host organisation, and clearing the air of any problems throughout the placement.

### *Student voice...*

We spoke about many of the difficult aspects of being together as a group for 10 weeks; we acknowledged differences, celebrated successes, we hugged and then we went out for dinner.

### On return

It is valuable for students to meet with the tertiary staff on their return from the international placement. These meetings

could usefully focus on how the course learning outcomes were achieved in the international context, reintegration back into the home country and any challenges associated with this for the student, critical reflection on power and privilege, reflections of the experience, feedback of positive and negative aspects, and recommendations for future international placements.

If the external field educator has travelled with the student(s), then a debriefing with them and the tertiary staff is also of considerable value. This meeting could focus on a range of aspects of the placement, for example: recommendations for improved pre-placement preparation (for students and field educators); consideration of emotional competence of students and understanding of self; recognition of students working with limited knowledge and understanding of the international context; guidance around university procedures; increased flexibility with university assessment procedures; development of courageous conversation skills; student recognition that they are representing their institutions 24/7 (rather than just Monday to Friday, during work hours); clearer guidance required for 'off-duty' behaviour; consideration of how to cope with poverty/begging and consideration of 'rescuing behaviour'; increased practise with interpreters; greater understanding of risk; recognition of cultural differences with regards to work practices; and coping with different climates and living environments (Anderson, 2005; Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Hay & Lowe, 2016 under review).



## Conclusion

International field education placements offer incredible opportunities for learning and the development of skills, knowledge, capabilities and values. Placements of this nature are however not without risk. Field education placements undertaken in another country adds another level of complexity and as Lough (2009) cautions:

“Although the possible advantages of international placements are many, they must be properly implemented to achieve these effects. If executed poorly, these experiences could negatively impact both students and host communities.” (p.472).

Our research also identified that students should be given the opportunity to learn and develop an understanding of the need for some basic skills and attributes while on international placement including:

- honesty;
- effective communication with other students, the host organisation, and the tertiary staff;
- reliability;
- knowledge of personal limits;
- understanding of conflict management;
- management of trauma and stress;
- good self-care;
- understanding of self;
- openness to new learning and feedback.

### *Encouraging good practice...*

International placements should not be embarked on lightly and care should be taken with the planning process, selection of students, understanding of the host organisation, and what learning opportunities and support staff can realistically provide to students. Concepts of reciprocity, cultural difference, collaboration and partnership need to be thoroughly explored prior to the placement to avoid neo-colonialist practices, whether intentional or otherwise.

### *Student voice...*

It was an amazing placement and I would recommend it to other students. It was definitely not a walk in the park and I suggest that you have a great support system behind you, whether it be whanau, friends or whoever, to tautoko<sup>1</sup> you on your amazing journey. But I would say jump at the opportunity, grab it with two hands and expand your kete<sup>2</sup> of knowledge to a place you never thought you could go!

<sup>1</sup> (verb) (-hia,-na,-tia) to support, prop up, verify, advocate, accept (an invitation), agree.

<sup>2</sup> (noun) basket, kit.





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