

'Mutual benefit' in international student exchange: possibilities and challenges

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During the past twenty years the number of schools of social work engaged in international student exchange activity has increased exponentially. The value of such exchanges especially for visiting students of the North is well documented. However reflective critiques of student exchange programs have also identified the likelihood that such exchanges are unilateral, one-sided and one-way, providing little opportunity for students in host institutions to engage meaningfully in the exchange process or to gain substantial benefit. Unless addressed these issues position international student exchanges as perpetuating "pretentious internationalisation" and "benevolent imperialism" (Racek, 2002).

Since 2011 the Department of Social Work and Human Services at James Cook University in Australia and the Office of International Affairs at Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University in Thailand have worked together to facilitate student and faculty exchange between the institutions. Central to the partnership has been a commitment to mutual benefit and reciprocity. This presentation describes the approaches which have facilitated a realisation of these commitments and the challenges to such aspirations.

The findings of collaborative research which explored the perspectives of both visiting and hosting students in both institutions are also described. Both groups of students' highlighted the increased awareness of their home countries culture and issues, an improved understanding of other cultures and an enhanced appreciation of the commonalities between cultures. Strategies for furthering international exchanges are discussed with a particular emphasis on developing real reciprocity and enhancing the benefit to all students involved.

Reference:

Razack, N. (2002). A critical examination of international student exchanges. *International Social Work*, March, 45(2), 251-265.