

Mutual Benefit in International Student Exchange: Possibilities and Challenges

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The Student Exchange Project

Since 2011 the Department of Social Work and Human Services at James Cook University (JCU) in Australia and the Office of International Affairs at Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University (NRRU) in Thailand have worked together to facilitate student exchange between the institutions.

Australian students travelled to small Thai communities identified by, and under the supervision of, NRRU academic staff to participate in community development/ human rights/ social capital development projects of importance and relevance to the local community; and Thai students travelled to Australia to participate in programs relevant to their degrees, under the supervision of JCU academic staff.

A postcolonial theoretical framework informed a commitment to mutual benefit and reciprocity.

Aims and Methodology

Research Aim

To assess, from the perspective of Thai and Australian students, the experience of participating in community development programs in Thailand and Australia as part of a practice-based education program. Specifically the research focused on students' reflections on their cross-cultural experiences and their development of cultural competencies.

Methodology

Qualitative in-depth interviews with 11 exchanging Thai and Australian students from 2011, 2012 & 2013 cohorts. Data were analysed using grounded theory techniques.

Possibilities and Challenges

Central to successful partnerships is a commitment to mutual benefit and reciprocity.

It is the task of educators to ensure that student exchange programs challenge rather than perpetuate oppressive Global North/South relations.

Both Thai and Australian students reported critical learning about self and political and social context.

What Students Learned

Being at the Home for the Destitute I learnt about poverty and disability in Thailand... and how I can help (Thai student)

Because we look at theories like anti-oppressive practice and cultural sensitivity – it's fine to have an academic understanding – so to experience the culture through a lens of theoretical understanding was very helpful for me. I didn't anticipate it, but that is what I got (Australian Student)