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**Title:** Sustaining quality learning abroad opportunities in Australian schools of social work

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**Abstract**

Student learning abroad experiences are encouraged to develop students' intercultural understanding and global citizenship. This article reports internationally collaborative research exploring social work student short term mobility programs and international field education placements. Findings from interviews with staff from Australian schools of social work are presented. Themes developed from the data explore the establishment and on-going resourcing and sustainability of international exchange programs including implications for risk and safety; relationships and partnerships; and reciprocity. The complex landscape of student international experiences is discussed and it is proposed that the lack of adequate resourcing of learning abroad opportunities threatens their sustainability.

**Key words:** Internationalisation; social work education; learning abroad; student exchange; sustainability; [resourcing](#)

## **Introduction**

In Australia, student learning abroad opportunities are important strategies in internationalising tertiary curricula due to perceived benefits such as fostering students' intercultural learning (Dorsett, Clark & Phadke, 2015), increased self-awareness and capacity for global citizenship (Bell, Morehead & Boetto, 2015), and improved academic outcomes (Malicki & Potts, 2013). [The term learning abroad is used to describe activities where students remain enrolled in their home institution, and travel abroad as part of their study requirements \(Potts, 2016\). Learning abroad can take many forms including “overseas study, international work experience, internships, practicum placements, volunteering, community service and other learning endeavours” \(Potts, 2016, p. 4\) and may occur over varying lengths of time, from two weeks to a full academic year. In this paper we consider two specific forms of learning abroad experiences common in Australian social work programs \(Harris et al., 2017\): short term international mobility programs and three month international social work practicums.](#)

Recently the Australian government has directly encouraged the higher education sector to engage in [various](#) learning abroad activities through [an array](#) of student grants and scholarship programs (Universities Australia, 2014). This government support aims to provide tertiary students with international opportunities and experiences that foster global citizenship and global mind-set demonstrated by “broadened perspectives, cosmopolitan hospitality, accelerated maturity and widened horizons” (Potts, 2016, p. 11).

Australian social work education providers are influenced by this agenda and efforts to develop internationalised social work curricula are pursued, at least in part, through the provision of learning abroad opportunities such as international field placements, semester study abroad programs and short term student international exchange (Harris et al., 2017). Given social

work's global commitment to "promote social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people" (International Federation of Social Workers, n.d, para 2), many of these opportunities aim to actively cultivate students' awareness of the structural sources of global oppression and privilege (Bell, et al., 2015). Alphonse (2008) describes the purpose of student international exchange experiences as actively promoting student respect for alternative worldviews by recognising and resisting existing inequitable cultural practices and power imbalances. Brydon (2011, p. 389) claims these ideological objectives "involve multiple transformations of both people and institutions" and require a sustained commitment to internationalisation strategies that allow relationships and mutual understanding to develop over time.

Social work educators are well positioned to consider whether the array of learning abroad opportunities offered to students meet these broad goals, and, in so doing, to reflect on the structure, nature and organisation of their internationalisation programs. The goal of this paper is therefore to contribute to this general social work learning abroad conversation, through an exploration of the international exchange activities of Australian schools of social work where students participate in international field placements and short term exchanges. The use of the term 'exchange' in this paper is deliberate, as a counter to neo-liberal terms such as 'mobility programs' that emphasise a one-way flow of students, designed to develop a mobile Australian graduate with competitiveness in the international marketplace. Instead, 'exchange' values the mutuality of intercultural learning, and includes a two-way flow of staff, students, knowledge, ideas and resources.

This exploration presents the findings of qualitative data collection with sending institutions in the second phase of an internationally collaborative research project - *International social work*

*student exchange: Facilitating good practice in Australia and the Asia Pacific* (known as the “Going Places” project). The project was funded by the Australian Government’s Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) and aimed to identify and document the nature and scope of international social work student exchange programs and develop guidelines for improved practice.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

The Australian government aims to positioning Australia as a “global leader in education, training and research” (Department of Education and Training, 2016) by strengthening the domestic education system, increasing student mobility, promoting collaboration with international partners, and improving Australia’s competitive position in the global tertiary sector (<https://nsie.education.gov.au/>). The commitment to increasing student mobility is demonstrated through investment in the New Colombo Plan, which aimed to have 10,000 undergraduate students participating in mobility programs by the end of 2016. This initiative was introduced during a significant increase in student participation in mobility programs, from 8.8 per cent of all undergraduates in 2009 to 16.5 per cent in 2014 (Potts, 2016). Lawrence (2016) attributes this increase to a range of factors, including “shifting generational characteristics, new and alternative mobility options and access to student loans” (p. 4).

Alongside these pragmatic motivations is the increasing volume of research which highlights the potential for profound and even transformative learning for students as a result of their international experiences. Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen, & Swap (2012) identified student transformations such as increased cultural competence, civic identity, and community involvement as a consequence of engagement in international student travel. McDowell, Goessling and Melendez (2012) describe powerful student learning in a family therapy course

with an international travel component. The authors report that the travel experience was personally and professionally transformative for participants, across a range of areas, including personal development and growth. A focus on changes in personal and professional behaviours, values and attitudes as a consequence of involvement in an international teaching practicum is likewise discussed by Black and Bernardes (2014), who argue that intentional planning of transformative learning opportunities greatly enhances the outcomes for participating students.

However, the research simultaneously notes that simply sending students overseas for a cross-cultural experience does not guarantee that shifts in worldview will occur (Roholt & Fisher, 2013). Therefore, Roholt and Fisher (2013, p. 50) emphasise the need for the use of intentional pedagogical frameworks to support student learning and argue that international exchange facilitators have an active role to play if transformative learning is to occur, as “assumptions and commonly held frames for interpretation of these experiences must be challenged when necessary to ensure that issues of privilege and power do not remain unexamined”. Further Jones and Miles (In Press) discuss the need to integrate critical theory perspectives that explicitly address issues of power, privilege and oppression with a transformative learning pedagogy if students are “to move beyond the tourist experience, developing deeper and more critically informed understandings of other cultures and perspectives”. They advocate the implementation of purposeful critically transformative practices in all phases of an international study experience; while preparing students for travel, during the travel experience itself, and in the post-travel reintegration stage.

Realising the profound learning potential of international study experiences therefore poses some challenges for social work educators. For example, Bell et al. (2015, p. 3) argue that more research is required to ensure international mobility programs are “educationally worthwhile, respectful and culturally sensitive”. The potential for programs to embody a form of modern

colonialism is frequently noted in social work literature (see, for example, Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2012; Hawkins, Pattanayak, Martin & Hess, 2016). Boetto, Morehead and Bell (2014, p. 13) caution specifically that “social work students undertaking study abroad programs can be viewed as ‘tourists’ who undertake relatively shallow observations and [draw] conclusions about unfamiliar cultures through a Euro-Western lens”. A failure to build curriculum around the learning abroad experience in order to facilitate positive learning experiences and transformative learning can lead to reinforcing parochialism and imperialism (Razack, 2002). Careful consideration of concepts of reciprocity and partnerships in international study experiences is essential in order to avoid the unwitting reinforcement of neo-colonialism and imperialism (Zuchowski, Gopalkrishnan, King & Francis, 2017). Reciprocity itself is a contested concept that needs to be understood as more than *quid pro quo*, and requires deep engagement in order to support transformative partnerships (Zuchowski, et al., 2017).

Crisp (2017, p. 10) also highlights the heavy administrative workload involved in international partnerships and asserts that despite the institutional and professional rhetoric about the importance of engaging in internationalisation, the priority of meeting local professional requirements “tends to be more pressing and given higher priority”. Brydon (2011) attributes these challenges to the commodification of higher education and, by extension, of the international experience. This means rather than a well-articulated, purposeful approach where programs are integrated as part of a broader internationalisation strategy (Johnson, 2004), the focus of international mobility programs is on the individualised experience of students; an emphasis devoid of a “clear conceptualization of the desired nature, purpose and scope of the process” of internationalisation (Brydon, 2011, p. 383).

The success and sustainability of student learning abroad opportunities are dependent upon institutional leadership, organisational culture, resourcing and accountability (Daly & Barker, 2010). While the levels of participation support for individual students have increased, there is some evidence that the institutional resources dedicated to the development and maintenance of mobility programs are shrinking.

*All institutions have targets for inward mobility and many now also for outward mobility. These targets increase while funding decreases, creating an imperative to be creative and to explore partnerships, alternate sources of funding, technology assisted experiences and collaborative cost sharing agreements with other institutions. Do more with less.* (International Education Association of Australia, 2014, p. 12)

Highlighting similar issues, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has identified the importance of sustainability in higher education internationalisation activity and urges governments to create benefit beyond individual institutions by facilitating diverse international activities that take into account the true costs of internationalisation, build relationships over time, and remain flexible and adaptable to change (Henard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012).

Ilieva, Beck & Waterstone (2014, p. 877) also closely examine the nature of sustainability in the context of internationalising higher education and propose a framework built on “respectful human and environmental interactions and the establishment of mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships... that require recognition of context, histories and relational elements, rather than a set goal to be achieved”. These authors argue the substantial limits to an economic lens and the pursuit of commodification values when considering international exchange opportunities, advocating instead for the full calculation of the “human, institutional, and educational costs and benefits”.



So while international study experiences offer significant potential for profound student learning and increased opportunities, realising these opportunities requires purposeful engagement by staff. This has implications for individual staff, social work programs and higher education institutions as a whole, especially given the evidence that the concurrent commodification of higher education works against the institutionalised provision of the necessary resources and support. In this context, this paper examines the qualitative data drawn from the second phase of the *Going Places* research project to consider the broad challenges and opportunities imbedded in the international learning abroad opportunities offered by Australian social work programs, with a particular focus on the issues which impact the sustainability of these activities.

## **Method**

### **Research Aims**

The *Going Places* project aims to contribute to the debates about the internationalisation of the social work curriculum through research outcomes that inform curricula and resources for Australian schools of social work, educators from other disciplines and their partners. Data which examined the nature and scope of international exchange in Australian schools of social work was collected in three phases: an online survey; qualitative semi-structured interviews with Australian sending institutions, international host institutions in the Asia-Pacific and participating students; and workshops/focus groups with sending and receiving institutions as well as travelling and non-travelling Australian students. In this paper the findings from phase two of the Project are presented – specifically the qualitative interviews with staff from Australian schools of social work who provide learning abroad opportunities for students through study abroad programs, short term exchanges and/or international field placements.

## **Participants**

The first phase of the Going Places research project in 2015 surveyed the 30 schools of social work accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). Twenty-seven schools (90%) completed the survey and provided substantial data about the nature and scope of the international student exchange activities offered within each school. Data gathered in this first phase of the project (Harris et al., 2107; Miles et al., 2016) was collated and then used to guide the selection of potential participants in the second phase of the study. This phase of the project received specific ethics approval from the James Cook University Human Ethics sub-committee.

The researchers sought to interview representatives from schools of social work that exemplified the diversity of Australian social work programs in terms of the size of the program, the longevity and type of exchange activities, the geographic location of the school, and the location of exchange partner/s. The results of data collection from phase one were used to select ten schools of social work, using these variables and the head of each school was contacted by email to request participation of a relevant staff representative in a phone interview. Phone interviews were conducted with 12 staff representatives from 10 Australian schools of social work. In two schools, two interviews were conducted, as the original participants suggested a colleague with additional knowledge and experience. The participants held varied positions in the school: some were the head of the program; some were the field education coordinator; and others were considered by the head of the program to be integral to the international activity.

## **Interviews**

Participants received information about the research and consent forms prior to the phone interview. Interview questions focused on how the school became involved in international student exchange, exchange planning considerations, processes used to identify international

partners, students' preparation and support, and the broad impact of international exchange on the entire social work program. [Participants](#) were also asked to reflect on the quality of student learning, the sustainability of the exchange program and the nature of reciprocity in student exchange. Interviews took between one hour and two hours and were audio recorded with participant consent. Each interview was then transcribed, and research team members analysed the data using the grounded theory techniques of coding and theme development (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

## **Findings**

The findings highlight the concerns of Australian schools of social work as they relate to the establishment and maintenance of [short term international mobility programs and three month international social work practicums](#), resourcing of [these](#) learning abroad programs, complex issues of risk and safety, relationships and partnerships, and the concept of reciprocity. Participants described the nature of these issues highlighting concerns and considerations for embedding learning abroad in its various forms into Australian social work programs. The findings are presented using participants' own words, differentiated by pseudonyms. Participants use a variety of terms to refer to their learning abroad activities including 'exchange' and 'placement', this terminology has been maintained.

### **Establishment and maintenance of learning abroad programs**

The social work staff representatives from Australian schools of social work reported various configurations of learning abroad opportunities including short-term, two or three week group experiences, and longer-term (approximately 3 months) field placements undertaken by students individually, in pairs or as groups. One [participant](#) reported on a multi-disciplinary, short-term experience while another participant highlighted the utility of the short-term exchange as preparation for a subsequent longer field placement experience.

The length and type of program offered was responsive to the demands of institutional contexts or reflective of the personal relationships academic staff had developed with staff in overseas institutions. Participants identified that many of the learning abroad opportunities began as ad hoc, opportunistic ventures that may or may not have become more formalised through memorandums of understanding between the sending and host organisation. Learning abroad initiatives were described as informal, built on personal relationships and/ or driven by the interest of students:

*Rather than somebody sitting down – because we don't have the personnel to do it... and strategically working out where we would want the students to go, or where we think students should go, we are sort of letting it evolve.*  
(Harry)

*It all started on an ad hoc basis because it was an integral part for many years of our field education program... So the students started off either saying, I want to go here, I've got family connections there... And we found that when students initiated it and had a passion to go where they had some emotional connection or family connections, there were a lot of complexities arising, in many instances we weren't able to ensure that standards were met ... we've begun to gradually refine things more and more.* (Nina)

Most participants described exchange processes that had evolved over time. Typically programs commenced as part of a personal relationship and often lacked institutional support for the exchange. In some cases, the social work team undertook the entire range of tasks involved in organising an international exchange without formal institutional support. In other cases, institutionally resourced programs were developed, and these rare occurrences allowed

space for the social work team set up professional relationships, and devote significant attention to student learning and support.

Regardless of the program structure, participants described experiences that highlighted their awareness of the importance of providing students with professional knowledge, logistical information and personal support prior to, during, and following an international experience: “...there’s a need for them to be able to have a huge amount of time to debrief and discuss” (Nina). This example points to the level of commitment of staff needed to ensure international exchange activities result in positive learning experiences for students.

### **Resourcing learning abroad experiences**

Interview participants noted the inconsistency between the institutional rhetoric of internationalisation with their [experience](#) of implementing the policies. This [experience](#) was marked by limited capacity to adequately support the [short term](#) exchange and [the social work field education international](#) programs. While some school representatives acknowledge that financial resources were available to support the travel costs of students (and occasionally staff), the lack of comprehensive, reliable resourcing [to plan, implement and evaluate programs](#) negatively impacts on sustainability.

*You need people resources, you need financial resources to ensure that they work, and so ... we often struggle to get universities to understand social work placements and how resource-intensive they are, internationalising our programs and having exchange programs et cetera is resource-intensive. So there needs to be particular allocation of resources, I think. That’s going to be the challenge. Otherwise it won’t be sustainable. It will all just drop away. (Harry)*

Staff highlighted that the consistent need to “cobble together” (Melanie) resources obstructs their ability to move forward in relationships with international partners.

*I hope we get past the point of having to continually nut out how we're resourcing things so that we can actually move on to that focus of how can we work collaboratively with the agencies, what can we offer them, what can they offer us, what can we do together. (Melanie)*

Limited resources also impact on staff ability to structure the exchange experience based on evidence of what works, or learnings from previous exchange experiences

*Look, I think the biggest impact is the resource issue... I always feel that there's insufficient ...time to really set it up properly and somehow we scrape it together, but ... there's never much time to go back and evaluate it, which I think is important. (Thomas)*

Participant comments highlight the range of competing demands within social work degrees. **Particularly**, international field placements involve more time and effort to negotiate and organise compared to the organisation of a local placement. In this context, academic staff question the utility and effectiveness of an international experience within already stretched workloads. For example, one participant highlighted the need to curb expectation because of the additional burdens involved in supporting six international placements within a cohort of 90 placement students: “We have to be careful not to have too many arrangements because we won't be able to service them easily” (Jane). Staff operating in resource poor environments are clearly weighing up the benefit of international programs relative to local priorities:

*I think there are lots of opportunities around that. But it would have to be over and above what we're already doing and what the students' requirements are. So I don't see that it's impossible. It's really just about who has the capacity to be able to drive that, and would we get students motivated to do that if there wasn't a return on outcomes, in terms of their curriculum around that? (Melanie)*

## **Risk and safety**

The majority of participants raised risk and safety issues as they relate to student health and wellbeing, the exchange environment, and risks to the partner relationships. These issues were recognised as an important part of the exchange planning process.

*It's a lot of work and I think and we really have to be very mindful about, and it's also some risks – its work and its risks. ... I just say, do your homework, because if there are great opportunities, but there are also great risks, and there are also costs associate with it – you've got to do it properly or not at all. And I think if something has gone very wrong with the students, ...that would have been good night nurse – there wouldn't be another exchange. (John)*

Many interview participants discussed their relationship with international partners as part of their risk-management strategy with the understanding of risk limited to the needs and overall experience of travelling students:

*Our biggest issue has been about identifying places for students to go where we have a relationship with an existing university and where we know there are trained social workers that can supervise. The main thing for us ...is about ensuring that students are safe, that they have a really fantastic placement experience. (Michelle)*

However, the experiences of some participants highlighted that risk and safety are more complex than ensuring a positive enjoyable experience for students. The duty of care owed to the host organisation was highlighted by some of the responses which described the risks associated with inappropriate student behaviour.

*The student was acting on some of the critical theories that [the student] had been taught here, but it would have been out of place for him to do that in [Australia], as it was for him to do it in [India] and you don't go in with an idea of challenging other peoples'*

*cultures from the get-go... this is wrong; this is oppressive; you ought to stop it. ... that was a challenge and that was resolved for us at the other end... they just said – right, well we're not keeping [the student]. Back [the student] comes. (Lisa)*

In this situation, the participant highlighted the risk posed by the student to the overall relationship with the host organisation and the potential for all the exchange establishment and maintenance work to be wasted. Screening processes were discussed by the participants as important in assessing the risk students themselves posed to either themselves, their peers or the overall partnership. A range of strategies were used to screen students for suitability to participate in international student exchanges, however, all participants recognised that screening is difficult and not fool proof.

*... how will you test them ... to know how they are going to react? That's just something that I am more and more aware of in terms of ... people's mental health, and how we manage that. Particularly when a student might be kind off on their own in a context, without necessarily an academic by their side all of the time. (Thomas)*

A close, formalised relationship with a partner-institution was identified as a risk-management strategy:

*So we don't send any students directly out to agencies apart from [name of partner-university] so all the rest are done by universities and that's a really strong policy on our part in terms of risk management. (Jane)*

## **Relationships and partnerships**

Participants noted that relationships were integral to their international exchange programs. As mentioned previously many learning abroad programs began with personal relationships and the desire to work more closely with international partners on areas of joint interest. Relationships based on the personal connections of small groups of people or even individuals,



the exchange champions, were often seen as central to the development of international activity.

*You've got to have the institutional and personal connections. And it's got to be something where there is ongoing communication, and that you know you can rely on the sources in the country that they are going to and the institution that they are going to. (Nina)*

Additionally, the importance of long-term relationships was emphasised by many participants:

*It takes years and years and years to develop these relationships ... I think probably five years to even start to say you've got a sound relationship. You have to invest that time. (Thomas)*

While relationships are clearly central to exchange partnerships dependence on individual staff members, the 'exchange champions', to maintain connections was both exhausting and potentially jeopardised the entire partnership [and the sustainability of the program](#).

*I think one of the things that we could have done more of is not to rely on particular points of contact as much maybe as we've had to. So, for example, if the key person in India and the key person here were both suddenly to not be there, we would have to re-negotiate the whole thing. (Lisa)*

*I think do your homework, and take the time to get to know the people and the agencies that you're – the partner agencies – get those personal relationships in place before you do anything, because there's such potential for good outcomes, but there's also potential for things to go wrong. (John)*

Some participants described how they 'inherited' these relationships and were then required to make ongoing efforts to maintain the program in the absence of the original initiator. Staff

representatives from these schools highlighted the need to balance interpersonal relationships with more focused, sustainable arrangements:

*I think we need to really consciously map out, maybe, for a five year plan type of approach, how to really extend those relationships and keep building them, rather than just keep going to different destinations, just because you can or because there's a pot of funding for here, there – just to have a much more considered, sort of, approach. And, I think, that's where we're about at the moment. And to just keep that focus on reciprocity, I guess, at the forefront of all of that as well. (Amy).*

Some participants suggested collaborative work between Australian universities would be beneficial in supporting and sustaining learning abroad opportunities. However, the commodification of education brings about competition between universities, constraining the uptake of collaborative opportunities to pool resources. The attraction of exchange programs to students, and its marketing potential, speak to the instrumental purpose of exchange operating in a neo-liberal environment.

*It often baffles me that I'll be at meetings where there might be four or five ...universities, and we're all talking about resourcing international – getting them up and running and how we resource people to do that, some of the difficulties there, and it's on the tip of my tongue to always say, well, why don't we come together and actually work together? And, of course, we don't, because it's a competitive market, but to me that makes so much more sense, rather than having programs that are trying to be run out of all different universities and we're all having similar issues. (Melanie)*

*It would be fantastic if there could be something, like, a more collective approach to this, I guess, nationally, between universities.... is there some mechanism there that might be used for such purposes? (Amy)*

## **Reciprocity**

As noted in [the literature review](#), the notion of reciprocity is important in the development of meaningful [and sustained](#) international partnerships, but is rarely clearly defined and understood. Participants in this research discussed the importance of reciprocal relationships recognising that the values and principles implicit in the concept develop over time and require commitment and self-reflection.

*I think there was this sense that we came as the Western-better-than-you. And so, it's taken a long time to break those attitudes down. Because we've had continuity of staff travelling, we've been able to do that, we've given back to them, which has been reassuring to them and the way that we work with them is a very humble approach.*

(Thomas)

The effort required to create and maintain these type of relationships is acknowledged as substantial and, most importantly, invisible to the institution. When staff are pressed for time and resources, the aspirations inherent in the concept of reciprocity remain unfulfilled.

*If it was resourced, it would be about joint research, publications, evaluations.*

(Christine)

*Well it's a resource issue. I mean, we simply don't have a budget that we can draw on.*

*To make this work, we've got to go through the university and try to convince the university that this is an important activity and can they provide some resources? (John)*

Overall participant responses suggest that reciprocity in learning abroad activities is not an easily defined or a readily implemented concept, [and not particularly linked to the long term](#)

sustainability of either short term mobility programs or international placements. Participant descriptions of actions they consider exemplify reciprocity include sharing resources and, on occasions, a two-way flow of students and academics between institutions and organisations. For some participants, reciprocity entailed a practical contribution to the host organisations or the host country. For example, the representative of one school described how their program had established a social justice fund for the host organisation and another told how they donated books to the host university. A number of the participants recognised challenges in ensuring reciprocity and looked for alternative means to enact the concept in the context of limited resources.

*It's not well balanced so it's about achieving reciprocity in other ways: I think the reciprocity is about ...understanding and becoming closer in our understanding and more celebrating our common humanity than anything else. And sharing in a global understanding of social justice and human wellbeing. (Christine)*

## **Discussion**

The findings presented here highlight the challenges and opportunities potentially inherent in the learning abroad activities offered by Australian social work programs. Significant in the descriptions of the programs is the improvised nature of learning abroad activities, often driven by the personal connections and interests of students or staff. Initiatives of this type can be rewarded at least rhetorically by higher education institutions given the national agendas discussed earlier in this paper but real and /or adequate resources rarely flow to the social work school. This paucity of resources can result in a range of dilemmas about the sustainability of international activities and the nature of the relationships on which such activities are dependent.

Participants recognised the opportunity the New Colombo Plan funding offered to students to engage in international short-term exchanges and to consider international field placements, however, this funding did not support the development or sustainability of an inclusive international program. While international field education placements were supported pedagogically through the mandatory requirements of the Australian Social Work Education Standards and Accreditation (AASW, 2012), there was no extra funding or resources to support an international field education program in terms of relationship building with partners and capacity building in host institutions. Rather an international placement was an additional burden to support within a large cohort of domestic placement students.

The work of Ilieva et al. (2014) is relevant in considering the issues of sustainability. These authors call for an approach to sustainable internationalisation in higher education that is exemplified by principles of interconnectedness and recognition of power imbalances and diversity among all key stakeholders (Ilieva et al., 2014, p. 879). Using this understanding to explore the experiences of participants in this research, it is difficult to view the international mobility activities in social work education as sustainable. The findings reveal a constant rummaging for financial resources, a lack of time for planning and conceptual development, and staff who are caught in an irresolvable dilemma about the one-sided nature of the relationships and partnerships on which their internationalisation agenda is reliant. On the one hand most participants in this study recognised the importance of relationships built on ethical principles of reciprocity, mutual benefit and equity, *on the other hand*, many also found themselves unable to maintain consistent, respectful contact with partners because of limited funding and time (Ilieva et al., 2014; Zuchowski et al., 2017).

While transformative learning can be a valuable outcome of international student exchanges (Intolubbe-Chmil, et al, 2012; McDowell, et al. 2012), the threat of under-resourcing programs and relying on staff to do extra or organise programs on an ad-hoc basis is that learning is not guided well, questioning the positive transformative learning possibilities. If students are left to deal with the international experiences by themselves or if they are only partially guided, or not supported to critically appraise their own assumptions and values that impact their interpretation and experience of the international exchange, then there is a danger that subtle or direct forms of racism and professional imperialism are reinforced (Razack, 2002).

Without an explicit intent and capacity to explore different worldviews, and even to co-produce social work knowledge and theory, there is a risk that the international activities of social work schools continue to promote the proliferation of Western theories and values (Noble, 2004; Zuchowski et al., 2017); a dilemma articulated by these participants. The varied nature of international learning abroad arrangements create a transactional approach focussed on accomplishing the task driven by institutional agendas. Concepts such as reciprocity and mutual benefit for all stakeholders becomes secondary to meeting student and institutional demand for international experiences. Embedding attributes like reciprocity into the framework of learning abroad experiences is difficult to attain or even pursue in contexts marred by limited, if any, resources and overworked individual program champions. When commitments to reciprocity remain overlooked, **potentially** sending organisations can fall back on established relationships, making the most of the goodwill afforded by host organisations (Parker, Ali, Ringell, & McKay, 2014), particularly in relation to risk management.

The experiences of Australian schools of social work reveal a complex landscape where staff are navigating institutional and government priorities for internationalising curriculum in the absence of a parallel commitment to the relationships and partnerships which promote the

effective management of risk for both students and hosts, and devoid of investment in program resourcing and reciprocity. Despite this lived reality as described by participants in this study, there is an underpinning assumption that internationalisation must go on; an idealism that insists the outcomes of the internationalisation strategies of higher education institutions are inherently beneficial and valuable despite the issues and concerns. Perhaps it is more necessary than ever to bring an alternative lens to these activities and ask the questions posed by Ilieva et al. (2014, p.889) – “why should it go on and how can it go on?”

## **Conclusion**

This research has found that many Australian social work institutions have embraced varied learning abroad opportunities as a strategy to comply with institutional and government agendas of internationalisation and to meet growing student demand for creative and alternative experiences. The [participants](#) raised questions and concerns about the nature of relationships and partnerships inherent in international mobility activities and the long term effective sustainability of such activities. They highlighted that while resourcing for mobility experiences has increased, the support has been individualised directly to students rather than to resource the work that takes place around exchange programs. For example, the importance of ongoing communication and relationships to international collaborations is well recognised (Brydon et al., 2012), however, it is the activity itself that is resourced, not the ongoing long term nurturing of international partnerships in which effective activities are embedded.

While learning abroad programs can provide useful and even on occasion transformative experiences for students, [this qualitative exploration of the perspectives of Australian social work schools](#) has revealed the need for more a holistic approach to sustainability of international learning experiences that can truly underpin the development of students’ global

**mind-set** rather than reinforcing pre-existing world views (Alphonse, 2008; Potts, 2016). Social work schools require earmarked resources to support the essential elements of equitable, ethical programs: reciprocal arrangements, sustained commitments and sound relationships with the host institutions. While internationalisation efforts are primarily driven by market trend, institutional competition and economic goal achievement, sustainable international mobility opportunities may be out of reach.



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