

The sustainability of UK post-colonial social work practice learning opportunities in Malaysia

Abstract

This paper considers the outcome of a British Council funded research project to develop a sustainable programme of international placements for social work students studying at Bournemouth University. The project provided a unique and innovative opportunity for final-year students to undertake a 20-day practice placement in social work/care settings in Malaysia, through collaborative links with two Malaysian universities: Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, in East Malaysia.

The aim of the project specifically focused on enhancing the student experience of social welfare in diverse international settings, while meeting the UK requirements of the practice elements of the BA Social Work. This paper therefore discusses the experiences of students immersed in an unfamiliar practice context in the Malaysian postcolonial cultural setting. Thus we consider the impact upon students' learning needs in a new cultural context where the stringent and rigid structures relating to legislation and policy, together with university protocols underpinning such placements in the UK, are removed or offered in a new and distinctive form.

Our analysis therefore explores the student perceptions of their personal and professional journey, in which transitional cognitive processes are recorded in journal format and through the complex exercise of developing a critical incident analysis. These formal reflective assignments form the basis of the findings in this study, in which insights are drawn from the students' inchoate thinking, where they consider their own biases formed and crystallised within the security of the developed world. Accordingly, the study considers the shifting and liminal states undergone by the students' as recipients of a postcolonial education, which is now challenged by new experiences and encounters with sharply contrasting relative values, norms and social conduct in Malaysia. Although non-imperialist in tone, their formal British education has to-date focused on particular social groups located within the socio-historical, post-Welfare State ecological environment characterised by global turbulence, as well as voluntary and forced migration. However, in the less familiar Malaysian setting the commitment to social and human justice, commensurate with adherence to social work values and ethics, may be manifested in ways that are seen as oppressive by someone from a different cultural heritage and personal background.

Finally, the study closely considers the impact of this kind of international placement on developing countries, in terms of improved professional competence, relevance to the host cultural context, as well as the British educational and professional one, and addresses the crucial issue of non-exploitative reciprocity. In addition, we review the general sustainability of this kind of exchange programme in forming an important plank in the internationalisation of the curriculum at Bournemouth University.

The selection of student candidates for this project depended upon their demonstration of genuine interest towards expanding their knowledge of diversity in relation to 'race'/ethnicity, culture and religious/spiritual identities. In addition, student interest in and knowledge of social work cultural competence issues was scrutinised and formed a further criterion for selection. These aspects are considered to be intrinsic to good professional practice in social work in the UK, as well as internationally. Finally, the greater exposure of students to these kinds of issues in international placements is viewed as enhancing the competence of social work

students on the verge of qualifying as social work professionals within the multicultural and multifaith society of Britain.