

# “It’s the News of Difference That Makes the Difference”: Witnessing Social Action Through an International Collaboration Between Australia and Taiwan

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## **ABSTRACT**

Short-term study abroad programs have been criticised in the literature as inauthentic, vulnerable to inequity and lacking in reciprocity. Questions about the potentially extractive nature of study abroad programs are important debates and social work educators must ensure that the learning opportunities resulting in study abroad programs are grounded in authentic, ongoing relationships with the host country. This article discusses a collaboration between the Social Work departments of the University of Wollongong (UOW), National Taiwan University (NTU) and an international NGO based in Taiwan. One aspect of this collaboration is a two-week study program in Taiwan for UOW social work students that focuses on themes of Indigenous cultural recovery, community development and elder care. These themes are grounded in non-government organisations who view care as a collective, relational, knowledgeable practice and are committed to creating possibilities for social justice. Qualitative data taken from the students’ reflexive essays, reflexive group discussions, student presentations and participant observations are used to highlight the perspectives and impacts on learning for all involved in the collaboration and to identify that, when learning occurs, a difference is perceived and it is this difference that makes a difference. The paper contributes to the pedagogical evidence base for how international short-term study programs can enhance intercultural learning, critically reflexive practice and build respect, recognition and empathy for the ‘other’ amongst social work graduates

**Keywords:** *International social work; Study abroad; Social work education; Culturally sensitive practice; Practice-based*

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing influences of globalisation and the demand for social workers to develop skills in cross-cultural practice have seen an increase in the numbers of international opportunities incorporated within social work curriculums (Thampi, 2017). In Australia, international student learning is an important strategy in internationalising tertiary curriculum (Zuchowski, Miles, Howard, Harris, & Francis, 2019) and social work students who have participated in international programs have highlighted their perceptions of cross-cultural immersion and intercultural learning (Thampi, 2017).

The definition of international social work has been the subject of much debate. Confusion over terms such as international, global, and cross-national has resulted in the definition remaining complex. International social work comprises a number of different concepts and is used to refer to, amongst others, international practice, comparative social welfare, cross-cultural knowledge and action on global issues (Healy, 2008). In 1956, the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) opted for a narrow definition of the term, limiting it to the confines of governmental and non-governmental agencies with international programs. More recently, the International Federation of Social Work (2014) stated that the global definition of social work is “a practice based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people...social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work” (IFSW, 1994). This definition reflects a shift to broader conceptualisations, highlighting social work practice that prioritises concepts of globalisation, development and human rights as core components of international social work (Healy, 2008).

International social work can be described as international professional action within which there are four dimensions: internationally related domestic practice, professional exchange, international practice and international policy development (Healy, 2008). The second dimension, the dimension of professional exchange, is the capacity to share knowledge and experience to improve social work practice and social welfare at home (Healy, 2008) and includes international placement exchanges of students and practitioners, collaborative research and opportunities to utilise the perspectives from different cultures into local settings (Thampi, 2017). It is this second dimension of international social work that is the focus of this paper. It will highlight the experiences of 12 final-year social work students from the University of Wollongong who participated in a short-term study program in Taiwan. With funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs New Colombo Mobility Plan, and in partnership with the National University of Taiwan and Eden Social Welfare Foundation, a large international non-government organisation based in Taiwan, the program is inspired by principles of Indigenous cultural recovery, elder care, activism for social and political change and developmental social work (Midgley, 1995). Developmental social work, put simply, is social work that favours outcomes that have both social and economic benefits for a community (Midgley, 1995). It can be regarded as a move away from the more traditional, individual-based social work practice in favour of a more collective and community-based practice (Midgley, 1995).

Short-term study abroad programs have provided social work students with the opportunity to experience cultures outside of their own and to think about how these experiences might influence their practice. There is a risk, however, for them to be extractive in nature by promoting a type of educational tourism where conclusions about unfamiliar cultures and traditions can be made through a western lens (Bell, Moorhead, & Boetto, 2017). Social work educators need to ensure that they are developing programs that focus on the needs of the community (Rice, 2019) and are based on reciprocity and partnership (Zuchowski et al., 2019). To avoid the unconscious reinforcement of neo-colonialism and imperialism, the concepts of reciprocity and partnerships in international study are essential ones to consider (Zuchowski et al., 2019). The New Colombo Mobility Plan is an example of the potentially non-reciprocal and extractive nature of short-term study abroad programs. Focusing predominantly on students between the ages of 18 to 28, the funding allows students to travel to 40 locations within the Indo-Pacific region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019). The focus of the New Colombo Plan is one of mobility and not one of exchange. The use of the term “mobility” places an emphasis on a one-way flow of students and not a two way reciprocal exchange that values situated intercultural learning (Zuchowski et al., 2019).

Taking the title of this article from anthropologist Geoffrey Bateson, “It’s the news of difference that makes a difference” (Bateson, 1972, p. 318), this study highlights the strategies used to redress the extractive nature of short-term study abroad programs. These include embedding the intercultural-learning program within authentic, ongoing relationships and facilitating experiences that recognise that, when learning occurs, a difference is perceived, and it is the presence of this difference that changes current thinking and practices.

Specifically, this article employs a practice-based theoretical frame to investigate the research question: How can a short-term study abroad program create the conditions of possibility for enhancing culturally sensitive and critically reflexive practice amongst diverse people? The paper contributes to the pedagogical evidence base for how international short-term study programs can enhance intercultural learning, critically reflexive practice and build respect, recognition and empathy for the “other” amongst social work graduates.

## **INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

Social work education places an important emphasis on the development of a student’s professional identity. Characterised by current worldviews, social work knowledge and a commitment to social work values and ethics, the development of a professional identity is important as it distinguishes the knowledge and skills that are embedded within the social work profession (Moorhead, Boetto, & Bell, 2014). Social work education plays a vital role in developing this identity and experiences such as field education that incorporate both the international and global contexts of social work practice have been identified as an important component in a social work curriculum (Moorhead et al., 2014). By acknowledging the social issues that globalisation brings and the diverse populations of service users and staff that future social workers will encounter, a curriculum that understands the global responsibilities of social work is critical (Moorhead et al., 2014).

By recognising and responding to the problems that affect human well-being in the globalised environment (Healy & Link, 2012), understanding the concept of cultural competency (Nadan, 2017) and representing themselves in an international setting (Hare, 2004), there is a necessity to produce practitioners who are comfortable and knowledgeable with cultures other than their own (Mapp, 2012). Field education is a core component of social work education and, in recent times, the popularity of international field placements has increased (Fox, 2017). International field placements provide students with opportunities that embed them into a cross-cultural learning experience and prepare them for international practice (Thampi, 2017). International placements have been included in arguments around principles of best practice (Fox & Hugman, 2019) as have the debates that focus on the ethical relationship and reciprocity between the host and home universities. These debates have highlighted the importance of acknowledging practices that are both decolonising and grounded in Indigenous knowledge (Fox & Hugman, 2019). Short-term study abroad programs have the unique opportunity to do this work by promoting intercultural understanding and personal growth (Fairchild, Pillai, & Noble, 2006) and have generally been regarded as an effective measure that exposes students to developing world realities (Epprecht, 2004).

The theoretical frameworks of transformative learning and critical reflection encourage students to engage in opportunities that challenge their belief systems, their assumptions about the world and their understanding of power and privilege (Fook & Askeland, 2007). Transformational learning is a core component of social work education and research on study abroad programs have highlighted a variety of transformative learning (Fook & Askeland, 2007) opportunities that include an openness to diversity, an increase in intercultural communication and the ability for students to challenge their ethnocentrism (Mapp, 2012). Transformative learning theory combined with a critical social work perspective are advocated in the literature as underpinning pedagogy that is effective in achieving meaningful learning and extending culturally sensitive practice amongst social work students engaged in short-term international study programs (Jones & Miles, 2017; Jones, Rowe, & Miles, 2018; Lamar, Boddy, O’Leary, & Allen, 2019).

Acknowledging culture as a multidimensional and expansive concept encourages students to consider the limitations of understanding other cultures in their entirety. Concepts of culture beyond the “visible” framework of language, art and dress and into the “invisible” framework of values, attitudes and worldviews is a critical component of student learning (Jones, Rowe, & Miles, 2018). Experiencing the challenges of being “the other” (Gilin & Young, 2009), questioning long-held assumptions and biases (Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015), and facilitating processes that promote students’ development of meaningful relationships with the host country (Woolf, 2007), short-term study abroad programs can influence the students’ development as global citizens and ultimately enhance their multicultural competency (Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015). The Australian government is keen for Australia to be regarded as a global leader in education by increasing student mobility and promoting collaboration with international partners. Through investment in the New Colombo Plan, there has been a significant increase in the number of tertiary students participating in mobility programs (Zuchowski et al., 2019).

## STUDY AND METHODS

### Theoretical and methodological frame: A practice-based approach

Practice-based studies comprise a diverse body of work that have developed explanations of social, cultural and material phenomena based on the notion of practices (Barad, 2007; Schatzki, 2019). Although the “turn to practice” is prominent in fields such as education, organisation studies, and healthcare, surprisingly, practice theory and studies are scarce in the social work literature (Keevers, 2020). In practice theory, the primary unit of analysis is practice, described by Schatzki (2019) as the complex interactions of sayings, doings and relatings between people, other beings and material artefacts. Practice-based approaches emphasise the *relational* character of learning. Thus, learning is viewed as *socially and collectively constituted* rather than individually constituted. Attention paid to *doing* and this move away from a cognitive conception of knowledge emphasises the *embodiment and the materiality* of learning. It encourages us to focus on the *sensing, knowing, perceptive body* and the *affective* dimensions of learning. A practice-based approach suggests for this study, a focus on the embodied, affective dimensions and situated complexity of intercultural learning in mobility programs. It stresses the importance of context and culture.

A practice based approach using a participatory action research (PAR) framework (Pain, Kindon, & Kesby, 2007) is the methodology employed in this collaborative project. The PAR framework is a collective, self-reflective inquiry (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006), that values the co-creation of knowledge, community expertise and community collaboration (Asaba & Suarez-Balcazar, 2018).

### Data-gathering methods

Within our practice-based framework, multiple interpretive methods were incorporated for accessing a range of data including:

- Students’ reflexive essays
- Student oral presentations
- Critical reflexive discussions conducted before, during and after the study program in Taiwan
- Observations of immersive learning experiences, activities and interactions
- Documentation and photographs of the study program in Taiwan.
- These methods were used to capture the impact on learning for students in the program.

### International social work study program: the research site

Prior to departure, the students were engaged in a mix of workshops and online learning that included topics such as cultural diversity, racism and white privilege. The preparatory learning of the social work students was further enhanced through an immersive intercultural workshop. Specifically, the local Taiwanese Buddhist temple invited the students to take part in a cultural exchange program with a group of Taiwanese students who were

visiting Australia on their own short-term study abroad program. The students participated in a reciprocal workshop where they shared valuable information about their countries, their culture and their language using interpreters. The students prepared for the workshop by developing verbal presentations, curating artefacts and designing demonstrations of specific cultural activities to be shared with the Taiwanese students. Similarly, the Australian students learnt about the history and culture of Taiwan and were given the opportunity to learn some basic language skills. Music and food were central to the workshop and created the possibility of generous relations between the two groups of students despite them not sharing a common language.

Once in Taiwan, the social work students from both UOW and NTU, participated in workshops where they engaged in learning together and teaching each other about social welfare structures, social issues, social work education and social work practice in both countries. Topics that focused on the global agenda for social work including Indigenous issues, LGBTQI+ communities, environmental sustainability and elder care were used as comparative, reflexive discussion points.

Guided by an academic and recent social work graduates from NTU who had participated in the previous iteration of this study program, students from both universities were immersed in developmental social work practice in the Wan-Hwa district of Taipei. Students had opportunities to learn from service users and community members, social workers and community workers from diverse practice backgrounds. In the second week of the exchange, the students travelled outside of Taipei and into the mountainous district of Lishan and into coastal Hulien where their learning focused on Indigenous cultural recovery and elder care in Aboriginal communities. Throughout the study program in Taiwan, the students participated in facilitated reflexive group discussions during which they reflected on their experiences, discussed implications for their own social work practice and analysed their learning in relation to the global agenda for social work and sustainable development goals.

After returning to Australia, the students participated in two workshops and in a collective group presentation to social work students in the third year of their degree. As part of their assessment, the students were required to complete a reflexive essay discussing the prominent themes and learning they had gleaned from their experiences in Taiwan. They were encouraged to reflect on their current understandings of individually focused, traditional forms of social work practice and to think about a collective, developmental approach to practice.

### **Research participants**

The total population of UOW students who participated in the study program in Taiwan in 2019 were invited to participate in this phase of the study. All agreed to be involved. Accordingly, 12 students comprising two males and 10 females and aged between 21 and 57 years old from the final year of the UOW social work program participated. They were from diverse cultural backgrounds including Aboriginal Australian, Southern Indian, Congolese, Dutch, Polish and white Australian.

### **Data analysis**

A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken using the students' reflexive essays, oral presentations, critical reflexive discussions and observations. The first author de-identified and aggregated the data. She initially coded the data using words from the texts, and then developed more "abstract" codes to determine the themes (Hesse-Biber, 2007). This early identification of themes and analysis was corroborated with other members of the research team. "Sensitising concepts" (Patton, 2002, p. 216) derived from the program's focus on Indigenous cultural recovery, elder care, development social work and activism for social and political change were used to further shape our analysis.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical clearance for this study was approved by the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Board (HREC). To avoid any potential student coercion or duress, the researcher who undertook the observations during the program, and the initial analysis was not a teacher in the program, she was not involved in the marking of any assessable items nor was she aware of the final grades for any of the students. The final analysis and writing of this paper occurred after the participating students had successfully completed the subject into which the study program in Taiwan was embedded.

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of the student's reflexive essays, oral presentations and observations during the program highlighted their willingness to participate in new experiences, food and culture within a distinctive social and political context.

The introduction of traditional Taiwanese cuisine by their Taiwanese colleagues was easier for some than others. Students who had travelled previously were accustomed to new tastes and textures but for some, their food experiences were limited. Learning how to use chopsticks, eating food from the local market and sampling food that might not, at first sight appear palatable, are examples of the students' willingness to immerse themselves in the local culture and open themselves up to experiences of cultural difference.

I believe we immersed ourselves through song and dance, by eating traditional foods, listening to stories and connecting through touch, sight and smell.  
(Student 1, reflexive essay)

In this quote the importance of embodied practices that engage all the senses to immersive intercultural learning is evident. Another student explains:

My learning from this is very much underpinned by the power of shared experiences, whether it be food, music ...connection is possible without talking...often aligns us to the core of our humanity. (Student 5, reflexive essay)

Here we see how it is from the sociality and relationality of practices involving food and music, that meaning emerges for the student.

Spending time within an aged care facility and the attitudes towards caring for the aged stood out for the students.

The resident led approach allowed some of us to experience the effect of being included in traditional dance and music with what felt like new friends. This was an empowering moment of understanding my desire to work with older people.

(Student 2, reflexive essay)

Again, it is *moving* with music and the *sense of connection* generated that prompted a transformational learning moment for the student, where her desire to practise social work with older people became clear to her.

The active involvement of the residential staff, the encouragement for them to sing and listen to their traditional songs and the inclusion of the residents in the everyday running of the facility all highlight a difference in culture and how care is enacted. The time, respect and consideration that the staff showed the residents was encouraging for the students and they wanted to participate.

One of the carers explained to me that they integrated as many activities that had been meaningful to the residents in their younger lives as possible. When this happened...I saw a dynamic shift in the elder's disposition. (Student 2, reflexive essay)

The students witnessed how the use of physical touch that enabled compassion to be felt was used as a means of communication and trust building with and between the older people living with dementia in the aged care home. As Student 3 stated in her reflexive essay:

I observed the staff using physical touch as a form of non-verbal communication to show warmth and kindness towards the elderly...In Australia, this would have been seen as inappropriate. The staff viewed this as a normal part of their roles rather than deliberate action.

It is witnessing these differences in practice that make the difference in student learning. The embodied experiences of the singing and dancing and feeling the genuine care and warmth shown to the residents highlights not just how the news of difference, makes the difference but the importance of affect and affective relations on immersive learning experiences.

The timing of this program coincided with the start of the summer protests in Hong Kong which saw approximately 1 million people taking to the streets to march against the government's proposed extradition bill (Davidson & Kuo, 2019). In solidarity, the people of Taiwan held simultaneous peaceful demonstrations in Taipei on the weekends which the social work students were invited to attend by participating social work practitioners and students from NTU. The UOW students were keen to learn about the political situation in the region and support their Taiwanese colleagues by protesting with them or by dis-cussing the situation and expressing solidarity on social media platforms. The bonds and interpersonal relationships that had started between the two sets of students were reinforced through this act of solidarity and continue to be built through the use of distance-shrinking technologies such



as Facebook and WhatsApp. In our critical reflexive discussions, the students explored on how these global influences might impact social work practice in both countries and whether a developmental practice approach might be a useful strategy to utilise.

This reminds me that our job is to challenge oppressive systems despite how powerful they may seem and to also bring the subject back to the conversations that people avoid. (Student 2 reflexive essay)

Learning about and experiencing directly the political context in Taiwan enhanced this students' commitment to practise critical social work. Another student comments on the impacts of the study program on her learning.

I believe I have grown as an individual and as a social worker. My cultural awareness has increased immensely, and I have gained a fire in my belly for community work and collaboration. (Student 1, reflexive essay)

The use of the phrase "fire in my belly" attests to the embodied, visceral character of the learning she perceives.

The situated complexity of intercultural learning in mobility programs is demonstrated in the cultural and political environment in Taiwan. The situation afforded access to social work activism in support of human rights and freedom. These unplanned opportunities that emerged and were presented to students were eagerly welcomed. They embraced the opportunity to think about their privilege and to challenge their beliefs and assumptions about cultures and communities that were different to their own.

These people speak their truth, and in that truth is hope...I think of the incredible things that can be achieved amongst the chaos of colonization and globalization... And this will be a reminder of Indigenous people's survival and the enduring soul of humanity... (Student 4, reflexive essay)

The students witnessed developmental social work in practice in Wan-Hua and in the Indigenous community of Lishan. This practice framework supported a collective model of care that enhanced outcomes for individuals and communities.

I have come to the conclusion that as social workers we cannot just work individually, rather we must work collectively and inclusively to influence change, increase human rights and move towards a peaceful and fair society. (Student 1, reflexive essay)

Something that struck me in Taiwan was the powerful communication that was created through various methods such as music. In each of the Indigenous communities we were welcomed with song. They were able to communicate stories of pain, loss, resistance, survival, love...I had never felt clearer about what their voices and bodies were telling me. The wisdom in their voices dominated the room. (Student 5, reflexive group discussion)

This comment suggests that these practices involving music, dance and storying-telling are not merely examples of “educational tourism” but political, everyday, corporeal ways of connecting across difference. It demonstrates how students’ culturally sensitive practice is enhanced by being affected by, and affecting, different bodies in diverse encounters (Keever & Sykes, 2016). The students were all participants in these practices and, whilst recognising their privilege, they did not see their hosts as “the other”. Immersive, embodied, affective practices have the capacity to facilitate respect, connections between people despite their diverse life-worlds.

Enabling access by UOW social work students to some of the innovative practices being enacted by practitioners in Taiwan, the study program embodies Bateson’s (1972) view that the news of difference creates the difference. We also attempted to encourage this “news of difference” by asking questions of comparison and speculation during our daily critical reflexive discussions with the participating students. The pedagogical premise here is that comparisons are useful for recognising possibilities and distinctions during experiential learning. Such questions direct our attention toward unnoticed details in our surroundings (Shotter, 2010). Based on Shotter’s (2010) and Bateson’s (1972) suggestions, we designed a collection of speculative and reflexive questions to guide critical discussion. Examples of questions based on these principles are:

If our short-term study program in Taiwan turned out to be really productive and useful for your learning, what would be happening? What differences would you notice? What differences might your fellow students notice upon your return?

If the notion of care as a collective, knowledgeable performance rather than as a relation between the carer and the “cared for” were integrated into aged care packages and the NDIS in Australia, what would be different? What differences might service users and their families notice? What differences might the broader community notice?

Based on our experiences of social work practice in Taiwan, if you could make one change in the way social work is practised at home, what would it be?

In response to such questions, students critically reflected as a group about the lessons they had learnt and how this might translate into the Australian context. One student commented:

Led by an academic from National Taiwan University a group of committed and passionate graduates enriched our experiences through conversations, translating and friendship. They joined us in workshops on socio-political and economic issues, encouraged us to participate in local culture, guided our understanding of how social work happens when faith and social conscience are at the forefront of work in the field and warmly demonstrated how they approach social work in the domains of Indigenous communities, children and families and elder care. (Student 2, presentation to UOW third-year social work students)

## DISCUSSION

The themes of Indigenous cultural recovery, community connection, elder care and social work activism were emphasised throughout the study. Together with the unique political situation unfolding during the program, a framework of practice that is collective and relational exposed students to community-based social work committed to social change.

### **Indigenous cultural recovery**

The students were introduced to the urban Indigenous communities of Taipei where they witnessed and learnt about the impact of dispossession and resettlement. There were many similarities between the Taiwanese and Australian Indigenous peoples' experience of colonisation such as the movement from rural to urban spaces, issues of homelessness, poverty and poorer health outcomes. Despite the intergenerational impacts of colonisation the connection to culture, family and community is still strong. The sharing of traditional food and music highlighted these connections and were effectively used as "communal media" to bring the students and the community together. In this way, this study makes a contribution to learning in short-term international study programs, by demonstrating the pedagogical power of combining embodied, sensing, relational and "doing" learning with a critically reflexive approach that tends to emphasise more cognitive learning.

### **Community connection**

The establishment of a food-waste café, a food-sharing refrigerator and a community food bank instigated by a local community representative, were all examples of the community development initiatives that promoted community connectedness. The issue of food waste and the popularity of food-sharing networks is not lost in Taiwan and these initiatives have, not only addressed issues around food security and wellbeing, but have also served to make connections with and between marginalised and poorer community members. Linked to the community food sharing and food waste networks is a locally based health organisation known as the community primary care stop. Here members are encouraged to attend regular health checkups, participate in the community center activities and meet with other members of the community. The more regularly they attend the health centre, the more they earn credit points for items in the food bank co-operative. The idea behind this initiative is to promote community connection, reduce isolation and promote good health.

Food played a significant role, not only in the community initiatives described, but in students' intercultural learning. This study makes a second contribution to the pedagogical evidence base of learning in international short-term study programs by suggesting that taking materialities like food seriously as pedagogical resources has the potential to enhance intercultural learning. Material things that matter are often missing from accounts of social work practice as most research and education tends to privilege the intentional, human subject. The practice-based approach to intercultural learning adopted in this paper provokes social work educators to pay attention to the dimensions of knowing and learning which are not primarily about representing but about *affecting*.

### **Elder care**

The underpinning of care and respect highlights the final theme of elder care. The students had the opportunity to spend time in an aged care residential facility and a group home

where they were able to compare the practices with the elderly in Taiwan with the practices in aged care facilities in Australia. Whilst there are many similarities between Australia and Taiwan with stories of dispossession, discrimination and ongoing funding issues, the difference lies in the relational, collective nature of caring and the importance placed on the maintaining Indigenous knowledges and traditions. Students experienced care as socially and collectively constituted rather than individually constituted. The aged care facility worked to honour the previous lives and backgrounds of the residents and actively encouraged them to engage in food preparation, listen, dance and play traditional music and to engage in traditional activities that had been an integral aspect of their previous lives. The acts of hospitality and the expectation that the students would participate rather than simply observe, combined to create an irresistible invitation to engage in cross-cultural learning and experience how aspects of the global social work agenda are enacted differently to their experiences in Australia. Accordingly, this study makes a third contribution by demonstrating that a powerful feature of learning in short-term international study programs is the opportunity to witness and perceive differences. The findings of this study support Bateson's (1972) view that it is the news of difference that creates the difference.

### **Social work activism for social and political change**

The summer protests in Hong Kong and the opportunity afforded for involvement in the Taiwan solidarity protests exposed the students to grassroots activism. The experience of activism varied throughout the cohort; some students regularly attended protests and for some, this was their first experience. There is much to be learnt from the opportunity of witness activism from within, particularly in the translation of anti-oppressive theory into practice (Gair, 2017). Gill (1998) as cited in Gair (2017) argued that becoming an agent of change requires a critical consciousness. The impact of neoliberal, conservative ideologies has marginalised the status of social activism in contemporary social work in Australia. Gair (2017) argued that social workers who are competent in understanding and addressing the causes of oppression and injustice are crucial in raising awareness of racism and human rights violations. This study suggests that embodied learning in which students have the opportunity to "catch" the politics of hope evident as the Taiwanese social workers struggle to disrupt entrenched power relations with their colleagues in Hong Kong, is also critical in their becoming agents of change.

This study attests that short-term international study programs can offer important education that has the capability to enhance global awareness skill development and culturally sensitive practice (Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015).

### **CONCLUSION**

In this first phase of the study, the scale is small and only allows for exploring the capacity of short-term international study programs to enhance culturally sensitive practice in one location. Accordingly, the findings are not necessarily generalisable to all short-term international study programs. However, what might be of value beyond the specific interests of those involved in this partnership is our practice-based theoretical frame that focuses attention on the importance of the embodied, affective dimensions and situated complexity of inter-cultural learning in mobility programs.

The learning afforded by immersive, affecting, doing, witnessing practice experiences, combined with opportunities to practise critically reflexive discussion and perceive difference are highlighted in this paper. Students participating in these programs have the opportunity to challenge their assumptions about other cultures and difference without being invited to defend their position. The article suggests that the dynamic and emergent character of short-term international study programs and the lived, relational, embodied experience of the learning can create possibilities for enhancing culturally sensitive practice. Such outcomes, however, are by no means guaranteed. Questions concerning the extractive nature and reciprocity of these programs are essential to ask and social work educators need to develop learning opportunities that are built on partnerships, genuine ongoing relationships, and shared, intentional pedagogies. The partnership between the University of Wollongong and National Taiwan University will continue with a reciprocal exchange that will facilitate social work internships for the Taiwanese social work students planned for 2021.

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