



Carina Thörn is course coordinator for international field practice at the Department of Social Work at Mid Sweden University. She holds a Master degree in Social Work and is a certified social worker. Her years of work experience are in the field of children and families. Carina once did her field practice in rural India.

The social work education in Östersund has since the late 1970s sent more than 1000 student abroad for field practice. Our experiences are sometimes asked for by colleagues both nationally and internationally, and this report focuses on how we do it all. How do we prepare students, how do we find placements, how do we establish contact and write contracts, how do we follow up and evaluate and let others benefit from experiences? These are issues being dealt with in this report.

Practice placement abroad

How we do it - Experiences from Mid Sweden University

Carina Thörn



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"Pedagogiska meddelanden" is a series of publications on field practice and educational issues at the Department of Social Work at Mid Sweden University.

Masoud Kamali, Professor of Social Work is Chairman of the Editor Committee.

Magnus Ottelid, MSSW, lecturer, is a member of the Editor Committee.

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Preface

This volume of Pedagogiska Meddelanden is dedicated to field practice abroad. The Social Work programme at Mid Sweden University has a long and broad experience when it comes to helping students doing practice in other countries.

Mrs. Carina Thörn, who is course coordinator for practice placement abroad, has often been asked for documentation in English regarding the question how we actually do things. In the end she realized that she had to write it all down herself. And who could be better suited? Furthermore, this is just the kind of publications we want for Pedagogiska Meddelande, since we need to record our daily efforts to make the social work education as good as it can be. Only by doing that is it possible to examine activities and make changes for the better. So, thank you Carina!

Magnus Ottelid

Practice Placement Abroad

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, students from the Department of Social Work at Mid Sweden University have regularly gone abroad for their second practice placement. To date over 1000 students have been placed outside of the country. In spring 2009 the department celebrated helping one thousand students who have chosen to do their practice placement abroad. Each year, 50-75 students study outside of Sweden. The most popular destinations have been and continue to be India, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Kenya and South Africa. However, the department has sent students practically all over the world – to all five continents. To date, students have been in over eighty-five different countries. English-speaking countries dominate. Although students do their practice placement in many different areas, the preferred areas are within NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) as well as traditional work areas.

The purpose of this article is to record some experiences about how to prepare students to study abroad and how the University can organise the practice placement course overseas. The Department of Social Work in Östersund has a long history of sending students to other countries. Students who go abroad for their practice placement learn a lot and acquire experience which is of use in their future careers as social workers.

In the course evaluation completed after the placement is finished, students indicate their level of satisfaction with the practice placement abroad. Regardless of the organisation or country, students have generally been pleased with their experiences. They write that they have learnt a great deal, particularly about themselves. They also refer to this as personal development. Students indicate that they learn a great deal by living in a different country, living as a minority and not always understanding social codes and the language. They gain knowledge of social work in another context, which means they also learn to relate better to social work in Sweden. This not only gives them new perspectives on social work, but also on themselves and their values.

Several books have been written about international social work, such as *“Broadening Horizons, International Exchanges in Social Work”* by Dominelli & Bernard and *“Socialt arbejde i et globaliseret samfund”* by Antczak & Johansen. Some of the issues the writers discuss are different perspectives on international social work and they carry on a debate about how to tackle social work problems on a global scale. These writers also discuss students involved in international exchanges in social work and the use of this experience in social work.

Research in this field is, however, remarkably sparse regarding how universities prepare their students for their practice placements and what kind of support students need before, during and after their practice placement.

The purpose of this report is to record how the Department of Social Work at Mid Sweden University prepares its students for their experience abroad. First, there is some background on the social work programme as well as the history and contacts the University has. Next you can read about the practice placement itself and the semester-purpose-curriculum, where you can take part in the intended learning outcomes (the objectives of the supervised practice placement and examination).

Next, the following issues are considered in turn: preparation for the placement abroad, international days, contract positions vs. seeking a practice placement on one's own and assigned practice placement positions. Afterwards there is information on students who are engaged in their practice placements, how the placement is conducted, supervision and compensations. After completion of the practice placement, students have follow-up meetings, experience seminars and evaluations. At the end of the article you can follow the overall discussion about practice placements.

Background

Social work programme

The social work bachelor programme (3,5 years) has been offered at Östersund since 1971. Each year, about 200 students begin their studies in the Department of Social Work in Östersund. There are two programmes: (1) social work and (2) intercultural and international social work. The intercultural and international social work programme was established in 1997.

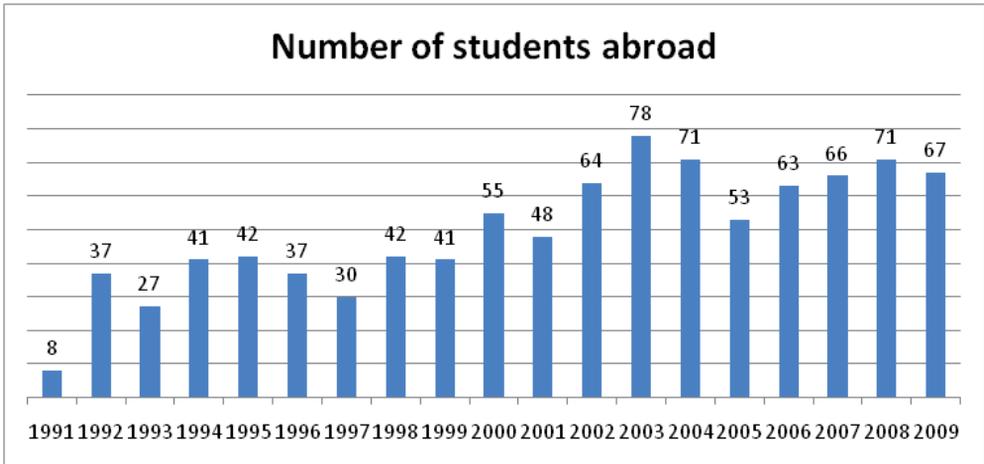
The social work programme is both academic and vocational. In order to ensure high quality of the vocational aspect, there are two semesters of supervised practice placements. The second one occurs during the sixth semester of study. Students in the social work programme have the opportunity to do their second, 15-week practice placement abroad (Mittuniversitetet, 2007b). For students in the intercultural and international social work programme, it is mandatory to do the second, 20-week practice placement outside of the Nordic countries (Mittuniversitetet, 2007a). The objective of the second practice placement is for the student to gain a deeper knowledge of the practice of social work. The supervised practice placement is a learning period in which the student gains knowledge and experience of social work in another country. It takes place at a workplace that deals with social work.

History

There is a long tradition of globalisation at the Department of Social Work, with practice placements abroad making a vital contribution. The first students to do a practice placement abroad travelled to England at the end of the 1970s. The practice placement abroad became firmly established at the beginning of the 1980s. More students have taken the opportunity to do their practice placement outside of Sweden.

Since the mid-1980s, students from the department have regularly gone abroad for their practice placement. Each year, 50-75 students go overseas. Since the beginning of the 1980s, about 1000 students have been abroad. The most popular countries have been and continue to be India, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Kenya and South Africa. However, the department has sent students practically all over the world – to all five continents. To date, students have been in over eighty-five different countries. English-speaking countries dominate.

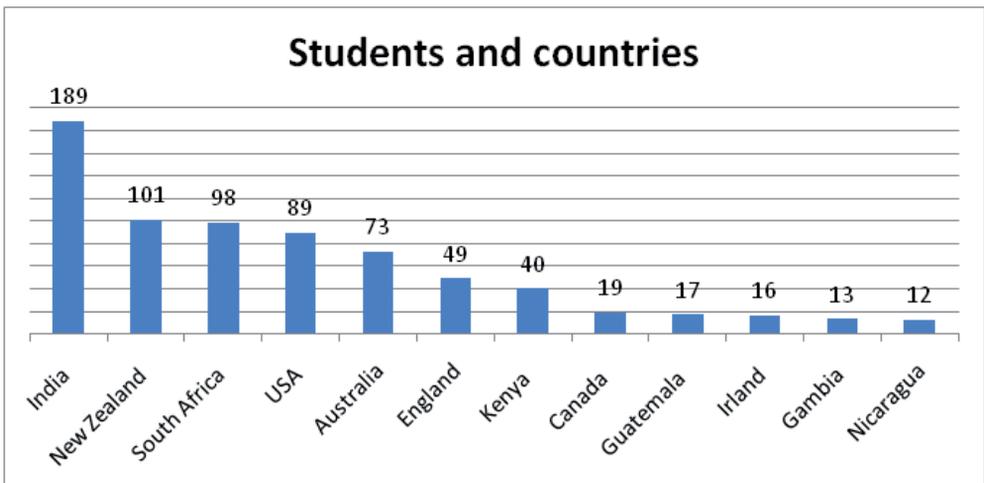
Statistic 1991-2009



A total of 941 students have been abroad during the period 1991-2009

Most used countries outside Scandinavia:

(Statistics from 1991-2009)



Contacts

Contracts and other contacts

Many students do their practice placement abroad within the scope of the collaborative arrangements the department has with organisations and universities around the world. Students interested in other countries and activities take responsibility themselves, but work with the department to seek out and contact organisations. The student's information and the course co-ordinator's contact with the organisation serve as the basis for the department's approval of the practice placement. The student is responsible for practical preparations while the department provides advice and support, arranges preparatory seminars and is responsible for other administrative tasks prior to the student's departure.

The Department of Social Work at Mid Sweden University has an agreement with the University of Fort Hare in South Africa. The university welcomes two students each spring semester and four students each autumn semester. The Department of Social Work also has agreements with a number of organisations, including an organisation in Kenya and one in Gambia, which promise to take two to four students per semester. In collaboration with Örebro University, the Department of Social Work is part of the SWINDIA project in India, which offers nine students practice placement positions per semester. The Department of Social Work also has agreements with two organisations – one in Australia and one in England. In addition to these agreements, the department has a huge contact network that spans the world.

Scholarships and insurance

The Department of Social Work participates in two Nordic networks, for some years financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers. Through these networks, students with certain conditions were granted a so-called "additional cost scholarship". It included a travel contribution. Students with a practice placement in Europe can apply for the Erasmus internship scholarship. Students can also apply for scholarships from other organisations and foundations. During the internship abroad, the student generally receives financial aid from CSN (The Swedish National Board of Student Aid) and can also apply for a so-called "additional loan". The purpose of this loan is to cover for example the cost of travel, insurance and vaccination. Mid Sweden University also provides insurance for students through the Chamber of Commerce and applies 24 hours a day.

Curriculum

The practice placement is performed under the guidance of a supervisor contracted by Mid Sweden University. This supervisor follows up and supports the student in his or her learning and development process. The supervised practice placement is

individually designed based on the student's needs and particular areas of interest and can be tied to his or her social work programme as well as the goals and methodology of the organisation.

Intended learning outcomes

Upon completion of the course, the student will be able to put theoretical social work knowledge into practice, will have further developed his/her professional identity by training and trying different proficiencies and will be able to use resources to understand the importance of the individual in social work.

Upon completion of the course, the student will have gained knowledge of the organisation, the organisation's objectives, work methods, laws and conventions which are of significance to social work, the country's social structure and social policies as well as the role of international and national organisations in international and intercultural social work. Also important are human relations and various processes of interaction, where particular attention is given to aspects related to gender, class, ethnicity, religion and age group.

Upon completion of the course, the student will be able to demonstrate an ability to analyse, understand and document social processes, problems and resources at different levels, make ethics-based assessments and develop professional ethics, systematically reflect on emotional and intercultural experiences (thereby developing his or her professional approach), analyse and reflect this approach in social work in the country and act in collaborative situations in an international environment.

Examination

Follow-up and assessment of the practice placement is a continual process and is carried out through regular meetings with the supervisor and a more extensive meeting in the middle and at the end of the practice placement. In order to pass the practice placement, the student must submit an individual study plan, written practice placement documentation and additional reports. The supervised practice placement abroad is examined using the aforementioned information along with input from the supervisor. (Course information, 2007a)

Motivate students

Any student who is interested in doing a practice placement abroad or is just curious about what is involved must attend the informational seminar on practice placements abroad. For students doing a practice placement in the autumn semester, the general informational seminar is usually held at the end of January/beginning of February, i.e., semester five. For students doing a practice placement in the spring semester, the initial information is provided at the end of May, i.e., semester four.

The informational seminar is used to provide general information on practice placements abroad. Such information includes how to apply for a practice placement

position, what contacts the school has and what requirements the Department of Social Work sets for practice placement positions and students.

The students then sign up for a meeting with the course co-ordinator. The meeting is held individually and/or in a group. The meeting is used to discuss matters such as whether the student plans to travel alone or in a group; to which country the student plans to travel; the student's previous experiences abroad and previous practice placement experiences; whether the student wants to have a participating and/or observation practice placement; the content of the practice placement and his or her language skills.

International Day

International Day was held for the first time in 2003 and developed from the experience seminars arranged for students who did their practice placements abroad. International Day can be considered a way to spark student interest in practice placements abroad. Because the Department of Social Work at Mid Sweden University is responsible for arranging International Day and wants to involve and create close collaboration with the relevant associations and organisations in the Östersund Municipality, these groups are invited to participate with book stands and exhibits. High schools and adult education centres are also invited to participate.

In addition to a guest lecturer, the students who have returned from a practice placement abroad present their experiences. The day is scheduled for all students in both social work programmes. Participants should go and listen to the presentations and ask questions about the students' experiences. It is a way to find inspiration, get tips and generate new ideas. International Day is the second Thursday at the start of each semester. The aim is to give both students and the public a chance to learn about and exchange experiences related to global issues and social work in other countries. It is also a chance to create greater awareness of the international activities of the Department of Social Work.

Preparations

In order for students to do well during the practice placement period, they must prepare both mentally and practically. They should read about the country – its history, welfare policies, etc. They should also learn as much as possible about the organisation where they are going to do their practice placement (e.g., reading about the organisation/work area). Students who prepare usually have an easier time adjusting to the practice placement and handle the situation in the new country much better.

Application procedure

The application deadline will be provided by the course co-ordinator at the first informational seminar. Any student deciding to participate in a practice placement

abroad must submit an application, a personal letter and a resume to the course co-ordinator. Students in the social work programme must first actively choose whether to do a practice placement abroad instead of a Swedish practice placement before turning in their application. Students cannot apply for a practice placement both in Sweden and abroad. Students must be sure about wanting to do a practice placement abroad when submitting the application. Students in the intercultural and international social work programme submit an application as indicated above.

The course co-ordinator goes through the applications, compiles them and notifies the students as to whether they have been assigned a contract position. If a student applies for a contract position, they may not also apply for other positions on their own.

The course co-ordinator meets with students who were not offered a contract position to discuss other options. These students can then apply for other positions, such as contract positions which are not filled or other positions on their own.

Contract positions

The following applies to students who have been accepted: the course co-ordinator sends their personal letters to the local co-ordinators in the respective country. These co-ordinators seek out organisations for the students. When this is accomplished, the local co-ordinators notify the course co-ordinator. The students then have direct contact with the local co-ordinator or the organisation.

Seeking practice placements on one's own

The following applies to students who seek practice placements on their own: they must keep the course co-ordinator informed of what contacts have been made. The course co-ordinator will coordinate the search if necessary. When a student applies for a practice placement position, he or she must submit a personal letter and enclose the institution's letter: "Information Concerning Practice Placements Abroad". This letter is translated into English, Spanish, French and German.

Students may use the school's fax machine (the one located in the practice placement area). They may also borrow the course co-ordinator's phone if needed to call the prospective organisation. Students should send their request for a practice placement by e-mail, fax or letter. Students must keep track of when they send e-mails/letters so that they can send a reminder or resend the request if they have not received a response within one or two weeks. The practice placement application process continues throughout the semester up until the start of semester six.

Assigned practice placement position

When a placement is complete, i.e., when the course co-ordinator has approved the location, the course co-ordinator e-mails the prospective organisation. The student must then immediately submit the registration form for a practice placement abroad to

the department secretary. When the department secretary has received this document, the student is registered in the school's computer system and CSN is notified that the student will be studying abroad and in which country. The department secretary then sends a letter written by the course co-ordinator along with the course to the student's supervisor. The letter and course information are translated into several languages, including English, Spanish, German and French.

The second seminar is held shortly after the application deadline. Here, the course co-ordinator briefly recaps how placements are handled and presents the students' desires for practice placement countries. The course co-ordinator reviews and learns about the students' own experiences and goes through a number of practical steps, such as applying for a passport, visa and driving licence as well as insurance matters.

An additional preparatory seminar is held at the end of semester 5 prior to the practice placement. This is used to discuss personal development and different processes during a stay abroad. It is also used to discuss student expectations of the practice placement abroad and how to prepare for a stay in another country.

Finally, there is a final seminar prior to departure. The course information is handed out and reviewed. The rules that apply during the practice placement and the students' submission details are discussed. The course co-ordinator hands out the student's medical insurance card. The seminar is also used to discuss the ethical guidelines for employees stationed abroad.

During the placement period

The student must report in when he/she has arrived in the country/at the practice placement organisation. The student and supervisor are responsible for and work together to draw up an individual study plan for the supervised practice placement. The study plan serves as a work tool during the practice placement semester.

During the practice placement semester, the course co-ordinator sends three letters to the supervisor. The student is sent three letters through the student portal/Web CT. Other e-mails/letters are sent as needed or desired. Telephone contact is also made as needed. The entire supervised practice placement abroad course is web-based. All material used before, during and after the practice placement along with many tips and information on different organisations can be found on the website.

Conducting the practice placement

The practice placement is a learning period in which the student's interests and learning needs serve as the basis for the content of the semester within the framework of the curriculum and in collaboration with the operations of the organisation of the practice placement.

Supervision is a pedagogic method – an educational process that helps the student learn to observe and understand social problems and processes. It also helps the student to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical social work experience.

Individual supervision is therefore an important tool to learning. The supervisor is knowledgeable about the country, living patterns, culture, operations of the practice placement organisation and the resources, work methods and limitations of social work. (Study practice II, 22.5 credits, practice placement abroad, course information, 2007)

During the practice placement period, the student encounters many new situations, gains insight into social problems and meets many new people. During the period, the student also lives as an immigrant/minority in another country, which brings with it new experiences in the form of living conditions, cultural clashes and language limitations. This makes the supervisor an extremely important person for the student to talk to and review new experiences with. (Course information, 2007a)

Some students do their practice placement period with a focus on social work at an individual level, such as at institutes for street children, addiction care or social services, while other students do their practice placement in central units for organisations and projects that primarily work at the organisational and community level. The department and responsible course co-ordinator are aware that the practice period is run under varying conditions and are open to completely flexible solutions as regards performance of the organisation and the form of supervision. (Course information, 2007a)

Supervision

It is important that at the start of the practice placement period the supervisor and student discuss the student's learning needs, draw up an individual study plan and reach an agreement on the design and content of supervision. It is a good idea for the student and supervisor to have fixed times to meet throughout the entire practice placement – preferably once a week – but this is flexible and should ultimately be based on local conditions. (Course information, 2007a)

Compensation

To “pass” the practice placement period, the student must get a certificate from his or her supervisor. During the course of the practice placement abroad, the student must have sent the Department of Social Work an individual study plan, information on the practice placement organisation and a practice placement report. The Department of Social Work, Mid Sweden University, pays supervisor compensation to the organisation/supervisor at the end of the semester. The amount of compensation depends on the number of students and costs in the country. (Course information, 2007a)

Afterwords

The student must write a practice placement report and submit information on the organisation. The practice placement report is the student's personal view of the

practice placement period. The practice placement report gives the student a chance to analyse, reflect on and provide a written summary of his or her experiences. In order to inform potential interns, the student writes a brief description of the country, a description of the organisation, including work tasks and methods, the student's duties and viewpoints on the practice placement. Tips on how potential students should prepare for a stay abroad, reading advice and any appendices/brochures on the organisation should be included.

Experience seminar

Once the student has returned to the university, an experience seminar is held. The course co-ordinator goes through and follows up on the students' experiences, prepares for International Day and works with the practice placement task – an ethical dilemma that students encounter during the practice placement period.

Follow-up meetings

There are then follow-up meetings. The course co-ordinator meets the students individually or in groups for follow-up and a summary of their experiences while on the practice placement abroad. Here, students can bring up individual matters and difficulties encountered during their stay in another country.

International Day

The final aspect of the programme is International Day. On this day, students present their experiences in a group or individually depending on where they had their practice period. Students have about 30 minutes to present their organisation.

Evaluation

In the course evaluation completed after the placement is finished, students indicate their level of satisfaction with the practice placement abroad. Regardless of the organisation or country, students are generally pleased with their experiences. They often write that they have learnt a great deal, particularly about themselves. They also refer to this as personal development. Students indicate that they learn a great deal by living in a different country, living as a minority and not always understanding social codes and the language. They gain knowledge of social work in another context, which means they also learn to relate to social work in Sweden. This not only gives them new perspectives on social work, but also on themselves and their values.

Here is a small excerpt from a course evaluation from September 2007. The question was: *“Practice placement abroad aims to further develop proficiencies, knowledge, attitudes and values related to social work through international experience. What did you gain from the semester?”*

Students answered that the practice placement gave them:

New and broadened perspectives, insights into themselves, many good and invaluable experiences that will be of benefit in both work and private life. The practice placement period gave them a lot of time for self-reflection, independence, being able to consider their actions in another context, not taking everything for granted, discovering the advantages and disadvantages of their country's social policies, being a minority, increased understanding of the importance of the country's history and geographical importance and social work skills in the country of their practice placement.

The most common comments from students after the practice placement period refer to the visit abroad as the best thing they have done in their life and something that helped them learn a lot.

Discussion

Students in the intercultural and international social work programme must do their second practice placement period in a country outside the Nordic countries. About one-fifth of students in the social work programme choose to do their second practice placement abroad. Over the past seven years, I have had the pleasure of working with students before, during and after their practice placement period. To date, I have worked with about 500 students who did their second practice placement abroad. All continents are represented and we have sent students to over 85 different countries. Some countries are more popular than others, which could be due to the contacts of Mid Sweden University and the language skills of the students. Students often choose English-speaking countries due to their language skills. They also often choose to travel to countries outside of Europe. Europe is not as attractive due to language skills and because many students want to take the opportunity to travel to a country they wouldn't otherwise have a chance to visit. Students who choose to do their practice placement abroad usually have done some travelling before.

Although students do their practice placement in many different areas, the preferred areas are within NGOs (Non-governmental organisations), NPOs (Non-profit organisations) as well as traditional work areas. Usually students do their practice placement in local NGOs.

The field of social work – both in Sweden and in other countries – spans a huge area. Due to this great diversity, it is hard to draw general conclusions as to what students learn during their practice placement. Students' preconditions, such as experience, maturity and skills, play a large role in their experience and what they learn during their practice placement. If the student has little or no experience of being confronted with social vulnerability, the practice placement can be a revolutionary experience. On the other hand, if the student has a lot of life experience, has worked at a treatment home or was involved in club activities, the practice placement can be a way to build on previous experience and deepen his or her knowledge. (Jonsson, Mårtensson & Thörn, 2007)

Students find themselves in different practice placement contexts that are important to learning. Skills, proficiencies and knowledge develop in relation to the culture in which the individual works. Another factor that affects learning is how active the individual was during the practice placement. Thus, learning situations are different depending on where the practice placement is performed. For example, conditions for disseminating information on preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS are different if the same work is performed in a rural area versus a big city. Many students who intern abroad gain a new perspective on Sweden in general and social work in particular. (Jonsson, Mårtensson & Thörn, 2007)

Regardless of the practice placement location or living conditions, cultural and social problems, students name personal development as the most important part of the experience. (Jonsson, Mårtensson & Thörn, 2007)

For future research it would be interesting to review the significance of the preparation course and see what, if any, impact it has on skill acquisition and the overall outcome of the overseas placement. It would also be useful to look more closely at the particular knowledge and skills which social work students learn during their placement period abroad and determine to what extent they acquire new knowledge which is not available during a practice placement within Sweden. Similarly, it would be interesting to see if the learning experiences and skills differ by country and/or continent chosen, and to trace the practical application of this experience to social work in Sweden.

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