

Internationalisation and international practicum for what and on whose terms?

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This paper will investigate the aims of internationalisation and international practicum, with the focus on the later. It is important to consider whether both partners in the exchange receive benefits, and if not to reconsider the practicum arrangements to ensure greater equity of benefit. Review of literature in the field and my own experiences as a Swedish university lecturer involved in student teacher practica will be the base for this paper. Some preliminary results of my literature review show that practicum in the South mainly focuses on giving the teacher students from the North the possibility of intercultural understanding with specific goal of dealing with demographic change taking place in the student teacher's home country. This demographic change has typically resulted in an increased cultural diversity of students in classrooms (Abraham & von Brömssen, 2018; Bosire & Brigham, 2009; Marx & Moss, 2011; Wiken & Klein, 2017). Experiences show that in the movement of students from the North to the South, economically and politically dominant countries are more likely to dictate the terms of relationships (Bosire & Brigham, 2009; Yang, 2002). Viewed from another perspective, countries considered in the center due to their economic and political influence gain more advantages than countries considered in the periphery (Barnet & Reggie, 1995).

Keywords: Internationalization, International practicum, student teachers, North, South.

Introduction

During the last 10 years I have been involved in supporting Swedish student teachers to have a practicum opportunity in South Africa , first at Gothenburg University and since 2011 at Karlstad University. The majority of participants were preschool teacher candidates, while there were also a few primary school teacher candidates. These student teachers undertook short practicum placements of a few weeks duration in preschools in South Africa. In a few cases there were student teachers who came from South Africa to attend courses in Sweden and at the same time to make a short visit at preschools.

Four years ago colleagues from Inland University of Norway and Karlstad University started to discuss Nordic international practicum for student teachers. A short time after we started discussion, we were invited by University College Copenhagen (UCC) to be a part of an application to work on a project for international practicum. Later on with the modest funding from NordPlus and with our institutions' contribution of our working hours, the project started with group of academics working with student international practicum. University College Copenhagen (UCC) from Denmark, Karlstad University from Sweden and three Norwegian universities, Inland University, Oslo Metropolitan University and University of Tromsø were from Norway were involved. At a later stage of the project, University of Bergen was included in the project. Regular meetings were held to exchange experiences between institutions . Beyond exchange of experiences, the group was also deeply concerned as to how to improve the quality of international practicum for students from the universities in the Nordic countries.

Beyond its concern for quality, the group gradually started discussing how to systematize the practicum. From our exchange of experiences and reflection on them, we started thinking about the practicum phases. The phases we chose to consider are the pre-departure, the in-country and post-practicum phases. Three groups were formed to discuss these different phases and to come up with texts that will support to student teachers to prepare for each phase. Individuals in the project chose membership of the groups based on their own interest and expertise.

To get clear understanding of the phases, to help students and higher education institutions, the group decided to prepare a booklet that will advise on what to do in the different phases (pre-, in-, post-). The booklet aims to prepare students predeparture, to give them ideas on intercultural communication and understanding with the people in the host countries while they are in their practicum and on how they can share knowledge and experiences they gained during their practicum when they come back to their home countries.

In the process of consolidating this idea of a booklet, the group planned to have one of its meetings in Inland University of Norway in December 2018. The university prepared a conference with the theme of intercultural perspective in teacher education. The conference committee facilitated for members of the group to submit their abstracts on the theme of international practicum.

That was when I started wondering on submitting an abstract that critically questions practices of our institutions. Most of us are involved international practicum work due to strong demand for internationalization from our institutions and due to our commitment as academics regarding the importance of intercultural understanding between different societies from different parts of the world. We are sometimes engaging in this work with limited reflection on possible consequences for both sides of the international practicum.

While considering the positive side of international practicum, we did not put much energy on problematizing it. It is important to see to both the pros and cons of the international practicum. The purpose of this study is therefore to answer the following questions: What is international practicum? Why do we need international practicum in the Nordic higher education? Who is benefiting from international practicum?

Literature review in the field is the main source of data for the study. In addition to that my own experiences as a Swedish university lecturer involved in the student teachers' practicum in South Africa will be used.

How do we understand international practicum?

Universities are globally striving for internationalization. They are doing this due to their belief that, internationalization is considered to enrich higher education by bringing diversity of knowledge and experiences. In the global North similar to other parts of the world, universities looking forward towards internationalization for various reasons. A recent policy document on internationalization of higher education by the Swedish government writes, "...Consequently, intercultural and international perspectives are important to preparing all students for the labour market and society of today and the future." (Swedish Government Official Reports, SOU 2018:78, 8).

One of the motives for internationalization could be getting more paying students, while the other motive could be promotion of their university as a major teaching and research institute. Depending what we consider as a South, there could be different motivation. My experience from some African countries show that some of the institutions or some academics are interested on internationalization with the hope of gaining some funding from universities in the North and also the possibilities for visit to universities they consider as well functioning to gain experiences and knowledge to take home.

In some cases there are comprehensive internationalization projects between countries. One such an example is South African Sweden University Forum (SASUF), a three year project with a focus on research, education and innovation. While South African and Swedish universities are the main target groups for the project it also included, "...embassies, civil society organisations, funding agencies and ministries in both countries." (<https://sasuf.org/south-africa-sweden-university-forum/>)

In higher education of the Nordic countries there are discussions on two dimensions of internationalisation. Internationalization at home and internationalization by traveling abroad. In the case of internationalization at home, university staff are supposed to gain knowledge of scholars from other countries through their books and articles (often through

open access on internet), with such resources included in course literature. Universities with sufficient resources invite foreign scholars to give lectures to their students in the home institutions and connect to others through media such as Skype and Zoom. There are also projects where students are giving each other feedback through mail and other electronic media.

The second dimension of internationalisation is physically leaving the universities and travelling abroad, and is the focus of this discussion. This physical movement may include students, academic and administrative staff. A major part of the movement is having exchange of students or sending students for practicum within the region or overseas. Students' practicum overseas may include such regions as Africa, Asia and Latin America.

What are the aims of international practicum?

International practicum could have different objectives for different countries or regions. While it could be considered general, what Wikan and Klein (2017) state can indicate a Nordic perspective on international practicum:

"The stated goals of the international practicum programme are to increase the students' understanding of cultural differences, and to enable them to acquire new perspectives on education and schooling and experience living in another country in order to enhance global awareness and reduce prejudice." (p.96.)

Intercultural understanding, new perspectives on education and the experience of living in other countries all serve enhance global awareness and to reduce prejudice (Wikan and Klein, 2017). In addition to what student teachers are encountering abroad, these experience will also help them in a meeting with diverse group of people at home when they start working as teachers.

There are diverse groups of people in the global North, there is an increase in these groups after 2015. Due to conflicts and wars mainly in the Middle East and North Africa, millions of people were forced to leave their countries of origin to save their own and their families lives. A largest number of asylum seekers came to Sweden while the other Nordic countries also accepted more asylum seekers compared to 2014 (Eurostat, 2016). These refugee groups are diverse in terms of language, culture and religion.

These diversities are recognized in different ways as part of supporting diversity of children in the preschool and school classrooms. In addition to diversity of language, culture and religious backgrounds, migrants may be new to the way of life in the host countries and may have been victims of various traumatic experiences.

Student teachers with international practicum may not be in contact directly with groups that arrived in the students' home countries, but their exposure to diverse groups of people is likely to be an asset for working with migrants. Therefore, the student teachers who have travelled for international practicum may be considered as more equipped than teachers who have not been exposed to school environments of other cultures, in terms of engaging with diverse groups of children at preschools and schools.

The institutions in the South are also interested to gain some knowledge of the institutions and societies in the North. By international practicum to the North, the staff and the students would like to gain some experience of the working conditions of the preschools, schools and higher education institutions they visit.

From a Southern perspective, the co-operation will be hoped to lead to long term cooperation for staff training, research, publishing and some investment to boost their institutions. Some Southern institutions may have an expectation that the wealthy North will provide both financial and academic input to improve the quality of the education in the South.

In some countries in the South, universities from the North are considered as role models for improving the quality of their education. In discussion on internationalization with the colleagues from South Africa at one university they mentioned the importance of internationalization for their study program. For a program to be approved by the higher education commission it needs to show a similarity to a curriculum at least of three universities outside South Africa. This according to the commission, should show the program is not only local in South Africa but also provided in other countries. This is one of the criteria for authorities to approve the program in particular university.

Who is benefiting from the international practicum? and how?

In general terms it is possible to argue there are benefits to higher education institutions from both the North and the South partners. I consider the following as some of the benefits to both sides:-

- Individual teachers and students could develop intercultural understanding and competence through intercultural communication.
- Gaining some knowledge about education systems in the sending and receiving ends.
- Students preparing themselves for joining global labour markets.
- Understanding their responsibility as global citizens working for sustainable development.
- Teachers improving their professional competence.
- Institutions promoting and boosting their images through partnership contacts with universities outside their own countries.
- Nations promoting themselves and their education system, research, technology and production in the ways that might lead to long-term economic benefit.

There are those who are argue from the perspective of the North, the importance of students exposure to culture is highlighted.

Proponents of internationalization in universities in countries of the North would argue that such partnerships, of which student placements comprise only one part, “will enrich and inspire us while providing important assistance to colleagues abroad” (Gillespie, 2003, p. 7); that the experience of “culture shock” on the part of students in overseas placements can lead to a new global perspective ... (in Heron, 2006, 4).

What Heron (2006) appears to claim in relation to experience being enriching and inspiring is true for both students from the North and South. However, the focus, is predominantly on what students and teachers gain. A critique is needed with regard to who is gaining most out of exchange. It is not clear what is included in the statement, “providing important assistance to colleagues abroad”. But it sounds that institutions that are sending abroad students are positioning themselves as superior, in declaring that they are “providing assistance”.

Critical perspectives on internationalization as well as international practicum, are presented in the following section.

Critical views on international practicum

According to some writers internationalization in higher education through exchange is not ‘a game of equals. A study based on Brazilian and South African context discusses the disadvantage some groups are facing.

Worldwide-operative discourses, approaches, and frames of reference for internationalization privilege the needs and realities of universities in wealthy, industrialised countries in North America, Europe, and Asia. Thus, depoliticised conceptualisations of internationalization hinge on global competition, which disenfranchises historically marginalised Black South Africans and poor Brazilians (the majority of whom are considered to be mixed or Black), who due to exclusionary and elitist policies of apartheid and colonisation – are saddled with weaker K-12 backgrounds and often face financial limitations. Serving these under-prepared and non-traditional students well, for instance through remediation programmes and publicly-funded financial support, works against the economic logic, which is premised on international competition for the brightest minds... (Majee & Ress, 2018, pp. 13-14).

The quotation explains the internationalization process by universities of wealthy countries privilege them. Majee & Ress (2018) criticise the depoliticised internationalization, which adhere to global competition for disadvantaging the already marginalised groups in societies. To help this group by using different support programmes is considered a move against the market logic of international competition.

Heron (2006) based on experiences from social work students exchange program to the South writes in this subject critically on terms used to describe relations between North and South and their implications:

” The terms North and South are used here to denote the “haves” and “have-nots” among countries of the world, and roughly correspond to the “First World”/“Third World” terminology of the Cold War era, and the “developed”/“developing” dichotomy. Rather than geographic location, what underlies the North/South split is the extent of present-day economic

development, or lack thereof, linked to the effects of colonization and empire. Thus, the countries of the South are former colonies. ..." (Heron, 2006, 2).

...In sum, the rapidly proliferating presence of Northerners on short-term postings in developing countries has become a feature of North-South relations, and seems to comprise a new dimension of globalization. This outpouring of Northerners is predominantly white and middle-class." (Ibid., 2006, 4).

" It seems to me that there is need for further discussion about the ethics of international practice from a critical social work perspective. By critical perspective I am referring to an analysis of relations of power that produce social injustice, particularly the operation of historically derived, materially-linked interlocking systems of oppression..." (Ibid., 2006, 4).

Heron (2006) addresses the different terms used to present the two worlds. The dichotomies 'North/South', 'first world/third world' and 'developed/developing countries' are used to demarcate the division between the wealthy and the poor countries. There are also clear power relations between partners on the one hand from the North including most of the colonizing countries and from the South most the countries that were former colonies. The predominant presence of "white and middle-class" persons travelling from the North to the South is presented as indication of the type of relations of the privileged and the disadvantaged.

Jooste and Heleta (2017) indicates driving forces for internationalizations in Higher Education and how the South is looked upon by North and its possible effects.

HE internationalization is driven largely by European, American, Canadian, and Australian "rationales, strategies, approaches and activities" ... (Jooste & Heleta, 2017, p. 43).

...This patronizing approach, which portrays the South as the problem, a helpless mass, which cannot survive without the assistance from the "enlightened" North, will not make the world a better, more equal place; it will only sow more divisions and animosity... (Jooste & Heleta, 2017, p. 47).

Countries that are mentioned in the quotation are considered as dominant powers on internationalization, they are perceived as initiators, planners and leaders of implementation. Jooste and Heleta (2017) raises the issue about the North's contempt of the South and warns for the negative effects of it on the relationships between the different countries in different continents.

There are authors who started seeing the need for change of direction.

" ...The focus of research in this field has begun to gradually shift to understanding the goals and policies of both the sending and receiving countries... " (Barnet, G. A. & Wu, R. Y., 1995, p. 354). To strengthen the mobility those who are sending students from the North need to be careful not to think themselves as owners of universal truth and material wealth to

impose their hegemony on the receiving institutions. Instead they can consider what they are supposed to give and what they are going to gain in terms of both knowledge and experience.

How can we work towards win-win goals of international practicum?

Most of the works on both the importance of internationalization and international practicum comes from the North and this situation is observed by Yang (2000) as follows:

“...Particularly absent are studies that aim to clarify the manner in which internationalisation is conceptualised in Third World universities, and to also investigate the decisive factors, limitations and feasibility of internationalization of higher education in less-developed non-Western countries.” (Yang, R. 2002, p.92).

While looking forward towards studies which can give us knowledge on expectation of higher education institutions from the South, there are also possibilities to work towards the future that benefits both sides. These could be:

Recommendations for enhancing reciprocity:-

- Developing knowledge about each other's national and regional reality.
- When planning an exchange of students or other partnership program, consider the goals of one's own institution (to think about what is going to be provided in return to what is being gained).
- Develop a trustful relationship in order to appreciate each other's positive sides and provide constructive criticism on each other's weaker points.
- Identifying common goals that could benefit students, institutions and nations (for example the issue of climate change)
- Apply academic discussions and sharing of experiences on contents and methods within courses.
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Recommendations for further development of North/South internationalisation:-

- Sending students for part of their studies, whether a year, a semester or a short time abroad.
- International practicum placement
- Receiving students from other countries.
- Developing courses for international students.
- Including issues of internationalisation in our ordinary courses.
- Inviting international guest lecturers and researchers to our institutions.
- Encouraging teachers and other staff exchange with other countries.
- Recruiting staff and students with diverse backgrounds through international advertising.

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