



# Learning from others: A critical reflection on an international study programme

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## Abstract

This article offers a critical reflection on an international social work study programme at a Northern European university in 2015. This study develops a shared sense of the expectations and experiences of two academic staff and two students who took part in this social work programme. Interesting findings from this life-changing opportunity were ascertained and included awareness of own motivational learning as well as developing cultural competencies (including language and communication skills), intellectual competencies (including working with others to solve problems), social competencies (including increases in self-confidence and self-awareness) and professional competencies (via increases in professional networks). This supports national data regarding the importance of student mobility including study visits abroad.

## Keywords

Europe, social policies, social work, student mobility, study programme

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## **Introduction**

This article proffers a reflective account of an ethnographic study based on a scholarly programme in a social work department at a Northern European university in 2015. It also develops a shared sense of the expectations and experiences of two academic staff and two students who took part in this social work programme. Findings revealed the participants' motivation, their interests and the value apportioned to their learning during the Social Policies in Europe: Learning from Others programme. This programme has 7.5 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points attached to meeting the learning outcomes. The country that hosted this programme required that all attending academics taught key specialist subject sessions and contributed to the wider learning activities with the whole international student cohort. The programme seeks to ameliorate the skill set and specialisms of each participating academic. However, the programme and its contents belong to the host and credit-awarding university. That is not to say that the host was unwilling to listen, or was uncooperative in terms of refining the programme; the pivotal reason of the programme was to meet the needs of social work international teaching and learning and the commensurate learning outcomes.

The programme's content was advertised by us, as academics, to all second-year students on an undergraduate degree programme at a university in the United Kingdom, as their opportunity to participate in a study programme abroad and increase their knowledge of international social work and social policy. The timing of this programme was significant as the students were not in their first or final years, neither unprepared, nor unfamiliar with study, or under the pressure of the final assessment stage. The programme was discussed with the whole student cohort, and while five students showed an interest in participating, only three actually signed up to take part and two actively participated in the writing of this article. This number was particularly low given the high number of students enrolled on the second year of the degree programme amounted to 127 students.

The low level of student take-up concerned us, given the well-documented benefits of studying abroad (Association of Graduate Recruiters [AGR] et al., 2011; Behrnd and Porzelt, 2012; CBI and Pearson, 2013; Das and Anand, 2013; Wilson, 2012). The responsibility of academics to convey such opportunities to students and broaden their understanding of international social work programmes could aid in addressing the earlier paucity of student enrolment. Conveying this issue of widening home students' understanding and participation in the internationalisation agenda would not only afford a unique learning opportunity abroad, but also benefit students through gaining additional credits, namely ECTS points. In order to address the question of whether the students would value the experience of studying abroad we conversed with them, believing that they would be the best future ambassadors for explaining the merits of such international learning opportunities to their peers.

This required timely investment of two academics (one of whom is a Director of International Student Recruitment and Development and the other who formally held a Teaching Fellowship for local, national and international provision). Individually we had grappled with international student mobility, differences, language barriers and misunderstanding of cultural nuances. Having 50 years' joint experience of academic infrastructures, quality assurance mechanisms and enhancement opportunities, we believed that motivation and research of this with students as co-researchers would increase interest and therefore possible participation in studying abroad. As such, this became the rationale for the article as a real world practical problem (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

Moreover, our university holds a vision that includes knowledge creation and investment in international relationships. Such investment in learning relationships does, however, require widening, sharing and collaboration by academics and students alike and through research opportunities. This reduces the risk of working in isolation, and in this instance any misunderstanding of social policy

and social work concepts and practices (Bruner, 1996). The political and educational agendas as described by David Willetts (former Minister for Universities and Science) collectively suggest that 'Education is in the early stages of globalisation' (Willetts, 2013: 3), with the higher education system of the United Kingdom being described as the envy globally for academic international reputation, qualifications and professional development opportunities: 'Our universities, colleges, awarding organisations and schools are recognised globally for their excellence' (p. 3). Moreover, there is scope (on a smaller scale) for this to be interwoven with new and innovative technology and working with reciprocal partnerships in a climate of respect, for example across the Social Policies in Europe: Learning from Others programme.

Willetts (2013) documented the reality of such possibilities in that overseas students studying in the United Kingdom in 2011/2012 boosted the UK economy by £10.2bn in tuition fees and living expenses. This form of financial investment 'in self' (Giddens, 1991) not only expands employability in the long term, but also has benefits for the local economy surrounding university campuses. More importantly, it has the potential to enhance and widen the cultural life and learning experiences of both home and overseas students. In contrast, Travis (2015) reported that Theresa May's (the United Kingdom's then Home Secretary) perspective overtly suggested that as soon as study in the United Kingdom was complete, overseas students should return to their country of origin.

Such a narrow-minded perspective was strongly contested by Willetts (2015), who has the backing of credible business leaders including the inventor James Dyson. They argue that such an adverse policy proposal would require overseas students to reapply for a work visa from their home country after graduating from universities in the United Kingdom (Siddique, 2015). As such, the collective view of business leaders is that to send home international students would be a waste of their intellectual capacity and a missed opportunity to capture and share the innovation of a new intellectual critical mass. This could be, and perhaps should be, viewed as a perilous retrograde step for a globalised learning society in the 21st century, and specifically UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). World business leaders and economists suggest that during a period of economic uncertainty, students from overseas provide opportunities for learning and an inward flow of innovation and ideas (Ali, 2016; Minsky, 2016; Pells, 2017; Politico, 2016; TopUniversities, 2016). Moreover, Willetts (2015) stated the financial gain of each international student as being worth over £20,000 a year to the UK economy.

The United Kingdom's own academic communities need to be mindful of Newman's (2013) UK Strategy for Outward Mobility. This extols the virtues and profile of UK higher education (HE), through students on overseas exchanges, suggesting that the exchange system and programmes allow for students and staff to become ambassadors for universities and the United Kingdom. Most critically, the United Kingdom needs to look at the practice and plethora of incoming international HE students and their rationale for studying in the United Kingdom, in relation to the limited outward flow of students indicated in 2011/2012. Newman (2013) reported that approximately 6 percent (or 15,370), of UK domiciled students undertook a mobility placement overseas with 13,250 studying abroad and 2120 working on a programme abroad for all or part of the year.

The majority of outward UK students who access study and work opportunities overseas do so through the European Union's (EU) Erasmus Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (British Council, 2016). The current ranking of UK participation (despite this increase in European mobility) indicates that the United Kingdom currently still ranks only sixth in terms of the overall number of outgoing students taking part in Erasmus Programmes. In real terms, this means that UK HEI students' participation lags behind Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Poland. This could have a damaging long-term effect in narrowing the future career prospects and employment opportunities within and across Europe for UK graduates.

## Approaches to learning

Sharing understanding with students is critical in terms of reducing learning anxieties and ensuring expectations of study are not polarised ideologies for academics and students. Bruner's (1996) concerns about individuals pursuing their own ideas highlighted that those who work in isolation and without challenge have reduced levels of stimulation and informed thinking, whereas Krause (2005) promotes and engenders a sense of self-connectedness within and across all aspects of HE life, encouraging students to engage with staff, libraries, services and the wider HE communities, which enable full participation in university life. Moreover, honesty, integrity and capturing the essence of self and others can only help to shape and influence capability of self-awareness, as well as of the professional identity of others (Wong and Cummings, 2009). Therefore, learning from others via a study abroad programme is beneficial for all participants. Equally internationalising the social work curriculum (particularly for those unable to go abroad) should be a necessary component of any HEI wishing to support economic vitality with an internationalisation agenda (Anand et al., 2015).

The sharing of pedagogical understanding from an international participative learning experience can develop understanding of learning for both academics and students. Specifically, what is valued expands thinking beyond contemporary and seminal research sources (Barnett, 2010; Collier and Morgan, 2008; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Most importantly, shared staff and student participation bridges the 'them' and 'us' of research. It develops research capture, research understanding, research evaluation and research interpretation from the real world research experience, which can inform research-informed teaching (RIT) and learning and influence understanding of others (Goss, 2012; Healey and Jenkins, 2009).

## Methods and setting

Reflections were obtained from two academics' and two students' individual motivations, expectations, active participation and experiences of the induction and participation post programme. This ethnographic study united established academic researchers and novice researchers in their endeavours to reflect on their expectations and understanding of international social work, the social and professional investment, the making of personal and professional connections (beyond their home institution) and career networking capabilities.

## *Aims of the research*

The aims of the research include the following:

1. to critically reflect on the shared expectations and understanding of individual experiences of an overseas social work study programme;
2. to critique the value of the study programme in relation to social work knowledge and practice, for both academics and students;
3. to evaluate the academics' and students' learning in terms of issues and opportunities emanating from participation in the programme and further unanticipated learning.

The universities taking part in the programme included one from the United Kingdom, as well as those in Germany and Sweden. Additional information provided by the students within the cohort indicated that countries of origin included Nepal, Spain, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Uganda. This programme builds upon the bilateral agreement between our university and the

university in Northern Europe. This agreement is one way in which our university contributes towards wider social work practice and the efforts of global opportunities for UK HE as well as being supportive of the United Kingdom's HE internationalisation and policy developments and leadership foundation.

Such agreements coupled with European academics teaching a wide range of international students side by side enliven Barnett's (2010) view of engagement in learning through scholarly activity and research, and in this instance ensuring familiarity with social work and social policy developments. Such international scholarly activities ensure that the United Kingdom's HE is sustainable for future generations and recognised not only within the United Kingdom, but also in the wider world (Newman, 2013). An advocate of high quality teaching and learning, Ramsden (2008) is concerned that UK students are not equal in accessing international study, and that as such, this may affect the quality of higher learning experiences and future employability. Likewise, he introduces the notion of '... productive cultural interchange' and urges academics to pay greater attention to the '... academic, attitudinal and social preparation' (Ramsden, 2008: 12) of students in their earliest days at university.

Issues that arose and lessons learned will be considered in terms of an ethnographic methodology that adopts analysis of a series of discussion groups and reflective journals which recorded expectations, experiences, learning and understanding before, during and post programme. It acknowledges that through such learning, academic staff and second-year undergraduate students have opportunities to work closely together to produce research evidence based on their expectations of the international study programme and actual learning (Jenkins et al., 2007). This unique opportunity should progress the current discourse within our home university (and other comparable institutions) by providing a new lens on shared expectations and learning experiences via student and staff voices.

These narrative methods set out to capture the essence of learning about social work and social policy by analysing ethnographic reflective records. Given the nature of the intensive study programme, the methods selected were deliberately chosen to prevent it becoming burdensome or an onerous set of data capture activities. Emphasis was on capturing the essence and accounts of the 'real world' international learning experiences and opportunities as they occurred. The programme included an overview of social work practice and social policies in Sweden, Germany and the United Kingdom and a discussion from practitioners working with asylum seekers, along with asylum seekers' harrowing stories in their efforts to secure asylum. This analysis of international social work and social policy allows us to think critically about social work and social policy in our own country. It enables us to view our own practice differently, via a critical lens (Lyons et al., 2006; McInnes, 2013).

Understanding and representation of experience are central to ethnography, both empirically and theoretically (Willis, 2000). Therefore the basis of this research is participant observation with the overall aim of contributing to a better understanding of the significance and value of study abroad programmes for both academics and students. As such, this study involves the beliefs and values of both students and academics. This article draws on aspects of insider status in a research setting and what Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008) and White (2001) call reflexivity. According to White (2001), 'reflexivity becomes a process of looking *inward* and *outward*, to the social and cultural artefacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices' (p. 102). The reflections grounded in the authors' insider experiences of the study programme yielded rich, substantive data. The analyses of findings are produced by reflecting on the qualitative data sets, identifying recurring phrases and issues and thereby establishing key themes. There are consistent findings from the academics and students in relation to a number of these themes, although the individual actors involved own other themes uniquely.

The methods selected were purposeful in terms of answering the broad aims of the research. Methods included first, a series of group discussions with each of the four participants in which they could air and share their perspectives on the learning at key stages, and second, the use of individual journals, which provided a rich written narrative that spanned the different perspectives. In both the discussion groups and the narrative accounts, the voices of individuals recalled their own personal learning trajectories and the issues or learning, which appeared to have a strong resonance with what was uniquely important to them. The social context and the relationships made through learning featured highly in the discussions and written accounts from the earliest stage.

From the outset, ethical protocol established that all participants were able to voice opinions without prejudice. As all participants were active contributors to the international programme and to this research study, there was a necessity to ensure that such ethical protocols were both understood and clarified with particular reference to the students as inexperienced co-researchers. Discussion and advice were upheld on the due ethical process to ensure honesty and integrity in terms of research practice with students as co-inquirers and in checking out that the students understood their contribution to the study. The two students had no experience of undertaking formal primary research. The two academics had both undertaken research projects, worked as co-authors and are published authors in their respective fields of study.

## Expectations and value of an international study programme

From the start of the programme, the students felt that participation would enhance their career prospects. Such prospects align comfortably alongside those of employers worldwide, who value graduates with global competences (AGR et al., 2011) and international cultural awareness (CBI and Pearson, 2013). The academics anticipated the development of a range of skills and attributes, including independence, becoming advocates for the university/programme, personal communications/interactions, building relationships with peers (leading to critical/learning friendships), negotiation skills (i.e. living in close proximity with relative strangers etc.), travelling skills (i.e. using transport systems, two other forms of European currency etc.), financial awareness (the need to get best value for flights and accommodation as unfunded), self-motivation skills and obviously an increase in their social work knowledge base.

Within Hannah's reflections some of the above attributes are highlighted; however, she goes on to develop this further by explaining that she already lives and studies away from home:

**I** (as an individual) gained more life experience than expected studying internationally. It required **me** to be independent on numerous occasions. Such as, **I** was required to book flights and hotels that were a reasonable price and distance from the university and suited all members of the team. When travelling around the city there were some failures with the public transport systems and **we** were (as a group) all required to work together to negotiate what the signs said and ask members of the public for directions, meaning that **my** communication skills were tested. Although **we** were studying abroad, our original studies did not stop, therefore **we** had to be motivated to not only do work for the international project, but to continue to work for **our** degrees at home, thereby requiring **us** to be highly self-motivated.

Robyn, on the other hand, had never experienced living or studying away from her home city. She illustrates from arrival her awareness of being in a foreign country:

Arriving in the city itself was challenging as **we** had to find our hotel in the dark and to make matters more difficult we had to drag our suitcases in the snow. Going from another city in England and arriving in the dark was unnerving. However, it was more of a challenge arriving somewhere where the locals speak a different language. Thus, showing how as a team of staff and students **we** were already creating a working relationship.

Our knowledge led us to understand that independence and communication would be essential learning attributes/skills. However, the strength and the use of collective and individual personal pronouns (above) illustrate the students' commitment towards each other and to the programme.

## Experiences of the induction

On reflection, the introduction of selves and our own countries came too late in the programme, 2 days before the close. During the programme, the formal commencement and close of sessions, each day there was a request for a 3-minute reflection from students. The result of this was that students' answers became flippant due to the repetitive nature and limited time allocated for their reflective presentations. The reflections provided were largely ill-considered, as students did not have sufficient time to consolidate ideas and new concepts. The remarks made were spontaneous but lacking further discussion or critical thinking. As such, they lacked criticality and mostly reflected the partiality of individuals. The lack of reciprocity and interaction dulled any transformation of thinking and reduced the social aspect of higher-level learning (Mezirow, 1975, 1999; Paul and Elder, 2002).

### *Hannah's reflections on induction processes*

When we received the itinerary for the programme there were no scheduled field trips, which had attracted us to the programme initially. This disappointment led to our staff's resourcefulness in identifying relevant field trips to make the most of being in a new environment. This included meeting local people who worked with young people in social work agencies and visiting social housing projects for asylum seekers. This was extremely interesting and highlights the importance of real world experience. **We** learnt more about the country and its culture in doing this, than **our** peers who ended up staying in the classroom for the duration of the time.

The induction was something that **I** personally feel could have been conducted better. **We** all had to provide a presentation about ourselves and where **we** came from. However, **we** did not actually present these consecutively as a whole cohort. This meant that some participants did not present until the last day, by this time **we** were already acquainted with each other. Doing presentations on the first day would have been an ideal icebreaker. A positive from the induction was that **we** participated in a communication game in which **we** had to use other skills (other than talking) to communicate and work as a team (which did ease any tension between different groups.) This was a learning experience for **me** and really challenged my ability to communicate with other class mates. As a consequence, **I** found out that **I** am more outgoing and able to connect with other people with more ease than **I** anticipated. In relation to the teaching staff it was interesting to see that teaching styles differed between different cultures. Discussing this with the other students they actually preferred (as **I** do), British styles of teaching which involve less being talked at and significantly more student interaction.

### *Robyn's reflections on induction processes*

Working with uncertainty at first was difficult, as **we** did not know what to expect from the programme. **We** arrived at the university and were welcomed by the staff. But, **we** were told that as a group **we** would have to present ourselves to the other students and explain what it was like studying **our** course and living in **our** country. This was not carried out until the end of the course which made it more difficult to bond with the other students on the programme. If there had been more opportunities at the start of the course to bond as a group, it would have made the experience better. However, this did not inhibit us in trying to meet and make friends with other students. If both **I** and **my** colleagues had not been open and ready for the unknown and open to new opportunities, I don't think **we** would have bonded as well with the other

students and staff members involved. Furthermore, it would have been a better experience if the university had arranged more social events (during the induction period) so we could all get to know each other and have an improved international study experience.

## **Experiences of participation**

The majority of teaching experienced was formal, didactic and based on accepting the knowledge of the usually older ‘expert’ without question. This was a culturally accepted practice in the other participating universities. However, for us it served to highlight the significantly different level of engagement and engendering of student interest that features heavily in the current teaching trends of our university and in the United Kingdom. Assessment of others’ teaching approaches and classroom practice led us to collectively conclude that such didactic methods have significant limitations in meeting the needs of a cohort with a wide range of learning styles. This was illustrated by the observation that a minority of students were disconnected from the topic and therefore disengaged from the programme. An example of this lack of engagement was noted when one student was actually knitting a complex garment throughout the majority of the taught sessions (although not our teaching sessions and a Derdian communication task). We noted the impact of this not only on the particular student but also on those sitting in close proximity. An additional group of students were diverted by social media when not provided with active and engaging learning roles and tasks.

The active Derdian communication task involved the physical movement of students away from their chosen seats to different rooms and sought ideas from individuals as to how to solve a problem. The small learning sets proved pivotal in engaging the students with peers they had previously neither met nor interacted with during the programme. This included speaking in their own ‘mother tongues’ as well as the universal language of English and non-verbal gesticulation and communication. This task was fun and was valued by the students, and they all undertook their roles with a great degree of enthusiasm and a sense of liveliness. It was beyond the learned behaviour and contrasted with the expected behaviour of the programme cohort thus far. Unfortunately, the reflections on the active engagement of students and the enjoyment of their learning failed to register as significant with several of our academic peers. Some appeared to feel uncomfortable with the novelty and informality of students ‘buzzing’, excited and involved in teaching experiences. The task actually resulted in the students becoming a corpus of knowing and a critical mass.

The two academics co-authoring this article were familiar with the andragogic and participative approach pioneered by Knowles (1980), Bruner (1996) and Healey and Jenkins (2009) and the promotion of students as participants in the research–teaching nexus. We were personally thrilled that this approach had been introduced before our teaching sessions on this programme commenced, observing that teaching styles from the United Kingdom consistently appeared to be interactive and challenging. They included small directed tasks that involved students getting up in class and using resources to discuss and share with peers. Additionally, multi-media sources were incorporated into the teaching activities, which again stimulated the audio and visual senses of the audience. The UK approach meant that during the teaching session (rather than in the typical question and answer session at the close) students were actively ‘participating’ in the learning activities, rather than being passive reactors in the process.

Following one of the author’s taught sessions on the definitions, history and cultural context of drug use in the United Kingdom, an open intellectual debate between students (with very little lecturer support) went beyond the allocated time scale of the programme. The students appeared to relish the opportunity to extend learning and be progressively empowered to evaluate and explore



their own knowledge and discuss this in a meaningful cross-cultural way (Horwath and Shardlow, 2001). This was not an easy or comfortable situation for the author, given that other international university staff made clear their more didactic approach to teaching and maintaining the strict time schedule of the programme.

The second author's taught session focused on perceptions of ageing and the current issues and dilemmas faced by social work service providers in the United Kingdom. The teaching approach and practice involved providing the students with information about the capabilities of older people, using small video vignettes. The students were challenged to contribute their perspective of 'older' in a data reduction exercise to distil and generalise the cohort's views of 'older' people. These groupings together and the classification of terms and contributions by students using rough rubrics, self-adhesive notes and large white boards facilitated this process. This meant that the session was highly interactive. The students enjoyed the freedom to move around the lecture theatre and contribute their thoughts to discrete classifications of 'older'. However, the physical movement of students seemed to be unfamiliar to and uncomfortable for the programme leader.

Critical reflection on our expectations as UK academics at this stage highlighted a range of misconceptions. It was clear that the teaching and learning strategies (specifically student engagement) that have permeated all elements of our role did not feature as significant across other European universities and the collaborative teaching team. We were disappointed that the teaching styles and approaches that failed to engage student interaction on their learning were not altered in subsequent teaching sessions. This led to some students asking who was teaching the next session, and the first dropouts of the programme were noted. Frustratingly, the students who took part in all the sessions were often without voices and their individual ideas were not verbalised.

Sadly, internationalisation of ideas failed to promote scholarship through collaborative thinking, listening and speaking and the extension of ideas in a process of academic shared dialogue. Genuine academic peer review and collaboration was only fleetingly present in the programme: it was not embedded or interwoven as an underpinning principle of this international collaborative learning experience. The creation of new knowledge through academic staff and students working together was clearly a new concept for many staff and students alike; it was clear that our fellow students received it much more favourably than our fellow European academics.

Teaching underpinned by the principles of 'High challenge/high support: I have expertise, you have expertise, let us work together and learn' (Horwath and Shardlow, 2001: 35) was not the only innovation for the non-UK teaching staff to deal with. The academic authors of the article both made an effort to speak using their modest foreign language skills, and sat with the student cohort when participating in the programme rather than with the other academic staff. We also ate and took coffee breaks with students and planned a series of visits, so students could see another European country. On these occasions, many of the wider cohort of students 'joined us'.

### *Hannah's reflections on participation*

I am extremely glad and grateful for the opportunity to study abroad. It made **me** realise that there is a lot more to do and experience outside the UK and indeed working abroad is a feasible option. Not only did **we** receive credits, but also received first hand experiences of other cultures. Also, **we** had an opportunity to visit a neighbouring country. Even though it was a short train journey away, it used its own currency. It also had its own unique history, which **we** learnt about on a walking tour. **We** also visited a place with its own subculture, which was insightful. It showed a completely different side to a developed country and is something that **I** personally enjoyed. On top of having a great time, making new friends and being able to say that **I** have studied abroad, **we** are also alumni of another university, which in itself is valuable.

### *Robyn's reflections on participation*

Studying abroad was a fantastic experience as **we** were able to explore two different countries and cultures. It made **me** more aware of the differences between our countries but, also the similarities. It was amazing to explore a different neighbouring country during the weekend break. In this country **we** explored the typical historical and tourist attractions and **we** explored an established alternative green community. This gave **us** another insight to the sub-cultures within European cities. Participation allowed **me** to work alongside students who came from a variety of different backgrounds. In addition, studying with students from Europe and beyond opened up opportunities such as gaining alumni status from the host university, being offered further opportunities to study for higher degrees and/or professional qualifications in different parts of the world.

### **Opportunities**

While the academic staff were keen to acknowledge the application of undergraduate social work skills, we were particularly moved at the recognition of personal growth of the participants and the willingness to share scholastic argument and intellectual challenges. This discourse included overcoming cross-cultural, country and language barriers and identified higher-order communication skills in many of the participants. The established discourse within the body of the programme permeated beyond the classroom sessions and activities into newly developed critical friendships with multiple networking opportunities for students and staff. The engagement of the students has not only raised the profile of international study programmes, but has also set them apart both in terms of achieving ECTS points and in increasing student curiosity for international social work and future programmes of study.

### *Hannah's reflections on the opportunities presented*

Overall, **I** feel that **I** learnt more about **myself** in the short period of time spent on the study abroad visit than **I** did in my whole second year of university. As **I** already live away from home, dealing with finances and homesickness was not a big issue for **me**. However adapting to such a diverse group of cultures and exploring new cities, was something that **I** will remember for a long time.

### *Robyn's reflections on the opportunities presented*

This experience has been one of the most interesting, challenging and wonderful things **I** have chosen to do in my life. It has enabled me to visit other countries, see cultures and experience things **I** would never have done if it were not for the programme. The programme has helped **me** to become a more independent person and has given **me** an insight into **my** own strengths and weaknesses. It has opened opportunities for **me** such as becoming an international ambassador for **my** own university and has helped **me** make new friends. Additionally, **I** feel **I** have bonded with **my** fellow colleagues and staff, creating relationships solely because of the study visit. And so **I** am thankful, that **I** was given this opportunity.

### **During the unexpected**

#### *Hannah's reflections on the unexpected*

Riding bikes appeared to be the norm around the city, so **we** wanted to give it a go because it looked fun. It turned out that using bikes from the hotel was free. This was a great opportunity to have some time to explore the local surroundings and attempt to get **our** bearings. **We** attended an ice rink, which was completely free (even the boot hiring), not only was this fun but acted as a good way for the group to mix and get to know each other. The walking tour at the weekend was also free (all they asked for was for a tip at the end). It was insightful and a fantastic addition to the trip.

In regards to the other people who attended the course **I** was not sure what to expect, whether they would interact with **us**. They did interact and indeed **we** ended up becoming friends. Something that also surprised **us** were students banging their hands on the table as a sign of gratitude, towards the speakers at the end of lectures. This was instead of clapping (so as not to disturb other classes that are going on around **us**). This is a nice concept that was completely alien to students from the UK, but for all the other students from around Europe, it was common practice.

### *Robyn's reflections on the unexpected*

One particular experience, which made me aware of different countries, cultures and cultural views, was the No Pegida demonstration, which happened in the square close to our hotel. It was interesting to see how different and similar some of the residents of the city viewed international integration and migration. However what was wonderful to see, was how much support there was against the rally and how many people supported the integration of different people into their country. Yet, at the same time it was a scary experience (having never experienced a demonstration in the UK).

## **Conclusion**

The 2-week Social Policies in Europe programme (despite its short duration) provided a range of opportunities to increase social work practice as well as cultural, intellectual, social and professional networking to a new level of understanding. This article sought to narrow the gap between academic and student understanding and the formation of new academic networking opportunities. At no given time was there any intention of assuming superiority or misplaced humility, but in terms of honesty and integrity to the research process, the authors candidly and honestly portrayed the events as they occurred. Learning from academic peers, peer review and critique were elements of the close of the programme, and such peer critique was challenged constructively. Most importantly, there was an opportunity for academics and students to evaluate the learning experience and make suggestions for the next programme. For students who have not travelled extensively this overseas programme was a life-changing opportunity in terms of gaining self-confidence through independence of action, thinking and in cross-cultural social interaction. The students themselves instigated short visits, shared meals and activities (within their spare time) that allowed them to sample different cultures relatively inexpensively and safely. This is in contrast to the other available opportunities promoted by HEIs, in the form of longer-term volunteering projects overseas.

It has become eminently clear that the best ambassadors for explaining the benefits of studying social work internationally are the past participants; it is they who can illuminate with first-hand knowledge the very real experiences and scenarios from a student perspective. Indeed, several academic peers teaching on the programme directly asked our students to continue their higher studies at 'their' universities. This was also reiterated through their critical friends made from these HEIs.

Aside from their roles as co-authors and co-contributors to this article, the students have undertaken many other teaching, learning and additional activities promoting and capturing the learning potential and experiences from studying social work internationally. These activities include lecturing, attending cross-university international events, and explaining and exploring the programme to the 2016 eligible cohort. Our shared thinking is presented, including revelations of self and ideas on how to improve the induction and programme of study. We have all learned from one another and a cohort of 11 attended the programme in 2016, proving the success of the previous students' ambassadorial prowess. The students' reflections indicate overwhelmingly the ownership of their own learning and the high level of it with use of the personal pronoun reinforcing their ownership and claims of new knowledge. This reinforced for us the notion that the topic of each individual day was only a part of the learning that was taking place. The lessons learned go way

beyond the curriculum of a social work study abroad programme and will stay with the participants throughout their lives and inform their future social work practice.

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