

**Abstract**

Internationalisation is a widespread trend in higher education, and social work is a discipline with a broad scope worldwide. As a profession that prioritises people and is based on social justice and human rights, it has various advantages and disadvantages from an international perspective. The concept of international social work education involves practices like student and faculty exchange, collaborations, research, and curriculum sharing. Its objectives include preparing students to work across national borders and cultivating a sense of global citizenship.



## **International Social Work Education: Challenges and Prospects of Multiculturalism**



Dealing with diverse people and their cultural environments requires great care. Multiculturalism has become increasingly popular as a concept for studying human diversity and groups vulnerable to discrimination. Developing cultural competencies among social work practitioners is crucial, and this chapter discusses the challenges and prospects of multiculturalism in the context of international social work education.

**Keywords:** *international social work education, multiculturalism, international social work, diverse contexts, cultural competence.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Profound global and demographic transformations have engendered a heightened diversity within societies. Equipping social work students with pragmatic knowledge and skills within this evolving context mandates an augmented global perspective, while concurrently preserving indigenous elements. In response to this imperative, educational institutions are incorporating global viewpoints into their pedagogical, research, and learning frameworks to enhance intercultural competencies. Social work is progressively establishing itself as a discipline of international significance, evident in burgeoning student and faculty exchanges, collaborative initiatives, research endeavours, and the exchange of curricular frameworks—a trend observed in various analogous helping professions (Thampi, 2022).

The field of social work encompasses an expansive scope, necessitating due consideration of variations across all dimensions. Individuals, groups, racial and ethnic classifications, social predicaments, and the methodologies employed in social work to address these challenges all exhibit marked distinctions. Within the realm of social work, the cultural context of an individual holds paramount importance at every echelon. This principle extends to the domain of social work education, where the escalating international mobility of students, a consequence of globalization, contributes significantly to the heightened diversity within academia. In this era characterized by widespread global participation and extensive migration, the internationalization of social work education assumes particular relevance.

This chapter delves into the conceptualization of International Social Work Education (ISWE), with a focus on the growing importance of multiculturalism. As societies and communities become increasingly diverse, social workers need to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to work effectively with individuals from a range of cultures and backgrounds. The chapter examines the challenges and opportunities that arise from this shift towards multiculturalism, including issues related to language barriers, cultural differences, and the need for cross-cultural competence. It also considers the role of ISWE in promoting understanding and collaboration between different cultures and nations. Through a critical analysis of current practices and approaches, this chapter aims to provide insights and recommendations for how social work education can better prepare students for the challenges of working in a globalized and multicultural world.

## **Concepts of international Social Work and International Social Work Education**

International social work (ISW) is a relative concept; it has multiple understandings (Gray & Fook, 2004). Since 1928, when the term first gained popular usage (Healy, 2001), the concept has become significantly more complex. International social work lacks a consensus definition (Miles et al., 2014). It could be a practice that transcends national boundaries (Healy & Thomas, 2016), focuses on issues with global implications, or can involve interactions with world-acclaimed organizations or international exchanges. The idea of ISW has been popularised primarily through international practice and exchange (Gray & Fook, 2004). What the word international social work means in terms of practice and education is not universally agreed upon, according to the literature on international social work (Healy, 2014). On this subject, social professionals frequently hold opposing viewpoints. The proponent of a universal definition anticipates that it may present an opportunity to build critical perspectives from a worldwide perspective, while others have severe concerns about how the global definition will account for the inequality, oppression, and power issues that are now present (Miles et al., 2014).

James Midgley (2001) has defined international social work in three ways. Firstly, as a field of practice that emphasizes the importance of having required skill sets in practising with international communities and organizations. Secondly, as exchanges and collaborative practices in an international context. And thirdly, as contextual consciousness among social workers to work with different issues of society with a global perspective.

Hugman (2010) offered a unique perspective on ISW, encompassing the practice of social work in foreign countries, collaboration with global institutions, international relationships, and exchanges in social work, as well as assistance to communities with international origins. This approach, characterized by its simplicity, examines the diverse contexts in which social work is practised internationally. A more comprehensive and contextual definition of ISW was proposed by Cox and Pawar (2013), viewing it through an ecological lens grounded in human rights values. According to their integrated definition, ISW involves the promotion of social work education and practice globally and locally, to create a truly integrated international profession capable of effectively responding to global challenges impacting the well-being of diverse populations worldwide.

The Global Definition of Social Work, as endorsed by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) in 2014, posits that the social work profession actively champions social change, engages in problem-solving

within human relationships, and strives for the empowerment and liberation of individuals to enhance overall well-being. Grounded in theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work interventions are strategically positioned at the junctures where individuals interact with their environments, with the foundational principles of human rights and social justice serving as integral cornerstones. This definition, with a deliberate acknowledgement of the implications of globalization, has significantly propelled the advancement of social work as a distinct field of study (Miles et al., 2014).

Fundamental to various definitions of ISWE are concepts of exchange programs, collaborative activities, and the exchange of knowledge and techniques (Miles et al., 2016). While historical perspectives on ISW focused on identifying similarities and differences in social problems between developed and developing nations, contemporary ISW prioritizes the sharing of information and professional expertise (Parker et al., 2014). Internationalization has become a pervasive phenomenon in higher education, and Miles et al. (2014) conceptualize ISWE in two main ways: as education prepares students for practice that transcends borders and as a means of fostering students' awareness of themselves as global citizens.

These conceptualizations, with distinct focuses, contribute to the curricular structure of ISWE. Initiatives such as the establishment of the IFSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) have facilitated the engagement of social work practitioners and educators in a global setting. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandates that student social workers acquire the skills necessary to work in an international context.

It is important to note that the concepts of ISW and ISWE are interwoven, lacking clear boundaries, reflecting the interconnected nature of these domains. This relationship arises from the mutual influence and dependency between the practice of ISW and the educational frameworks that nurture and prepare professionals for this global engagement. The practice of ISW is inherently dynamic, requiring practitioners to navigate the complexities of diverse cultural contexts, global challenges, and cross-cultural interactions. ISWE serves as the crucible for cultivating the competencies essential for such endeavours, providing a platform where students can engage with diverse theories, methodologies, and ethical considerations germane to ISW.

## **Understanding Multiculturalism in Social Work Education**

Given that social work primarily focuses on the person-in-environment, cultural context is an important component. In social work education, multiculturalism has gained popularity as a concept for the study of human

diversity and groups who are vulnerable to discrimination. It is an essential aspect of developing cultural competencies among social work practitioners. It is rightly emphasized in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics and is one of the accreditation standards put forward by CSWE. IASSW and IFSW published the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training in 2004. It maintains the flexibility to accommodate the varied cultural heritage of social work while reflecting the professionalisation of social work with a cohesive identity. Multiculturalism education is urgently needed in social work training programmes across the world to appropriately equip social workers for this dynamic and always-changing global context.

Despite the existence of a contrasting viewpoint that posits multiculturalism as an impractical concept, with assertions that it has limited relevance to cultural competence (Atherton & Bolland, 1997), it is imperative to recognize the significance of multiculturalism within the realm of social work. This is especially evident in its consideration of crucial factors such as indigenous practices, cultural diversity, and cross-cultural experiences. In this context, the acknowledgement of the contradictory perspective does not diminish the importance of multiculturalism in addressing the complex and diverse aspects inherent in social work practice. Instead, it underscores the nuanced nature of discussions surrounding cultural competence and highlights the multifaceted role that multiculturalism plays in fostering a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural elements within the field of social work (Feize & Gonzalez, 2018).

As articulated by Fellin (2000), multiculturalism within the domain of social work education encompasses three distinct facets. Firstly, it is closely associated with cultural pluralism and the acknowledgement of cultural diversity. Secondly, it is equated with the cultures of individuals belonging to racial and ethnic groups, particularly those identified as people of colour. On a tertiary level, the term extends to encompass other populations at risk for discrimination and oppression, further embracing a comprehensive understanding of diversity.

Within the framework of multicultural education in social work, Nadan and Ben-Ari (2013) identify four key perspectives: Cultural Information about the 'Other,' Anti-Opressive and Critical Multiculturalism, Cultural Competence, and Sensitivity to Cultural Differences. These perspectives serve as foundational elements in fostering a nuanced and informed approach to engaging with diverse populations within the field of social work.

Recognizing and appreciating the sociopolitical backgrounds, cultural variety, and social challenges faced by historically underrepresented groups is

emphasized as essential in social work (Marsiglia et al., 2021). A more comprehensive comprehension of these aspects will augment the capacity of social work students to effectively engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds. This underscores the importance of integrating multicultural perspectives into social work education to equip students with the requisite knowledge and sensitivity to navigate the complexities of diverse cultural contexts and social challenges in their future practice (Danso, 2014).

## **Prospects of Multiculturalism in International Social Work Education**

### ***International Social work Education as a pedagogical approach for teaching multiculturalism***

International programs offer a collaborative learning environment facilitated by the intergroup conversation method, fostering discussions among students from diverse nations and facilitating the exchange of intercultural knowledge (Smith & Yang, 2021). Beyond mere social dialogues, international exchange programs within the realm of social work education provide students and educators with a practical, hands-on opportunity to delve into various social phenomena. This, in turn, enhances their analytical, comparative, and critical evaluation skills (Bell et al., 2021). While many social problems exhibit commonalities across different countries, a myriad of factors can influence their causes, expressions, and implications. Notably, American poverty differs distinctively from Indian poverty, exemplifying the complexity of social issues as a result of multiple variables.

The internationalization process, exemplified through student exchange programs, extends experiential learning opportunities to both social work students and faculty, contributing to the enhancement of their professional competencies in working with diverse backgrounds (Thampi, 2022). Collaborations, research endeavours, and curriculum exchanges further enable the implementation of diverse educational initiatives, including but not limited to diversity projects, courses, instructional technologies, and cultural immersion programs. This opens avenues for the integration of cross-cultural components into social work curricula, thereby broadening the educational landscape.

International field studies emerge as a potentially transformative element in both teaching and learning, offering valuable insights into global social work practices (Werkmeister Rozas & Henry, 2022). Student exchanges, acting as foundational points for official connections with foreign colleges, play a pivotal role in fostering international collaboration. In essence, the multifaceted nature of international programs not only enriches the educational experience but also

contributes significantly to the cultivation of a global perspective within the field of social work.

### ***Cultural competence as an outcome***

In the multifaceted landscape of ISWE, the significance of cultural competence is steadily gaining prominence across all dimensions (Arat & Kerelian, 2017; Small et al., 2017). The conventional understanding of cultural competence, rooted in the so-called fundamentalist approach, is deemed insufficient and, in some instances, detrimental when applied within the context of a global workplace. Recognizing this limitation, a more nuanced and beneficial interpretation of cultural competence is essential. This refined understanding aims to better equip social workers as ethical and oppression-free practitioners and educators, aligning with the evolving requirements of contemporary ISW. By embracing this more comprehensive perspective, social work professionals can navigate the complexities of global settings with heightened sensitivity and effectiveness, fostering a culturally competent approach that aligns with ethical standards and addresses the diverse needs inherent in international social work practice and education.

### ***Developing a critical framework***

Reflective learning opportunities are the foundation of social work education. It is through this reflective learning process that a social worker can evaluate the social environment and develop a critical framework. Global exposures, such as exchange programs and global education, are essential in cultivating critical reflections and acquiring cultural competence. In all of these processes, direction is crucial for growth, and supervisors play a particularly important role in helping people reflect structurally within a critical framework. Teaching, understanding, and critically reflecting from an international perspective on issues of power, marginalisation, and oppression can raise the standards of students. International social work utilises multicultural education as a pragmatic strategy to promote critical thinking and self-reflection (Azzopardi, 2020).

## **Challenges of Multiculturalism in International Social Work Education**

The confluence of indigenization and westernization within the domain of social work has persisted as a longstanding challenge, a phenomenon not confined to recent developments but entrenched over time. This complex interplay is notably pronounced within the sphere of social work education, where the dominance of western social work practices presents formidable challenges for practitioners seeking to apply their skills within local contexts.

The intricacies of these challenges manifest in difficulties related to reconciling theoretical frameworks, navigating ethical dilemmas, and managing disagreements over practical considerations. The concept of indigenization encapsulates the adaptation of existing theories, models, and conceptual frameworks to align with the specificities of the local context. A comprehensive understanding of the local culture, history, values, and resources becomes imperative for a nuanced appreciation of this crucial component (Ouedraogo & Wedler, 2019).

The discourse on education further mirrors the disparities perpetuated by historical forces such as colonialism, imperialism, globalization, and technological progress. Notably, the existing asymmetry is evident in the research landscape, where studies investigating the outcomes of overseas programs predominantly focus on students from the Global North, with a glaring scarcity of research on the experiences of students from developing countries.

A substantial impediment to the cultivation of culturally sensitive approaches lies in the deficiency of indigenous theories and models, significantly impacting the internationalization of education. The formulation of practicum models and the integration of global experiences into the general curriculum emerge as pivotal challenges in the realm of international student exchange programs (Thampi, 2022). This deficiency profoundly influences the practical exposures of students, creating a state of ambiguity when addressing local issues. Consequently, this deficiency significantly compromises their preparedness to navigate real-world situations, contributing to uncertainty in addressing and resolving local challenges within the dynamic field of ISWE.

### **Case Study: Enhancing Social Work Education for Cross-Cultural competence**

In response to the evolving societal landscape marked by increased cultural diversity and globalization, the University of Palermo's undergraduate course in Social Work undertook didactic experimentation over the past decade. This initiative aimed to equip future social workers with the essential tools necessary for engaging effectively with individuals from diverse cultures, given the heightened presence of immigrants in Italy (Di Rosa, 2017).

#### ***Teaching Model***

Based on the accumulated experiences of didactic experimentation, the University of Palermo has developed a teaching model that seamlessly integrates academic education with cross-cultural tools. This model is designed



to enhance effectiveness by placing a heightened emphasis on acknowledging and addressing the diverse lives of individuals within the context of social aid relationships.

### ***Outcomes***

The integration of intercultural tools in social work education enhanced services for immigrants. This encompasses assistance for social reintegration, protection of cultural specificities, and prevention of violence and discrimination. Emphasizing the social rather than legal sense of citizenship, a rejuvenation of indigenous communities occurred. By fostering understanding and reassurance among cautious citizens, the social work education model sought to transform the entire concept of citizenship within the societal framework.

### ***Inference***

The study from the University of Palermo provides a comprehensive overview of how a deliberate focus on cross-cultural competencies in social work education can address the challenges posed by an increasingly diverse and globalized society. The integrated teaching model not only enhances the preparedness of future social workers but also contributes to the broader goal of fostering inclusive, culturally sensitive, and effective social services.

## **CONCLUSION**

Within the realm of social work education, multiculturalism is conceptualized as a fundamental imperative for students. The educational objective is clear: social work students must acquire the skills to communicate professionally with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, the scope of this concept should extend beyond a mere acknowledgement of diversity; it should be expansive and contextually grounded to effectively address the challenges inherent in contemporary settings.

To navigate the complexities of multiculturalism, the social work profession must adopt a broad and contextual approach, acknowledging the nuances and intricacies of cultural interactions. This necessitates an ongoing commitment to creating and expanding global networks that facilitate the exchange of information, insights, and best practices. This interconnectedness is paramount for fostering a collaborative and informed global social work community.

In the context of international social work education, trainees are presented with opportunities to cultivate various pedagogical perspectives on multiculturalism. This exposure not only contributes to the development of cultural competencies but also enables the construction of a critical reflective framework. Through engagement with international social work, students gain valuable insights into diverse cultural contexts, refining their ability to navigate the complexities of multicultural environments.

In essence, the ongoing emphasis on multiculturalism in social work education underscores the profession's dedication to preparing practitioners who are not only adept in cross-cultural communication but also possess a nuanced understanding of the broader societal implications. As the global landscape continues to evolve, the commitment to multicultural education and international collaboration remains essential for shaping socially aware, culturally competent, and reflective social work professionals.

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