Overseas social work placements: Can a well-designed workflow contribute to the success of an overseas placement?

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the importance of workflow design for students completing field education as part of a social work degree. Specifically, this article examines this in the context of an Aotearoa New Zealand social work student from the University of Waikato (UoW) completing a final placement at a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Battambang Cambodia, Children's Future International (CFI). The main body of the article reflects on the advantages of designing an overseas placement approach which is planned to flow from theory development to practice implementation, termed "knowledge development and flow" (Henley et al., in press).

KEYWORDS: placement; overseas; flow; knowledge

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As part of the four-year Bachelor of Social Work programme (BSW) with the University of Waikato (UoW) and a requirement of the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), social work students undertake two practice-based placements with a minimum of 120 days total (SWRB, 2014). The BSW at UoW, under specific circumstances, allows an option for students to complete their placement overseas. This article considers the impacts of an international placement and how careful planning can benefit the student's skill development and knowledge.

As part of this placement, the student completed 60 days based at a NGO in Battambang Cambodia, Children's Future International (CFI). The student worked predominantly with the social work team within CFI but also spent time with education and operational teams. This field education experience is considered alongside a similar placement in Cambodia in 2015 (Hay, Lowe et al., 2018), and other Aotearoa New Zealand based placement experiences.

The student, Claudia Munro, was in the final year of her social work studies; she had not previously visited a developing country. For this student, an international placement was a huge undertaking and a courageous commitment. Simon Lowe is a lecturer in field education on the social work programme at UoW, Aotearoa New Zealand. Lee Henley is the Executive Director of CFI and took the role of field educator and supervisor for the student. Zoey Henley, the Managing Director at CFI, also supported the student.

CFI is an NGO working with children and their families and is situated in Ek Phnom, approximately eight kilometres north of Battambang, Cambodia. Ek Phnom is a rural and an extremely poor region of Cambodia. CFI was founded to prevent human rights abuses and protect and uphold the dignity of some of Cambodia's most at-risk children. CFI came into existence in 2009 after its founders

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witnessed persistent, yet preventable, human rights abuses against children in Ek Phnom, where they had been living and working as educators. CFI exists to, first provide for the basic needs and safety of children (ages 5–21) and their families in rural Cambodia and, second, to provide them with educational opportunities not otherwise available. CFI's model of service takes a results-driven approach for a community with untreated trauma from the Khmer Rouge genocide, poverty, malnutrition, unsafe migration, and exploitative experiences such as child labour, physical and sexual abuse, underage sex work and neglect. CFI aims to empower children and youth to break the cycle of poverty utilising innovative social work approaches (CFI, 2019).

This article focuses on the placement design of "knowledge development and flow", and whether it was effective in increasing the efficacy of a student social worker on placement in addressing knowledge and awareness of consumer empowerment and service dependency among managers and staff at the placement NGO. From its conception, this placement was approached as being a learning environment for the student, one where the student was encouraged to contribute for the benefit of the NGO, its staff and service users. The intention was for the placement to be planned in a way where the student would acquire knowledge and use this knowledge in service delivery; an example being running a workshop on mental wellbeing for teenagers. As such, a knowledge development and flow approach was used. The student would therefore be sharing her knowledge around theoretical and research approaches.

Placement planning

Before this placement commenced significant consideration was given to how the student's learning objectives would be reached and practice delivered. All parties were cognisant of the need for detailed planning to minimise the potential stress of an overseas placement in a developing context (Agllias,

2010; Litvack, Mishna, & Bogo, 2010). The preparation included discussions around:

- building an understanding of overarching theoretical approaches regarding consumer empowerment, service dependency, and advocacy;

- completing multiple literature reviews. These were the first learning activities and practice flowed from these. These reviews focused on empowerment, dependency and advocacy;

- developing an understanding of pertinent issues in a community context;

- developing a workshop designed to share knowledge with CFI staff (focused on consumer empowerment, service dependency, and advocacy). These flowed from the literature reviews;

- using outcomes from workshops to inform and develop policy frameworks (for a consumer participation group and exit pathway);

- evaluating placement success by measuring against learning outcomes and development of the social work processes at CFI.

This approach used a knowledge development and flow process as each task was informed by the previous one. The resulting flow is displayed in Table 1 which breaks down the placement work and achievements, demonstrating how the tasks allocated were designed to gather knowledge and flow into each other
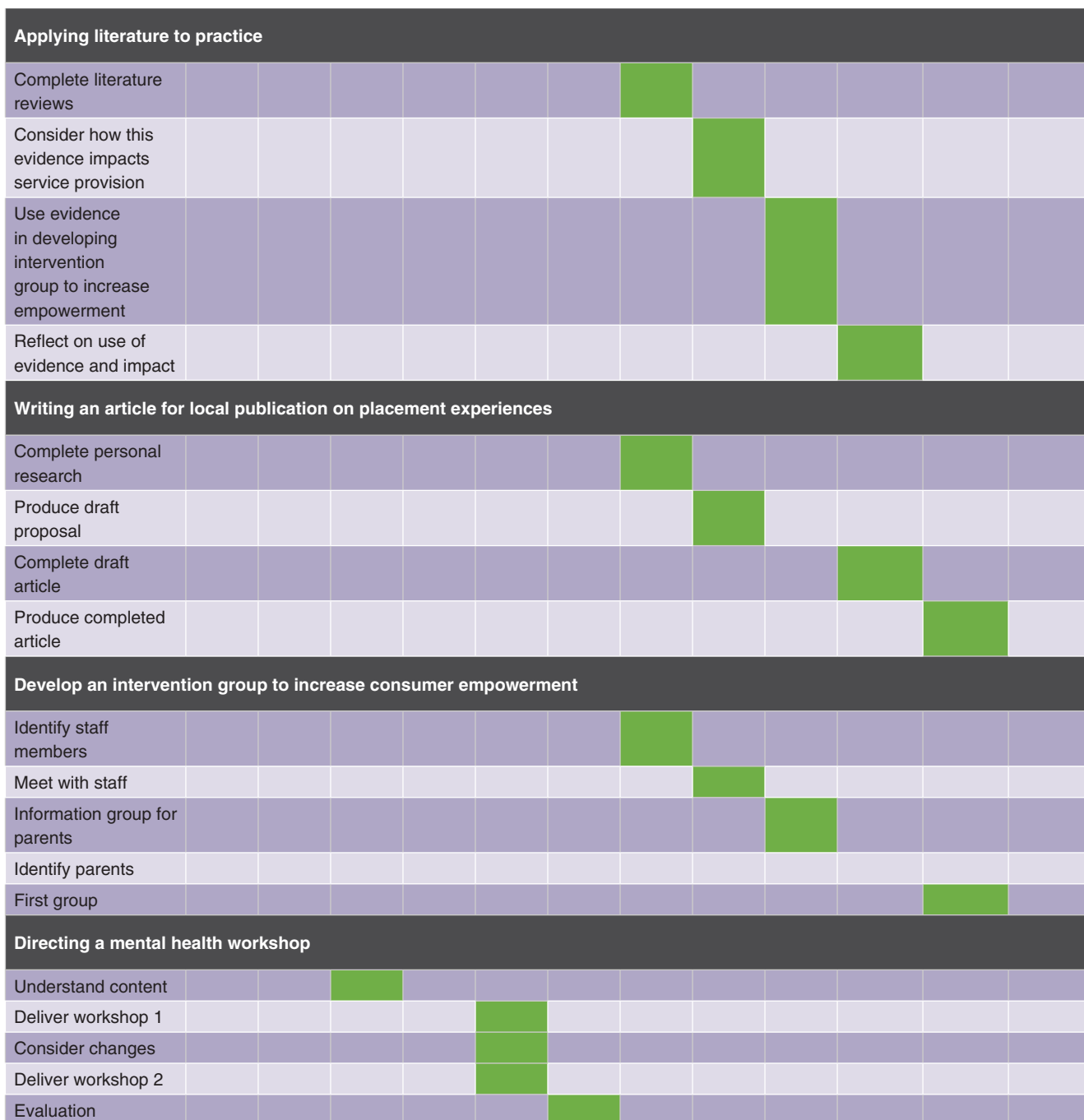
For example, one key task was "Education Opportunities" of which was broken down into the following stages:

1. complete a literature review on empowerment, dependency and advocacy;

2. develop own understanding, thereby enabling education;

Appendix 1:

Table 1. Placement Flow

Student Work Plan												
Objective	**Week 1**	**Week 2**	**Week 3**	**Week 4**	**Week 5**	**Week 6**	**Week 7**	**Week 8**	**Week 9**	**Week 10**	**Week 11**	**Week 12**
Education Opportunities												
Complete Literature review on empowerment, dependency and advocacy			■									
Develop own understanding Enabling education				■								
Present information						■						
Evaluation of presentation							■					
Developing further cultural understanding/knowledge												
Develop awareness of dos and don'ts												■
Develop some language knowledge												■
Review and design systems in a developing context to reduce service dependency												
Collect data from literature reviews and other sources							■					
Develop a clear exit pathway								■				
Develop clear guidelines for exit process									■			
Present information to staff										■		
Completing research in a developing context												
Develop questions	■											
Develop questionnaire	■											
Consent forms	■											
Analysis data			■									
End line												■

Applying literature to practice													
Complete literature reviews							🟩						
Consider how this evidence impacts service provision								🟩					
Use evidence in developing intervention group to increase empowerment									🟩				
Reflect on use of evidence and impact										🟩			
Writing an article for local publication on placement experiences													
Complete personal research							🟩						
Produce draft proposal								🟩					
Complete draft article									🟩				
Produce completed article											🟩		
Develop an intervention group to increase consumer empowerment													
Identify staff members							🟩						
Meet with staff								🟩					
Information group for parents									🟩				
Identify parents													
First group											🟩		
Directing a mental health workshop													
Understand content			🟩										
Deliver workshop 1					🟩								
Consider changes					🟩								
Deliver workshop 2					🟩								
Evaluation						🟩							

3. present information to the staff group;

4. evaluate presentation.

Clear goal-setting enabled staff supporting the student to guide her interventions with the various teams at CFI. As described earlier, the teams included a social work team, an education team, and an operational team. The process of goal-setting made the identification of learning and development goals relatively easy. While much of the work completed by the student was through direct practice with the different teams, there

was an overall focus on the development of policies and processes within CFI. Policy development involved the student mapping current processes and considering how to develop new ones; these developments were regularly discussed with CFI staff and managers. This provided an excellent opportunity for the student to be involved in policy and process development, and for her to actively contribute to the agency. These mechanisms, including referral intake, triage, allocation, assessment, care-planning and review, helped staff to consider appropriate methods to reduce service dependency, increase consumer empowerment, and encourage discharge from CFI services. These processes were new concepts to the CFI social work and education teams; although the team were already using a strengths-based model in their work with families (Hillier, 2017).

Throughout the student's placement, much was achieved and learnt by the CFI staff. One of the main findings was the impact of tacit learning. As the student was sitting with the social work team, they demonstrated greater learning regarding empowerment and dependency, this appeared to be due to daily tacit learning. This is discussed in a further article (Henley et al., 2019).

Placement literature

Research of previous international student placements identify how social work knowledge, work knowledge and self-knowledge had high contributions in the success of the international placements (Hay, Lowe, et al., 2018; Matthew & Lough, 2017). When considering an international placement, the cultural context impacts on a huge proportion of the work and there is a need for knowledge as to how to work within this appropriately (Beecher, Reeves, Eggertsen, & Furuto, 2010; Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010). Hay, Maidment, Ballantyne, Beddoe, and Walker (2018, p. 5) conclude how knowledge which includes "historical, ethnic, cultural, social, economic and

religious context" are important and should be considered. Additionally, complementary research shows that there is a heightened importance of understanding one's own culture and one's self, regarding being able to recognise cross-cultural differences and similarities (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Garneau & Pepin, 2015).

Intimate understanding and ability to apply a range of social work theories and models are deemed as essential for international and cross-cultural social work intervention. Maidment, Chilvers, Crichton-Hill, and Meadows-Taurua (2011) conclude that a precise understanding of social work theory, initially by field educators, supervisors and field placement coordinators, and latterly by the student enables increased competence to practise cross-culturally.

Of significance is recent research, based on social work student satisfaction of experiences on placements in New Zealand. In this research, Hay, Maidment, et al. (2018) explain that little is known regarding this subject. What is clear is that many social work students experience a range of traumatic events while on placement (Collins, Coffey, & Morris, 2010). Davys and Beddoe (2009) argue that regular and effective supervision is a way to address the possible impacts of these events. The relationship with the field educator is of importance as they have a responsibility to prepare the student to prevent negative impact (Bride & Figley, 2007). In this instance, this relationship was of significant importance as this placement entailed completing work in an entirely new culture and environment. Therefore, this relationship was deemed critical for the success of this placement.

Placement outcomes

Throughout weekly supervision between the student and Executive Director, consideration was given as to how to make the workflow benefit both the organisation

and the student, and how to maintain flexibility on placement and respond to the unexpected. Each of these points led to the discussion and development of a structured work plan.

The work plan was a key component to the development and flow of the student's placement. This allowed for the planning of specific work tasks to be broken into clearly defined completion timeframes. The work was designed to follow a specific order, or workflow linking the majority of the tasks back to the first major goal.

A benefit of having a clear workflow process to follow, meant the student was able to balance their work plan alongside unexpected learning opportunities such as visiting clients at home and community centres. The student found the value of knowledge gained from these extra learning opportunities added value to the placement and the work plan. Intricate planning of the placement fitted well with the mandated requirement for weekly supervision, as per SWRB regulations, (SWRB, 2014) which contributed to the student's development while working through the placement flow. Consequently, regular, planned supervision formed a huge part of the structure of the placement, enabling and supporting the student to flow from one task to the next, respond to the unexpected, while simultaneously reflecting upon knowledge development, values and experiences. The student was able to reflect on her experiences in a number of fora. Mainly though, these included reflection with the field educator during clinical supervision, and confidentially online with the field placement coordinator through Mahara, an electronic platform. Mahara is an online journaling software that enables students to reflect, confidentially, on experiences whilst on placement. These reflections are part of the placement assessment and are shared with the field placement coordinator at the university. Students on placement with the BSW at UoW are expected to complete a minimum of two critical reflections per week

online. The intention is to develop levels of insight and personal growth through the development of critically reflective practice (Tesoriero, 2006).

Separate to the assessment of the placement, outcomes were also measured by surveying staff about their knowledge of specific concepts at the start, middle and end of the student's placement. These concepts underlined and guided the student's work and can be seen through the research data of "International Social Work Placements: Can a student from overseas stimulate professional learning for staff in a community development NGO" detailed later. The student's impact of work around service dependency and consumer empowerment can be seen in Table 2 through a comparison of learning achieved for CFI social workers and teachers from baseline to endline . This chart shows the impact of the work the student completed. According to the data collected significant increase in knowledge in all areas was achieved.

Employing a knowledge development and flow approach to placement planning meant the student was empowered to develop their knowledge, by completing each task as planned. This knowledge then flowed onwards to the staff group via a workshop and developed into a policy and process for service provision; and flowed into the next stage of the work plan.

Further reflection

This placement was planned and delivered within the previously mentioned knowledge development and flow framework (Henley et al., 2019) approach. Simply put, the student gathered knowledge and this flowed through into the host NGO. However, this reflective account also demonstrates the importance of clear planning designed to develop a student's abilities. Alongside an understanding of the complex local context is the need to recognise and feel comfortable with one's own culture and be able to recognise and discuss differences across

Appendix 2:

Table 2 – Student Impact. Baseline to endline.

OVERVIEW OF SCALING QUESTIONS
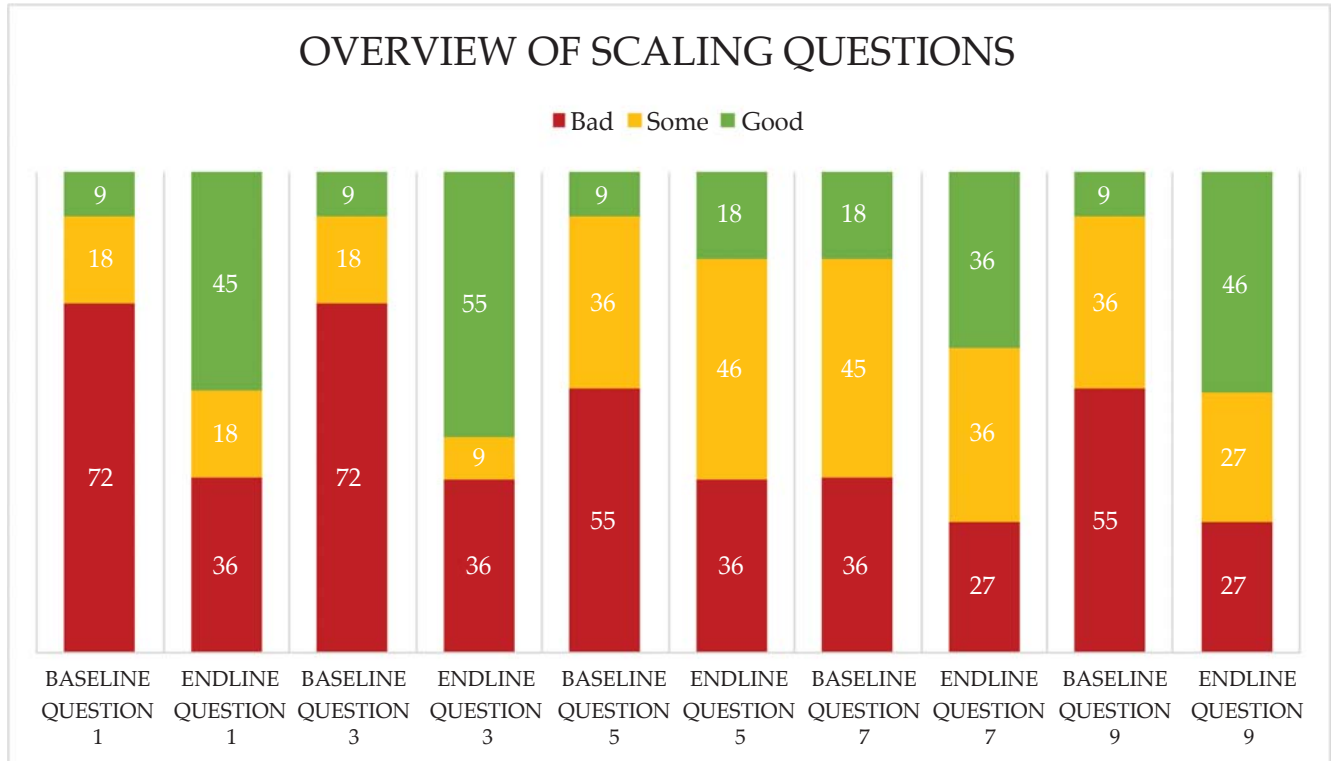
cultures (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Harrison & Turner, 2011; Saunders, Haskins, & Vasquez, 2015). In this placement, much of the supervision discussion was focused on observed differences, working in a different culture to encourage the student to be able to discuss these differences and respect them.

What does appear constant across the literature is the need to consider concepts and theories carefully when working cross-culturally to not dis-empower or collude with voyeuristic tourism (Hay, Lowe, et al., 2018). The student displayed good awareness of the need to practise in an appropriate manner with respect to culture, while forming quick relationships with staff and responding well to advice and supervision discussion (Ranz & Langer, 2018).

Hay, Maidment et al. (2018) discuss how students often feel luck plays a huge part in their placement. This placement was

deliberately planned in advance to positively enhance the student's experience, increase their skills by employing a knowledge development and flow approach, and to amplify potential benefit to the placement provider. The deliberate planning of learning opportunities provided the structure for the student to feel comfortable with their learning and, importantly, confident in knowing what tasks needed to be completed. The approach of removing luck and replacing with intensive planning was a key feature of this placement's success.

Reflections for future

Based on the participant's experience (student and CFI staff), the following thoughts are relevant:

1) Overseas placements need to be well planned and targeted to achieve certain outcomes.

2) Good quality liaison and prior planning between university staff, placement provider and student is essential.

3) Planning of overseas placements should commence at least three months prior to commencement.

4) Field supervisors should consider using a knowledge development and flow approach for placements to maximise impact and learning achieved.

Conclusion

Adopting a knowledge development and flow approach ensured this placement was prepared well and optimally structured for both the student and the host organisation. The student acquired knowledge in a planned and measured way and applied this knowledge to the benefit of staff and service users at the host agency. The student's progress and any areas of concern were able to be addressed in a transparent and timely manner and compared to agreed milestones established at the start of the placement.

Employing a knowledge development and flow approach provided clear structure in an otherwise unpredictable environment. This reflection offers some evidence as to how effective planning and goal setting can result in a successful overseas placement.

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