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An argument for transnational learning in social work programmes

Experiences from the Erasmus+ 'Urban Diversities' course

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Abstract

Internationalisation has steadily grown in importance and scope in tertiary education. In addition to exchange and scholarship programmes that encourage student mobility, curricular internationalisation or 'internationalisation at home' has broadened opportunities to integrate international dimensions into the curriculum. Despite the value of 'transnational awareness' for future social workers, the degree to which educators in social work invest in international and intercultural competences still varies greatly. In this article, we argue for an explicit commitment to internationalisation in social work education. Based on our joint experience of developing and implementing an Erasmus+-funded multimodal, blended, transnational social work course for undergraduate students, we highlight the power and potential of transnational learning for future social workers. At the same time, the development of such an international course is not without its pitfalls. Therefore, we discuss the structural, organisational, technological, and cultural factors we struggled with when implementing our course. This discussion is based on the evaluation of two editions of our course, collecting the experiences and feedback of the students, lecturers and practitioners involved.

Keywords

Social work education, internationalisation, urban social work, transnational learning, digital learning

environment

Funding

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Introduction

This article contributes to the development of transnational social work education in consideration of pedagogic design, and potential formats and objectives for collaborative transnational education. Globalisation has reshaped the world and created complex new social interdependencies and diversification, giving many of the current concerns of social work an explicit transnational dimension. At the same time, within the past decade we have seen a renewed tendency towards nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric and border protectionism. The relevance of transnational social work should be understood within this field of tension (Schrooten, 2021). Despite the obvious need for social workers to have 'transnational awareness', and relevant professional competences (Negi & Furman, 2010; Withaeckx et al., 2017), the degree to which educators invest in international and intercultural competences still varies greatly. As such, we reflect on our collective experience of developing and delivering the Erasmus+ funded multimodal, blended, transnational social work course ´Urban diversities' for undergraduate students. Within a European and urban context(s), students explored the role of social work, learning at the 'glocal' level in communities, and sharing their collective learning in transnational online classrooms.

Based on our innovations we emphasise the power and potential of transnational learning for future social workers. We argue that exposure to international educational environments and the acquisition and absorption of intercultural values and skills are essential for the development of a transnational perspective in both the practice-based profession and the academic discipline of social work and argue for an emphatic choice for internationalisation in social work education. At the same time, the development of such an international course is not without its pitfalls, and we therefore advocate for educators to be attuned to logistical factors such as the allocation of resources, time, and administrative support. We also explore the structural, organisational, technological, and cultural factors required to implement transnational courses, including consideration of student support and integration with the main curriculum.

In describing our learning experience of developing and implementing the international course 'Urban Diversities', we make an important contribution to the development of international social work education in consideration of pedagogic design, and potential formats and objectives for collaborative education. Finally, we offer a reflective analysis of the challenges encountered in developing innovations in transnational exchange and in sharing our recommendations for good practice. We conclude that institutional and professional flexibility are significant factors to the future sustainability and success of such important initiatives.

Urban diversities: Challenges for social work

In 2018, teachers and students from Brussels (Belgium), Turku (Finland), Manchester (United Kingdom), Debrecen (Hungary), Trento (Italy), Utrecht (the Netherlands) and Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) met to discuss challenges and opportunities for social work in an urban context (see Hendriks & Kloppenburg, 2020). The basis of this meeting was the observation that (sub)urban areas throughout Europe are facing complex challenges. Cities are characterised by socio-geographical inequality in terms of income, housing, safety, mobility, opportunities, consumption, power, and privileges (Tonkiss, 2013). At the same time, cities are also places of hope, development, social mobility and social innovation, and in many ways, are good for people and their well-being (Williams, 2016).

This duality of the city poses many questions and dilemmas for social workers: How to 'read' a city and gain insight into its dynamics? How to learn to navigate through different – sometimes contradictory and paradoxical – urban realities? How to gain insight into the needs and forces present? How to find, select and combine relevant and adequate knowledge? What is the role social workers should play in the interplay of forces between all sorts of actors who are active in the city (Schrooten & Veldboer, 2021)?

Despite the sometimes very different local contexts, the participants in the workshop also recognised many similar dynamics. The idea arose to jointly develop a course that would better prepare students for carrying out social work in complex urban contexts. With the support of Erasmus+, we developed the course 'Urban Diversities: Challenges for social work'. The course was piloted in the Spring semester of 2021 with the second edition taking place in Spring 2022. The central focus of the course is to strengthen the capabilities of future socially engaged professionals (including social workers, social care professionals, youth workers and community development workers amongst others) to intervene effectively in situations that involve urban tensions and complexities. The course took place in five social work schools across Europe: Odisee University of Applied Sciences (Brussels, Belgium), HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (Netherlands), Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom), University of Debrecen (Hungary) and Turku University of Applied Sciences (Finland).

The Urban Diversities course focuses strongly on combining dual strands of local and transnational learning. In one strand, students participate in a Community Service Learning (CSL) trajectory in their own city. Within CSL, learning takes place together with the social work field and alongside the public of participating organisations. In this sense, it forms a unique partnership between the university, the field and the community (see Claes et al., 2021, 2022 for a more detailed explanation of the CSL component of this course). The second strand of collaborative learning focuses on transnational exchange. Students, lecturers and social workers from the various cities involved meet each other online on a regular basis. They receive conceptual input, discuss their CSL experiences together, look for similarities and differences between the different local settings, and jointly develop new experiential knowledge about the role of social workers in a complex urban context. For the purpose of this article, the transnational component of the course will provide the focus. However, before going into detail about this transnational exchange, we first consider the political and educational context from which the course takes place.

Internationalisation in higher education

The 'Urban diversities' course was developed in the context of a growing Internationalisation agenda within the Global Higher Education sector. Over the last few decades, globalisation has "dramatically reshaped" the world (Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 1) fuelling global interconnectedness and forging complex new social interdependencies (Di Matteo & Ganne, 2020; Dominelli, 2010). The paradox of globalisation has seen economic, political, environmental, social and cultural homogeneity, while simultaneously enabling diversification of experience, culture and identity; and inequitable distribution of resources and power (Bauman, 1998).

Living and working in this changing society requires global awareness, and (higher) education is increasingly called upon to equip its students with relevant competences (Robertson, 2021; Simons et al., 2013). Indeed, Internationalisation in higher education is still perceived to offer distinct benefits for wider society, functioning as a key dimension of universities' social responsibility (Jones et al., 2021), and thus, has been steadily increasing in importance and scope. Since the early 80s, the Erasmus programme of the European Union has supported the mobility of students and teaching staff. Since this time, the international dimension of higher education has become more important for governments, higher education institutions and accreditation bodies (Aerden, 2015; De Wit, 2009; Korkeakoulu- ja tiedepolitiikan osasto. Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2017; UK Government, 2022).

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 made the internationalisation of higher education a top priority and in 2009, a mobility target was set, to provide 20% of the European Higher Education Area graduates with an international mobility experience by 2020 (European Commission, 2020). On the system level, from 2008 onwards, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) has contributed to the internationalisation of education by creating descriptions of competences and learning outcomes on different educational levels.

Whereas the focus of the Bologna process was originally almost exclusively on mobility, over the last two decades, the concept of internationalisation has widened considerably. Illustrating this diversification, Jane Knight (2004, p. 11), defines internationalisation as "The process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education."

In addition to the formulation of concrete and quantitative objectives around mobility for students using exchange and scholarship programmes, institutions of higher education pursue internationalisation in their teaching and curricula. As such, various forms of cross-border education, ranging from staff and student mobility to 'Internationalisation at Home', 'Internationalisation of the Curriculum' and concepts such as bilingual education or joint programmes have become widespread in and outside Europe, providing non-mobile students with relevant knowledge and experience (Teeri, 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Invoking the latter, the multiple benefits of developing virtual student exchange programmes has long been identified (Alammary et al., 2014), and precedes the Coronavirus pandemic which exacerbated the urgency for such initiatives to be realised. For example, Shields (2019) recognises the environmental drawbacks of 'mobile' international exchange, and the need to move towards a more sustainable alternative; while Souto-Otero et al. (2013) identify the numerous barriers and inequities that exist within traditional exchange programmes such as access to sufficient finances, and the complexity of personal circumstances (such as caring commitments, and availability of family support). Arguably, each barrier is more likely to impact under-represented and marginalised groups. Therefore, in line with the social justice focus of social work education, the need to find inclusive opportunities has a special resonance. In response to this need, concepts such a 'Glocal Curriculum' (Caniglia et al., 2018), 'Massive Open Online Courses' (Teeri, 2019) and 'Collaborative International Online Learning (COIL)' (Naicker et al., 2021; Rubin, 2015) recommend utilising distance education principles and technologically enhanced learning to continue sustainable and equitable transnational collaborations and cross-cultural experiences.

Learning objectives in an international context

Regardless of the form that internationalisation takes, learning in an international setting brings with it a number of general objectives. Simons et al (2013) distinguish five domains of international competences: intercultural competences, language skills, global engagement, international professional knowledge and personal growth. A number of additional objectives are of specific importance to social work education, namely the development of intercultural sensitivity, reflection, professional knowledge and professional profiling (Kloppenburg & Tirions, 2020).

Intercultural sensitivity makes students more sensitive to cultural differences, as it enables them to put themselves in the position of the 'cultural other'. It involves a shift from an 'ethnocentric' to an 'ethno-relative perspective' (Bennett, 1998). A potential risk of an overemphasis on intercultural sensitivity is that differences between groups of citizens in a society are explained solely based on cultural differences. In contrast, an intersectional approach states that social differences and contrasts are explained by a multitude of intersecting and accumulative factors, including inequity and oppression due to (multiple) identity characteristics, and the impact on one's access to (higher) education, economic resources and the labour market (Hendriks, 2018). **The intersectional approach overrides the boundaries that arise when different cultures meet and puts social, political and professional challenges into a different dimension. This approach is particularly relevant when cultural differences are used to reinforce nationalism or 'ethnicism'.**

The capacity to *reflect* increases when students are confronted with different societies and cultures and thus with different norms and values. This makes students aware of their own view of humanity, as a person and as a social professional. Students who work together internationally have much to learn from fellow students, teachers and practitioners when previously, locally, acquired knowledge, skills and

attitudes no longer seem natural or effective. Students who are open to this experience, allow space for reflection and new and different meanings of social work (Che et al., 2009).

> There is something disquieting, humbling at times, yet exciting and attractive about such close encounters with the unknown, with the mystery of 'otherness': a chance to explore the edge of your competence, learn something entirely new, revisit your little truths, and perhaps expand your horizon. (Wenger, 2000, p. 233)

Furthermore, *professional knowledge* increases in an international setting because institutions place different emphases in the body of knowledge and practice and experiential knowledge are different. Exchange of knowledge and expertise helps students to develop their personal body of knowledge and to connect the local with the national and the global (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

Finally, the ability to *profile* social work can also be enhanced through international exchange and cooperation. Social work is practiced worldwide, but in many countries, it has a low status and little recognition, one reason being that social workers and students are not always able to demonstrate the added value of their work. By making visible the way social work is part of an international community, a worldwide contribution can be made towards solving social and societal issues, and as such the profile of the profession can be raised (van Ewijk, 2010).

Learning processes

Internationalisation of social work education also entails specific learning processes as students acquire a broader and deeper understanding of social reality and learn how to relate it to their actions as professionals. This is not individual learning but collective learning. We distinguish the following learning processes in the international context: boundary crossing, socialisation and transfer.

Boundary crossing occurs when students find themselves in a foreign intercultural or international setting and are not always able to act appropriately. Meijers and Wardekker (2001) speak of a boundary experience in which not only the boundaries of one's own professional practice become visible, but also the boundaries of one's self-concept. An important learning condition in this situation is a cross-border dialogue between students. Through this experience, the student encounters distance because one has a distinct view from the other. This difference becomes productive when the students are encouraged to justify themselves and works best when there is a genuine interest in the other person's point of view.

Socialisation is related to the extension of the professional identity within the framework of a nation state to a transnational level (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003). The horizon of social work education is often limited to social work within the student's own region or country. Through international exchange, students become aware that they are also part of a European and global community of social workers.

Transfer is a learning process in which knowledge and insights gained in an international context are translated into one's own practice and made applicable. In this context, two types of transfer can be distinguished that apply to learning in an international setting, namely high road and low road transfer. High road transfer means that knowledge is abstracted from a specific context, followed by a deliberate search for connections and then recontextualised again, and adapted to another context (Salomon & Perkins, 1989). High road transfer is necessary because an approach that works well in the context of one country cannot simply be applied to another context. Low road transfer is in a sense simpler: it often concerns very practical skills that can be applied in another practice without adaptation.

The pedagogical design of the Urban Diversities course

In designing the Urban Diversities course, we explicitly aimed at facilitating and integrating the learning processes and learning objectives mentioned above. Furthermore, the 'glocal' and collaborative

pedagogical method inherent within both the Urban Diversities International class and the CSL approach embodied the wider curriculum which explores the complexity of (networked) hyper-globalisation and superdiversity, paying attention to regional nuance and specificity. As such, the Urban Diversities programme enables students to 'learn globally and (practice) locally' (Walters et al., 2009).

In addition to the general objectives related to internationalisation described above, we formulated several specific learning objectives that would contribute to a deepening of the knowledge, skills and reflections of the participating students, on social work and urban diversity (see figure 1).

Acquire knowledge of:	1. Human needs, human rights and social justice
	2. Theories on identity and diversity
	3. Social work approaches to urban complexities
	4. Identify and analyse community needs, assets and interests from various perspectives
Acquire skills to:	1. Use participatory methods in working with individuals and/or groups
	2. Be creative in finding arenas of participation in communities
	3. Cooperate in interdisciplinary, intercultural and international teams
	4. Develop a practice-based body of knowledge
Develop reflections on:	1. Inclusion, exclusion, power (im)balances, strengths and challenges
	2. The personal learning processes
	3. The joint development of a practice-based body of knowledge

Figure 1: Learning objectives of the Urban Diversities course

Urban Diversities is designed as a blended learning course, as it integrates face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). One of the key features of the

programme is the use of synchronous and asynchronous online delivery. This enables students to explore web-based learning content before the international classrooms, while use of MS Teams allows students to connect with each other in a shared online space. The pilot programme, delivered in Spring 2021, also coincided with the Coronavirus pandemic, a period now synonymous with the explosion and acceleration of digitised and multi modal learning technology. Digital technology and the assorted plethora of terminologies that accompany the practices of networked information and communication, has become the norm, and the distinction between digitised and 'real life' teaching and learning is increasingly intertwined and interdependent (Fawns et al., 2019). The acceleration of a 'post-digital' world (Jandrić et al., 2018), exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has further blurred the boundaries of what can be classified as online, synchronous and 'in person' learning.

The Urban Diversities programme, by way of necessity and design, epitomised this 'post digital' tension in that it required students to have prior access to online, digitally mediated learning materials, a synchronous presence in a virtual classroom, and a real-life presence with their local community partners. Furthermore, due to the restrictions necessitated by the global pandemic, in some countries, both global *and* local collaborations were made online. Indeed, as the students were learning about superdiversity in the global and local contexts, they were also experiencing an arrangement of superdiverse methods and modes of educational delivery. This, however, did not mean that students, in any of the settings, conformed to the questionable notion of the confident, equipped, and skilled 'digital native' (Selwyn, 2009). Indeed, as Selwyn (2009) and Riordan, Kreuz and Blair (2018) identify, Urban Diversities students demonstrated a wide diversity of technological confidence and skill, willingness to participate; and significantly, varying levels of access to technological resources and infrastructure.

A central pillar of the Urban Diversities course is the incorporation of a Community Service Learning (CSL) approach at the local level. CSL allows social work students to undertake experiential and collaborative learning and activism within a local community, to seek and share new knowledge, experiences and

perspectives. Reflecting with each other (reflection-in-action), a key element of CSL, creates a powerful learning process. The international classroom then allows students and stakeholders to share their experience of CSL in their distinct geographical communities and reflect together on their experiences (reflection-on-action). Thus, interaction is very versatile, as students work with peers from other countries, communicate in a transnational community and collaborate with professionals, urban residents and lecturers from different institutions. In this way, the international classroom also provides space for students to consider different manifestations and contexts of social work practice within each participating country.

To enrich the transnational learning process, the course includes several web lectures to guide and support the learning activities, as well as opportunities for discussion and reflection, individually and in groups. Furthermore, the ethos, content and curriculum for the Urban Diversities course mirror the core mandates, principles, and knowledge outlined in the Global Definition of Social Work (IASSW General Assembly & IFSW General Meeting, 2014). Students undertaking the course are assessed on the basis of a presentation by the international student teams at the final meeting of the international class, consisting of the integration of three learning tasks: a needs analysis, community service and reflection. The scope of the one-semester course is 3-6 credits, on the EQF level 6 (Bachelor level).[1]

Lessons learned: feedback from participants

After each edition, the course was evaluated by the different parties involved. The methodology for the evaluation involved each university organising a local focus group, where the experiences and feedback of the students, lecturers and practitioners were collated. We also organised an international focus group

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[1] All learning material and instructions are available on the Urban Diversities website, https://deb.tuas.fi/urban/.

for this purpose with all the lecturers involved in the course. The process of joint assessment covered various dimensions, ranging from initial expectations to experiences encountered during the course. Several components of the course were discussed: the CSL experiences, local and transnational meetings, the digital platform, webinars, and the impact of the course on students, social professionals, their target groups and lecturers. During the focus group sessions we considered the overall aim of the course, namely whether the participating students were better prepared and more able to carry out social work in complex urban settings **and the** extent to which the transnational character of the course contributed to this preparedness. In accordance with our focus on the potential of transnational learning for future social workers in this article, this critical analysis we present here will elaborate on the evaluation of the transnational dimension of the course. The experiences illustrated with quotes from the evaluations are presented in following sections of this article. We first summarise the positive experience, followed by a discussion of the areas to be improved and the challenges based on the participants' feedback, in the section 'Evaluation of preconditions'.

Students' motivation and expectations

Most of the students were highly motivated to participate in an international course. For example, when discussing the reasons why they had chosen this course, the international character of the course was often referred to as a crucial factor (this in addition to interest in the central topic of the course and the pedagogical approach of Community Service Learning). More specifically, students were motivated to meet and share experiences with peers, social workers and lecturers from other countries which can be related to the learning condition of cross-border dialogue (see the section 'Learning processes'). By participating in Urban Diversities, some students also hoped to develop multicultural or intercultural competences and to improve their English language skills.

"I expected the international project to be an opportunity to learn more from social workers in other countries and, in the process, to learn more about different practices." (SW Student, Utrecht)

"Developing language skills would be important because we have serious disadvantages in this respect." (SW Student, Debrecen)

Participation of social work professionals

For the social workers who participated in the course, this international component was not such an explicit attraction. In most universities, social work organisations decided to join the course because of the chance to engage in Community Service Learning. According to the original design of the course, the main role of the participating social workers was to support the home groups in implementing the local CSL. However, as the course progressed, they gradually became involved in the international elements of the programme as well. They thus gained new knowledge and experiences and were introduced to social work practices abroad, which they rated as very positive in their feedback. The international orientation of the course thus became a strong asset for many social workers. This experience raises the need to rethink the role and involvement of social workers in the international modules of the programme.

"As community workers, we are often confronted with unexpected and unforeseen problems that arise in the midst of other activities. Difficult problems often occur at the wrong time. You are taken by surprise and have no routine adequate response to these problems. This complexity makes us insecure. Having space to reflect on your experiences and share conceptual knowledge helps to build self-confidence to deal with unforeseen problems in the future." (SW professional, Brussels)

"Exploring new avenues with risks. You have to let everyone discover their own way; you have to give them confidence. Focus on solution-centricity." (SW Lecturer, Debrecen)

Lecturers' expectations

The evaluation showed that course lecturers had high expectations of the transnational exchange element embedded in the course. They hoped the international aspect of the course would allow for both high-road and low-road transfer, boundary crossing and socialisation. They also hoped it would contribute to students' global awareness and would deepen the knowledge, skills and reflection on social work and urban diversity.

> *"New pathways are born in a larger perspective. All around us people think very similarly, so we need to go further out in space if we really want to change and develop." (SW Lecturer, Debrecen)*

> *"This international perspective is an important added value of the course. It offers opportunities to learn from each other, but also to understand what concerns people in other countries. It also allows global knowledge and expertise to seep through." (SW Lecturer, Brussels)*

The opportunity for advancing lecturers' expectations regarding the promise of the transnational element of the course were realised by transnational exchange in three distinct ways: (1) synchronous online international plenary sessions in which students collaborated with lecturers and, when possible, with social work professionals and citizens, enabling an exchange of their learning experiences; (2) asynchronous pre-recorded webinars, where lecturers from the participating universities provided students with theoretical input; and (3) online smaller international student team meetings, where students learned to include multiple transnational perspectives in their reflections, and to enrich and deepen them with theoretical insights provided in webinars and literature.

Experiences with webinars and transnational contact between teachers and-students

While the webinars were accessed independently by individual students, they covered topics that contributed to the development of a global mindset. Examples of topics covered include 'superdiversity', 'human rights', 'complexity, tensions and assets of urban diversity' and 'cultural humility'. The choice of topics and the international team of lecturers were assets for several students involved in the course.

> *"All the theoretical frameworks introduced were presented in a way that either clarified and strengthened my previous knowledge or presented completely new ideas. Considering the overall picture now that the course is over, nothing seems irrelevant or insignificant to me. Reflection, thinking back and making new connections, was the most rewarding part of the entire course."*
> *(SW Student, Turku)*

> *"I really enjoyed getting lectures from teachers from other countries. This felt very interesting to me and like a breath of fresh air. It was very interesting to see how themes that I have had before, such as diversity, are illuminated in a slightly different way by lecturers from other countries." (SW Student, Utrecht)*

The direct exchange with fellow students, lecturers and social workers from different foreign programmes was highly appreciated. This forum made a tangible contribution to the process of socialisation for a transnational profession, as it made clear that social workers across Europe are to a large extent facing the same challenges and highlighted how major political and cultural differences affect the practice of social work. Contextual circumstances that course participants sometimes took for granted turned out to be vastly different in other countries. When it came to ethnic diversity, for example, Dutch students assumed that much of a national population had a native background and that minority groups tended to be from migrant communities. But this notion was shaken when Dutch students heard from Hungarian students (and lecturers) that the Roma ethnic group are indigenous to Hungary since the 14th century, and as such,

they are not a new immigrant group, but are nevertheless identified as an ethnic minority throughout the country (Schrooten et al., 2022).

Reaching learning objectives

Transnational exchange contributed to a broadening of frames of reference from which students reflected on practice. As such, students, lecturers and social workers explicitly vocalised the perception they had achieved a range of international learning objectives.

> *"Through the examples from abroad, we got to know a very different world/approach. Diversity was very much present in the programme." (SW Student, Manchester)*

> *"To me, Central European countries with colonial pasts have a very different history of super or hyper diversity than Finland... The comparisons between different countries were very fruitful." (SW Student, Turku)*

> *"I consider the greatest advantage of the method to be peer learning, both in the national and international context." (SW Professionals, Debrecen)*

Students also highlighted how the course had enabled them to develop greater autonomy and creativity, as well as facilitating the development of complex, interprofessional and intercultural perspectives and competencies.

> *"From the mentors I learned professional humility as a student, which is the most important element in the helping profession. The international team taught me a new vision." (SW Student Utrecht)*

"It also reinforced in me that not everyone should have the same opinion. It is very important to have tolerance to accept the views of different groups in this multicultural space." (SW Student, Debrecen)

Evaluation of the pedagogical design and preconditions

The main focus of the course was to reflect on the role of social work in complex urban contexts, with both local CSL trajectories and transnational exchange contributing to this goal. For the proper preparation and implementation of such a course, organisational, technological, structural and cultural factors play a crucial role. In what follows, we discuss these factors from our experiences in developing and implementing Urban Diversities and formulate recommendations for colleagues who would be inspired to develop a similar course. The organisational and technological factors were also covered during the focus group sessions mentioned above, allowing us to support our discussion with quotes from these focus groups. In this article, we also add structural and cultural factors to the discussion, although these did not come up during the evaluation moments. Looking back at the first two editions of Urban Diversities, however, we note that these factors are also crucial to include in considerations regarding the elaboration of such a course.

Organisational challenges

Prior consideration of organisational challenges will support the preparation of a successful international course. Of note, differences within the structure of the academic year may differ from one university to another, and this requires flexibility in scheduling the timetable of the course. Additional variations in national holidays, university breaks, exam schedules and internship periods exacerbate organisational

complexity. Furthermore, international time differences impact upon the scheduling arrangements for the synchronous classes. Within Europe, time differences of two hours imply this is more manageable, however the logistical challenges of timetabling should still be taken into consideration in the planning phase so there is clarity about the time frame over which the course will take place, and agreements about the frequency of meetings and related learning activities.

Educators need to also ensure there is flexibility of resources allocated to participating facilitators, to allow the coordination and administration of the course. Similarly, planning adequate learning time is an additional organisational challenge for successful international programmes. Students need to be afforded time and space to integrate their experiences, reflect on their intercultural learning and process the knowledge they have gained through their participation in the programme. Student responses to the evaluation of the urban diversities course highlighted the learning process was intensive and time-consuming, and although it was a useful learning process in their professional socialisation, they felt time requirements were challenging.

> *"Students should be prepared that this is a time-consuming programme. There is a lot of work to prepare students for in this project." (SW Student, Turku)*

> *"I would suggest more time, more consistent task organisation … for the next group on the international project element." (SW Student, Utrecht)*

Educators shared this sense of pressure and felt that the timeframe of the programme was tight, with some suggestion it may be preferable to organise the international course over a whole academic year instead of a semester.

> *"Do the pressures of day-to-day work and the timeframe of the pilot project allow for this timeframe for this confidence building?" (SW Professional, Brussels)*

In addition, the role of the lecturer/expert in the intercultural learning process is of paramount importance to the student experience. The lecturer/expert serves as the translator between theory and practice and between each of the transnational stakeholders and cultural experiences. However, if the lecturer/experts (including field-based teachers) are not familiar with the CSL method and intercultural social work, they may struggle to bridge any gaps in understanding and interpretation. Without knowledge and understanding of the practice methods involved, which are integral to the course, the development of student's skills and knowledge is likely to be compromised. As such, in order to work effectively, we organised a workshop with participating experts, teachers and field instructors at the beginning of the programme to address pedagogical, practical and organisational issues. This ensured good alignment, which proved crucial during the course pilot.

Technological challenges

Learning technology posed another challenge to the delivery of the international course. As previously stated, the pandemic has accelerated the evolution of educational technology. However, there is still variation in technological infrastructure across institutions, and disparities in confidence and capabilities of individual learners, which raises challenges in achieving a smooth pedagogical approach. Furthermore, the ability to use an online learning environment, while simultaneously conversing in a foreign language impacted on continuity and depth of contact amongst participants. Unlike a physical course where students meet and work together frequently and can observe body language and gesture, the mediation of communication and collaboration over a screen can create distance and a feeling of remoteness. As such significant scaffolding is needed to support student confidence to converse in an online setting and ensure they feel sufficiently skilled to use the available technology. Student evaluation highlighted technological challenges that made communication more complex, although some benefits were noted:

"It was also surprising to me that such an international project could work in the online space." *(SW Lecturer, Manchester)*

"I did like the online platform, very nice that there was one place where you could find everything." (SW Student, Utrecht)

As technology plays such a key role in an international blended learning course, it is extremely important to consider learner experiences, and technological challenges. Of principle importance is the recognition that screen time may feel more demanding than a physical presence. As lecturers, we have also gone through a learning process around organising online sessions, particularly around the length of sessions and the need to plan breaks and integrate interactive teaching methods and engaging ways of communicating with each other.

"Each meeting lasted about 3 hours, which is far too long for an online program." (SW Lecturer, Utrecht)

Another crucial factor is awareness of *digital exclusion* and the effects of digital inequalities within the student population. Ensuring inclusivity for socially and economically marginalised student groups has become a major challenge for higher education since the pandemic (Spante et al., 2018, Singh et al., 2022) as students' access to digital infrastructure, digital confidence and capability has become critical to engagement and continuation of their studies. As such, future programmes should actively consider how best to engage, support and upskill students with the digital capabilities required for both multimodal learning on international course, and indeed for wider social work practice (Taylor, 2017). Because participation in Urban Diversities was optional for students, we took (too) few measures to counter this digital exclusion. When we proposed the course to students who could apply to participate, we always mentioned how important internet access was for successful participation. In most universities, students

could also log in on campus during the online meetings. In other universities, this possibility was not there during the first edition of the course, because of Covid-19 measures in place at the time.

Structural challenges

In planning the international course, it should be first decided if the required learning outcomes are part of the overarching curriculum or are specific and additional to the main programme of study. Since the different universities involved in Urban Diversities each had their own list of learning outcomes for their local students, we decided to develop a specific set of learning outcomes for our joint course (see Figure 1, earlier in this article). Each participating university then separately related these learning outcomes to those used in their own curriculum. The advantage of this method was that all students participating in Urban Diversities started from the same framework, while the responsibility for translating the learning outcomes of Urban Diversities to the framework used within their own institutions lay with the lecturers.

Secondly, educators should consider if the course will be compulsory for all students or if the course is an optional element of their main programme of study. If participation is optional this raises additional questions of sustainability and feasibility, related to demand on student's time. This can be mitigated if the student is permitted to exchange their participation in the international programme for a module of their main programme, as was the case in most – but not all – of the universities involved in Urban Diversities. However, if students undertake the course on an entirely voluntary basis this inevitably raises challenges for them, given the intensity and demand of the programme. For example, in the second edition it was noted that mandatory demands from student's main programme of study limited the capacity for some voluntary students to take part, as they felt unable to commit the necessary time and resources. Additionally, the course requires ongoing administration as well as time investment from teaching staff, and without institutional support this was difficult to maintain.

Thirdly, educators should consider how the student's participation in the course will be assessed. For example, how does the evaluation of the international course fit into existing assessments within the main social work programme? Within the pilot programme of the urban diversities international course, assessment was of a summative nature and students were awarded academic credits. However these were not classed as core credits for participants who joined on a voluntary basis, which risked undermining the value of the course for students.

These structural factors influence the extent to which the course can be integrated into the main curriculum and impacts on the alignment of expectation and resourcing between partnering universities. As such, prior consideration and forethought will support clarity of expectation between each partner institution, lecturer and student.

Cultural challenges

Tsang (2011) reminds us that social work education is influenced not only by debates relating to epistemology and pedagogy, but also by the socioeconomic context of the society in which both practice and education takes place. Within the context of each participant country, 'local' distinctions had a significant and differential impact on the student/educator experience, and delivery of the project. As such, cultural and ideological differences between the participating countries deserve special attention. The economic, social and political backgrounds of the participating countries differ, so taking this into account is an important challenge in the organisation of the programme. Cultural and ideological differences may also cause difficulties for students in blended learning programmes when making international comparisons.

For example, the UK context posed specific challenges to the projects core aims of civic engagement and learning 'with' communities. In the UK social work is a highly regulated activity leaving minimal room for flexibility of practice method and approach, or curriculum diversity within registered pre-qualifying courses (Social Work England, 2021). In addition, UK based social work practice typically focuses on statutory and legal interventions, with community and preventative 'placed based' work often undertaken by non-social work qualified social care professionals, and voluntary organisation. This meant that the learning objectives and collaborative methods required from the Urban Diversities course were not easy to translate for UK based social work and as such the programme was made available as an academically credited but voluntary 'enrichment' course to students.

In Hungary, with the strengthening of the centralised control of the national government, local communities and civil society organisations have less and less room for manoeuvre in recent years. Top-down development models are gradually gaining strength and are increasingly replacing bottom-up development, in which local actors, including social workers, could play a significant role. As a result, the role of civic engagement as an important basis for action in social work is limited. It was in this context that the social work students participating in the international programme had to experiment with co-creation-type developments in local spaces, which posed a major challenge for them. A common understanding of these cultural differences and specificities should be a key focus in the design and implementation of international courses, as this is the only way to overcome the barriers to joint learning that arise from cultural differences.

Conclusion

In the presence of armed conflict in Europe, fortification of territorial borders, social and economic hardships resulting from the global pandemic, and political challenges to the values of social justice; the need for internationalisation within social work education is more acute than ever (Healy & Thomas, 2020). Enabling students to recognise and reflect on their social and cultural positionality and consider how social work is practised outside their host/home country offers enriching and fruitful possibilities for the development of a transformative and sustainable transnationally cohesive social work profession (Nuss, 2023).

In identifying the pedagogic and epistemological benefits of transnational student exchange, we found a strong rationale for integrating international learning content and teaching methods into core curricula for social work programmes. By reflecting on our own collaborative experiences, and evaluating stakeholder evaluations, we have identified the value of cross border dialogue, reflections leading to expanding students' horizons, an increasing transnational body of knowledge and in the end socialisation within the European and global community of social workers. These higher level learning outcomes and tangible value driven benefits to participating students and stakeholders move beyond acquisition of knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the moral and ethical imperative to learn from each other, model collaborative practice, and reach across borders, exceeds quantifiable measures of improved employability and graduate competence. Students, as well as lecturers and social workers, confirmed the added value of transnational education in the Urban Diversities course. They all reported having gone through a learning process leading to a more 'global mindset' through the development of a transnational perspective and to acquiring new knowledge and non-traditional abilities and skills they would not have gained in a regular class (see also Di Matteo & Ganne, 2020). The conceptual input they received from lecturers from other countries was highly relevant in this sense, but also, perhaps even more so, meeting students, social workers and lecturers from other countries and discussing with them their Community Service Learning experiences. This led to fascinating discussions on the role of social workers in complex

urban realities and insights on the universality of certain values and frameworks of social work and – at

the same time – the diversity that characterises the profession and the impact of the local context on

social workers' capabilities and roles (see also Ioakimidis & Sookraj, 2021; Schrooten & Veldboer, 2021;

Williams, 2016).To ensure student experience is not compromised by structural, technological, and

logistical frustrations during their transnational learning process, our analysis provides educators with

both a blueprint and a number of critical considerations to support further advancements in transnational

exchange. In summary, allocation of resources, sufficiency of time, administrative support, and attention

to logistical details, alongside institutional and professional flexibility are significant factors to the future

sustainability and success of such initiatives.

The delivery of the transnational Urban Diversities course has demonstrated that supporting future social

work professionals to become attuned and responsive to human need and experience within globally

interconnected urban contexts holds valuable deep learning, that moves beyond nationally defined

conceptualisations of social work. In uncertain times, this cannot be relegated to a fringe interest, but

rather more, offers the potential to re-imagine social work as a unifying and unified international

profession.

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