



Desk-based students and international issues

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Course details

Course title: Applied Social Sciences

Level: undergraduate

Year: 2

Module title: Work & Professional Development

Discipline/Subject areas: Social Policy

Context

Funded Project

This case study is one of four outputs created as the result of a funded project entitled 'thinking, learning and 'doing' international work experience'.

Case study 1 describes how a team of colleagues at Sheffield Hall University added an international stream to a core level 2 degree module.

Case studies 2 – 4 review some of the teaching and learning tools implemented by colleagues delivering the international stream.

These include short international experience opportunities; desk based international experience and an optional reflective diary.

Definition of terms

Internationalisation: A process whereby students are exposed to international issues, processes and influences, and are given the opportunity to experience those directly by going abroad or indirectly by staying in Sheffield.

Work: A complex package combining some or any combination of the following: direct work experience, reflections on types of working and work environments, reflection and study.

Activity details

What we did

We set out to engage students with work and professional development in an international context by offering them the option of experiencing a different working environment by going abroad (one month maximum) or electing to stay at home to explore an international dimension to UK work contexts.

Why we did it

We wanted to define internationalisation as being more than simply travelling and experiencing another country. We felt that students needed to be given an opportunity to remain in Sheffield, if they so chose, without limiting their chances of adding an international dimension to their studies. Because we had

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contacts with some overseas organisations and institutions, we thought this was a realistic 'way in' for students to make contacts. Equally, the large international student body at SHU also provided a useful target audience for one student who wanted to work more with this group.

What we wanted to achieve

Our main aim was to enable desk-based students an opportunity to develop their work and professional development skills and interests around an international perspective. In effect, we wanted to internationalise these students' experiences without them having to travel.

A short description of what we did

In semester one students were asked to formulate a project that enabled them to develop and explore their own work and professional development. For these particular students, this meant that they needed to reflect on work-type activity or work-related topics that had an international dimension, but a dimension that was feasible to do without leaving Sheffield. It proved a challenge for many students (not simply the desk-based ones) to formulate their project, and valuable time was taken up 'waiting' for these to emerge. Several students contacted voluntary organisations in order to develop their understanding of work carried out within them. This was largely done through email communication, and the subsequent sending of questionnaires out to key individuals. Students chose particular organisations that dealt with areas of work of interest to themselves, and in some cases, where students had had prior experience of doing similar types of work. These students were keen to make contact and to make some observations about the work done through the organisation and the international issues that arose from it. Another student, an international student herself, was very keen to try and capture the experiences of other foreign students at SHU. Working voluntarily with these students, she gathered data on international student experiences via interviews and questionnaires. For both sets of students here, their exposure to international issues was achieved without them travelling abroad. The students reflected on these experiences in their semester two assessment.

What worked well

- Utilising the idea of the desk-based study allowed more students to pursue international projects than would have otherwise been possible.
- Giving students contacts in overseas organisations seemed to work well, and offered a 'way in' for students to then take forward as they saw fit. Students welcomed this intervention
- International experiences can also be found within a British university through its own community of international students.
- This community provided an interesting mix of student experiences.
- Working voluntarily within the university's own international community provides both international exposure and also direct work experience for the student(s) involved.

Problems and/or issues

- Many students on the stream were disappointed that they were to become desk-based students as opposed to being given an opportunity to travel abroad. This raises questions about managing expectations about 'doing international' study, as well as about the 'selling' of the benefits of desk-based study
- There is a clear appetite amongst students to travel abroad and to experience internationalisation directly. Whilst there are some definite benefits to this. The funding and the readiness of some students to go abroad are issues that may question the feasibility of this on any large scale
- It is challenging to engage students with activities which are work-related but are not necessarily about experiencing direct work experiences i.e. students find it quite difficult to see what a work and professional development module 'means' if they are not located within some direct form of work experience (as opposed to looking into areas that are of potential work interest in the future and/or build on work-related activity they are currently doing)
- There needed to be a longer run-in time for making contacts and persuading organisations to help the students carry out their projects: as it stood, it felt rather squeezed and rushed for many of these students. Deeper understanding of particular international issues were thus not possible
- The willingness of some organisations to offer help to students was a little lacking, and was perhaps down to the rushed nature of the request

What students thought about it

- Experiences of international topics tended to feel a little superficial for those students whose contacts were late in being organised
- Whilst students (desk-based as well as those who travelled abroad) felt strongly that a 'better' and more meaningful understanding of international issues would be gleaned from international travel, the majority did not think that international travel was the only way to appreciate international issues. The idea of desk-based study was seen, in theory, as positive, although the reality for this cohort was disappointing
- Having an opportunity to remain in Sheffield, but to embed within the international student community, was seen as a real way of combining employability with internationalisation

Key messages

- It is possible for the curriculum to be internationalised without students travelling abroad, and for that curricular experience to be meaningful and real
- It can be quite a challenge to engage students in a task that is international without them feeling as though they should be going abroad
- Contacts with organisations need to be concrete, firm and guaranteed as much as possible

Related documents or links

Hudson B. & Todd, M. (2000) (eds.) *Internationalising the Curriculum in Higher Education: reflecting on practice*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University Press.

Palmer, M. (2002) 'On the pros and cons of volunteering abroad', *Development and Practice*, vol. 12 (5) 637-647.

Darvill, G. and Ashford, A. (2006) *Recruitment and Employability issues in social policy degree courses in Higher Education* (SWAP report)

Case Study 2: Desk based students and international issues

Case Study 3: International work experience (abroad)

Case Study 4: Using reflective diaries within the context of a work and professional development module

Any other comments

In 2008 it was decided that the module would in future attempt to embed international issues within other streams rather than having a specifically 'international' stream. This will enable students still to adopt 'desk-based' international study, if they so chose, but embedding the international dimension within other streams.



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