

Sharing Experience and Learning in Doing International Research: The Case of the Erasmus Mundus ADVANCES Program¹

Abstract

The article explores the experience of implementing the international studying program ADVANCES (Advanced Development in Social Work) in terms of the challenges and dilemmas in designing and realizing joint education & research programs. The program exposes the difference between ‘the talk’ and ‘the walk’ in the global social work concept building of human and institutional capacities, on the one hand, and merging theory and practice in preparation to contemporary social work profession, on the other. It also brings to light the process of integrating models and understandings of how international collaboration in higher education could look like (and be delivered worldwide). The ADVANCES program, which integrates the theories and practices that were formerly approached separately in social work, creates a context for the European (and, by extension, international) status of social work, while its respective components, such as the experience of social work institutions and their beneficiaries, contribute a new, global value to the discussion by demonstrating the ‘diverse universe’ of helping professions offers.

Keywords: global social work, joint master’s degree program, international studies, aims of social work

¹ The ADVANCES Program is part of the international Erasmus Mundus scheme. Program description has been prepared by academics from five European universities, including the University of Lincoln, United Kingdom (School of Health and Social Care), Aalborg University, Denmark (Faculty of Social Sciences), Technical University of Lisbon, Portugal (Institute of Social and Political Sciences), Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense (Faculty of Educational Sciences), and the University of Warsaw (Faculty of Education). The first edition of the program was coordinated by Dr. Michael Rassel of the University of Lincoln, and took place in 2013–2019; the second edition, coordinated by Professor Lars Uggerhøj of Aalborg University, began in 2019 and will conclude in 2023.

Introduction

The growing interest in and number of international social work education programs proves the desire of researchers, educators, and practitioners for collaboration, exchange of knowledge, skills, and experiences, while also indicating a search for universal guidelines, standardization, and commonality. The continuous globalization of social work perspective has to face both the resistance of practitioners focused mainly on individual and local problems, and researchers who are critical of the areas of its development, intended to bridge culturally, economically, politically, and historically diverse societies (Dominelli, 2014; Hely, 2008 Hugman; Moosa-Mitha Moyo, 2010).

Education for social work faces similar challenges. The ostensible emergence of the internationality of social work manifests itself primarily in the comparative aspect of social work systems of various countries, and in accepting the legitimacy of global standards of social work. Therefore, designing an international, globally relevant social work education program was the main task of ADVANCES (Russell et al., 2019).

Some reasons why the University of Warsaw joined the program were tied to the argument that a strong belief in ‘local solutions to local problems’ is more present in countries such as Poland, where intercultural skills are a notion entrenched in the global theoretical discussion rather than in the lived experience of local and individual practices. The multicultural experience of social workers is still at an early stage, and immigration is not substantial enough to create concern or debate for social work interventions at a bigger scale (Naumiuk et al., 2020).² Many active NGOs tackle the emerging issues of new immigrants, legal requirements of citizenship, and policies that prevent mass migration to pro-migrant movements in our country, though the formal systems have failed to recognize this problem as of yet. Seen and believed to be united through the religion, patriotic traditions, and a long history of protecting its identity, Poland remains focused on national unity, which prevents it from being perceived as multicultural phenomenon—a country hosting and welcoming diversity. This way of seeing the ‘foreign’ or ‘domestic’ aspects of social life gives rise to misunderstandings in thinking about its international or global impact. The mass-media debates capture the conflict between prioritizing in-country problems and the urgent need for internal reforms, on the one hand, and the international issues that are not the ‘target’ for the Polish government or state, on the other. The global interrelations and interdependencies are not nearly

² The Polish experience in implementing ADVANCES is presented in the article “When Europe’s East, West, North and South Meet: Learning from Cross-Country Collaboration in Creating an International Social Work Master Programme,” submitted as a contribution to: Lorenz, W., Havrdová, Z., Matousek, O. (Eds.). (2020). *European Social Work Education and practice: East-West Exchanges Between Universal Principles and Cultural Sensitivity*. Cham: Springer.

as visible and understood in social services, where the systems and processes are verified in practice. In many cases, the global concepts are derived from the grassroots. Still, foreign language skills are not obligatory among social workers, thus compounding the feeling of being excluded from the bigger picture. These factors influence social work in Poland, which still seems very much 'Polish,' so the question would be why to discuss and, by extension, why to engage in international social work education?

Part of the answer is that social work is not only a responsive practice but a preventive and creative environment for changes to happen. Globalization is one of the factors that shape the present scene of changing living conditions. The possibility of and the right to mobility of work, travel, and education in Europe (and beyond) influences the methods of work in various sections of service-use and service-provision processes, and becomes a fact, rather than mere wishful thinking. Social work education captures this change in both theoretical and practical aspects, since 'multicultural skills' changed from an idea of the future to an integral part of the current reality. The number of migrant children in Polish schools rises systematically, as does the number of people of foreign origin working in Poland. Among them are potential and actual service-users. In the past 20 years about 2 million Poles have migrated to the UK, Germany, and outside of Europe. Many of them are professionally and voluntarily engaged in social work systems worldwide. They use and experience various social support systems. Polish social work has been learning about them, and needs to react to the growing and expanding reality of 'being of service in spite of nationality.' The phenomenon of this global interchange may be seen in the negative light of emerging problems caused by globalization and mobility, but it may also be seen as a possibility for the new era of social work development, using the global potential of the social capital behind the exchange of ideas and practices.

As an international Master's in social work program, ADVANCES has shown a lot of promise in enabling the exchange of knowledge, skills, and experiences, yet it has also demonstrated the difficulty and the depth of discussions required to adapt the program to the diversity of expectations among all participants of the process. In our article written in 2019 (Rasell et al., 2019), we showed some of these aspects, including local-global constrains in perceiving the value of the program and social work priorities, various cultures of higher education and expectations, difficulties in managing the differences from the learning angle (students) and teaching angle (academics), the curriculum and content discussions as a struggle for a synthetic representation of international social work education, the critical and value-based dialogue between the students and lecturers, the Global South-Global North postcolonial inclinations' awareness, and many more. Realizing how difficult and challenging it is to fulfill such a task, it became a learning journey and a learning curve for all academics and students participating in the program, in particular

with respect to the new experience of East-West collaboration and its potential in social work education and research in Europe. Below I describe some of the challenges worth reflecting on in the process of learning we all take part in as teachers and students of social work education program. The research taken as part of the course is not only a 'result' but also a big question that we all ask ourselves while taking on international topics, including international contexts, or presenting the outcome of our work to international audiences.

Creating and developing a joint education plan as a response to global social work needs

The globalization process seen as the either unification or interconnectedness is not an issue of 'outside world' anymore. It is experienced and understood very clearly through economics, technology, and mass travel. It has become a new interrelated context in which people live nowadays. With the right to free movement in Europe and the open door policies adopted across a number of countries, minutiae are becoming an international issue that social work starts to deal with. When you live and work in one country but move to another as a pensioner, it immediately creates the question of adapting the local social work system to deliver proper services to foreign senior residents living there. If you move to another country and become poor, are you under the care of the hosting country or still under the care of your country 'of origin'? If you are eligible for family benefits under one country's conditions, why are you refused similar treatment if you move to another country of the same status? And who should pay for, decide on, and solve these problems? These circumstantial differences, complicated by the world's environmental disasters, i.e. the political, racial, religious or neighborly conflicts that influence 'our' citizens' require that social work transcend the local confines. At the same time, the global impact of these processes has given rise to challenging consequences on smaller scales, so we shall have to learn how to cope with this complex paradigm.

Education has not been paying enough attention to the demands embedded in these changes, too. Social work has been treated as a growing profession that is only remotely connected to educational challenges. Educational systems seemed to be perceived through and narrowed down to school or vocational preparation-related issues. A more integrated approach to these two disciplines, experienced as tools for empowerment through the social engagement of education (Olubiński, 2004, pp. 115–133; Marynowicz-Heta, Piekarski, Zając, 1996, pp. 131–174), social work educational practices, and the so-called education in action (Mendel, Skrzypczak, 2013), has not received adequate support, nor has it attracted wide-ranging discussions on the applicability of social education in the global environment. The globalization trends have developed a context in which this interrelation between pedagogy and social work translate into another, international level. The new competences,

knowledge, and skills, but also the ability to work together on issues and problems that require our attention and reaction as social work professionals, call for a new approach at the theoretical, practical, and humanitarian levels.

From the onset, the 2013–2019 Erasmus Mundus MA Advanced Development in Social Work (ADVANCES) program adopted an international perspective on both theoretical and practical aspects. It grew from the conviction that although the social work profession focuses on promoting social change and empowerment in local settings and specific contexts, it is an increasingly global and international field, responding to complex and diverse issues as a global community of practitioners with its own value base, guidelines, and associations (Noble, Strauss, Littlechild, 2014). The program is aimed to contribute to this global dynamic in social work with an international postgraduate degree that promotes active, knowledgeable professionals who can confidently tackle global issues at a local level and be part of discussions on how international educational experience contributes to global and local social work perspectives. In this respect, the program aims to promote European higher education and contribute to sustainable development around the world, in line with the Erasmus Mundus scheme.

The program addresses the labor market and social justice needs for a more developed social work education system that explicitly focuses on transnational competencies, capacity-building, and innovation in social work. National-level courses in developed countries tend to treat international social work as a reference rather than a core component, while postgraduate social work courses in developing countries are rare or designed as copies of their Western counterparts. The few international social work courses that exist around the world rarely include a high degree of student mobility, and tend not to emphasize high-level professional competences for practitioners, preferring to focus on academic knowledge and (research-related) skills. There is therefore a gap to be filled by offering training to qualified social sector professionals who wish to extend their practical skills through an explicitly international curriculum and study program.

The educational concept of the ADVANCES program was designed to provide social work professional with outstanding levels of practice skills so that they can confidently respond to the vulnerabilities and uncertainties facing societies across the world. A strong emphasis is placed on the knowledge and skills required to work with international, diverse environments across borders and cultures. The main objective of the program is to enhance the skills, capabilities, and knowledge of individual social work practitioners and the overall social work profession at a range of levels.

[A] review of the documentation on international social work during the development of the program resulted in the following overall aims:

- Professionalize social sectors around the world through the development of advanced practice skills in social work

- Produce practitioners who can confidently respond to rapid social change
- Promote social justice and professional social work ethics that encourages equality and empowerment
- Promote the awareness of the transnational nature of social work issues and strategies/ solutions for responding to them
- Encourage skills in social work entrepreneurship and innovation in response to the changing models of social service delivery

These goals were embedded in the overall objectives for individual students on the program, who upon its completion should be able to:

- Critically examine the purpose and context of social work, showing substantial knowledge and understanding of the international, national, and local contexts of practice, including current issues and future forecasting.
- Critically and systematically integrate different aspects of knowledge, skills, and values in social work; analyse, assess, and manage complex cross national issues and contexts when responding to human problems.
- Independently and creatively develop innovative interventions in social work service delivery, including entrepreneurial responses to promote social cohesion and integration.
- Promote values and ethics of social work and synthesize intercultural knowledge, particularly in providing support and promoting change for those experiencing multiple disadvantages and in cross-cultural environments, with an emphasis on social justice.
- Have proficiency to participate in international and national projects and developmental work within the area of social work
- Critically, independently, and creatively contextualize the knowledge, skills, and values of social work, with critical reflection in practice and on practice; identify further knowledge and skills development, and be responsible for their own proficiency (excerpt from the outline of the ADVANCES program)

There were many dilemmas embedded in responding to these global challenges through creating joint master's degree program while simultaneously treating them as national challenges. They were seen in the choice of elements addressing global issues in education of social workers, which were adequate or relevant to the needs of modern professionals representing social work in various localities. There were many questions and discussions in this field: Shall we focus on the integration or promote the unique value of each nation's culture in our approaches? What concepts and definitions of innovation, social justice or professionalization shall we use? How to measure and prioritize the importance of needs in Africa or Asia? How to assess them in our research and screen them through the 'international relevance' lens? Critical judgments had to be reviewed and criticized for their own colonial, neo-colonial, and postcolonial stereotyping concepts of the West and the East, the North and the South. Among the discussions on 'what we mean by...,' which were very inspirational in redefining the foundations of social work, we found ourselves caught in a set of dilemmas of how to make a joint effort where all partners would play active roles in designing, evaluating, and leading the program. This created

the questions of joint responsibility, mutual trust and competences, and the ability to deliver as projected in the plan. The challenge was organizational: how to make the program efficient and to whom to delegate its respective duties; how to manage it time-wise (we are all scholars with other duties); financial (how to create a self-sustaining program); and, last but not least, conceptual (what should be included in certain modules and why). With many barriers, the program became part of our university life. We were also able to learn more about international program creation, including the nitty-gritty of international module design, collective marking, integrated assessment of students and our own 'international' performance in new collaborative ways that spanned beyond our previous national didactic experience.

The project partners came together on the basis of the existing teaching, projects, and previous research co-operation. The ADVANCES program took over two years to develop, based on an analysis of the needs of the global social work profession and discussions of how to incorporate each institution's expertise into a coherent MA degree program. As the overall coordinating institution of ADVANCES, the University of Lincoln provided organizational input and acted as a liaison with the European Commission on behalf of the ADVANCES consortium. The creation of the ADVANCES program was finalized in a Consortium Agreement signed by the legal representatives of all five EU universities in February 2013.

The program was designed and developed closely by all partners participating in the program's overall concept. They designed and discussed its learning outcomes, modules, procedures, and teaching approaches. Program management also became a collaborative exercise through the establishment of the ADVANCES Program Committee, containing two academic representatives from each institution, overseen by the Board comprised of the legal representatives of the respective universities. It enabled the scholars to approach social work teaching as a more integrated concept, designed collectively through international partnership.

The universities delivered teaching based on their staff's expertise in teaching/researching advanced skills, and their command of English as the working language. Each institution's input was based on their strengths and resources. All participant universities could also invite leading social work academics from outside the EU as lecturers. Students gained additional experience from local social sector partnerships and networks by meeting social workers in each country, taking field trips to local services/charities, and learning more about the contexts and realities of social work practice in different countries.

Program content was comprised of 14 modules: Core academic skills; Critical Knowledge and Perspectives on Society; Advanced Methods and Interventions; Communication and Creativity in Social Work; Working within Social and Public Spaces; Power Relations and Actor Perspectives; Problem-based Learning: Power Relations and Actor Perspectives in Social Work; Practice-oriented Research in

Social Work; Globalization, Migrations and Cultural Diversity; Globalized Social Work and Sustainable Development; Professional Ethics and Human Rights; Social Administration and Social Entrepreneurship; Social Work Research Methods and Research Projects; in the course of the program, students wrote their MA theses, defending them at the end of the second year.

The main dilemmas in the area of content design and its realization included the interrelations between modules, the possible repetitions and gaps between the subjects and staff presentations, the smooth adaptation to teaching styles and assessments, as well as the new experiences of different cultures in their approaches to social work practice. Given the uncertainty of potential partners in the field and students' competences, the main challenge involved the potential language barrier. Some scholars also found it difficult to understand the formal bureaucracies of participant countries/universities' requirements in order to make this program work and have the awarded MA diplomas recognized internationally. This key element of holding a diploma that would open doors to better work rather than just be a hollow document was discussed with the respective Ministries and taken into consideration while planning the end of the study program. So far, there is no one joint international MA diploma for ADVANCES due to the difficulties on national education policy levels, however ADVANCES 2.0 (the program's continuation) has not given up on this goal. As of now, students receive multiple diplomas. In addition, students are awarded a joint certificate of studies, signed by all participating universities. The concept of joint diplomas is developing and could bring a huge difference to the current offerings, given the visible need for such international education quality recognition of in social work environments worldwide.

Learning internationally as a process of transforming the aims and goals of young researchers

Approximately 2/3 of the students participating in the program come from outside of the European Union, mainly from the developing countries, and 1/3 of the students hail from across the Community. The high level of diversity in students' backgrounds, as well as their international mobility during the program, are seen as pedagogically beneficial, as they enable students to learn to work and study across difference and provide them with unique social and cultural opportunities.

Part and parcel of the 21st century reality, the internationalization of studies affects the young generation of social workers, who each have their own multicultural experience. One ADVANCES student worked as social worker in Poland before moving to Australia; another was born in Poland, emigrated to the UK with her parents, and received her BA in Social Work there. The international roots of

other students and staff engaged in the program are often mixed and prevent one from classifying them under clear-cut national labels.

The ADVANCES program gives even more international exposure, practice, and experience to all participating individuals, who in many cases had been previously exposed to international programs and want to pursue international careers. It requires that students travel to a different country each semester, settle, study, and pass their exams there, and then pack again and move someplace else. This experience of constantly changing cultures, languages, learning styles, teaching requirements, and formal bureaucracies in 5 countries within 2 years makes one a true mobile social worker in practical terms, as well as an experienced 'other,' even within the social workers' professional group. Despite a temporary stoppage in physical mobility in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions on international travels, the mobility of ideas continues through online teaching. Integration and multicultural orientation is also implemented on inter-relational levels among students and teachers, institutions and laws. This produces a strong group of motivated students who experience global social work even more than their teachers. Part of the effect is achieved through the ADVANCES Alumni, whose task is to continue networking and supporting the human capital of the program. To bolster this effect, the program has been designed as an educational and skills package to shape more confident and trained specialists in order to progress towards advanced practice or a range of social work leadership roles, including supervision, management, strategy and policy, applied research or project development. To this end, the program has certainly been a success, but we shall not forget about the personal challenges that these people faced each day while studying, which are rather difficult to transpose into long-term stable job settings while retaining the same optics of internationalized social work. On the other hand, these students may now understand more than other social workers hiring them, i.e. the common ground of social work in spite of the local differences. This is why their research is so relevant and innovative at the same time. It pictures the transition from the past to the future, which includes a mixture of feelings spanning from conformism to ambitious responses to calls for change.

When starting the course, students mentioned some of the goals they wanted to achieve. These included, in no particular order:

Creating an integrated web of international social workers within this program and further; improving linguistically; being able to work as social worker in many countries; having new points of view on the different topics already worked on; learning as much as possible from the program and other students experiences on social work; developing leadership skills so that I may become a socially engaged social worker; being animated and motivated/prepared to start new projects back home; internationalism, i.e. being in a position to work at the global level and have a deeper understanding of social work in different contexts; becoming a competent social worker.

With respect to perceived challenges, students mentioned the following:

To confront myself with my home country practice; to write and study in another language and culture; to feel quite relaxed among so many countries and travelling; to relate to the background and context of the place I am from; to be busy seeing/experiencing new countries to study; to have enough time for field practice; lack of money and experience of moving around; language barriers—being unable to understand the language of diverse groups of people; disagreement with some cultural practices of various cultures may inhibit the applicability of my designed framework for practice, and my personal biases may lessen the effectiveness [of the program]; life challenges: missing family, boyfriend, friends and home; academic writing in English (exams/assignments); different backgrounds and social realities to bring together; being alone, marginalized and not accepted by the others and failing; how to cope with moving ‘house’ every six months.

These statements are very much akin to immigrants’ concerns when they move to work or study abroad and feel a mix of fear and excitement at the same time.

Also put on the table were some benefits:

To develop leadership skills to work with different people from various backgrounds; to study policy issues that will allow me to put into use what I have learnt; to be able to define real needs and resources to work with; to contribute to social work knowledge and practice; to be part of a better society and a better world; to develop listening skills as I feel it is an important skill to understand the needs of vulnerable groups; to be more aware of who I am; to gain of the ability to design social work models in addressing social problems.

Students were challenged by intensive travels, the need for quick adaptation to different cultures while studying, different sets of academic requirements, and even different grading criteria. The main issue was with transferring from one country to another while remaining an active student. Technical, legal, and administrative challenges also determined the postponement of a soft ‘landing,’ adjustment, and progress of students’ professional development. With the research included in their study plans, they were slowly realizing the reality of being an outsider in the local contexts, yet remained very much interested in the unfamiliar whereabouts of their research.

Since more international students have been coming to Europe and Poland, the studying barriers have become less painful; still, ADVANCES is not a residential program, not all of its teachers speak English fluently enough to assess masters’ theses written in English, nor can all of them teach full courses and prepare modules in English, moderate discussions at a proficient theoretical level, or be of help when it comes to practical orienteering; some university libraries do not offer extensive collections of social work literature; some administrative staff sees ADVANCES students as ‘aliens’ in the system. The program has emerged as the first experience of its kind for both academics and administrators at our department that truly requires the personnel to work collaboratively, internationally, and