5. INTERNATIONAL FIELDWORK EDUCATION PLACEMENTS

Study abroad programs for students in the last few decades have increased in quantity and diversity in terms of student types, destinations, duration and type of program (Godkin & Savageau, 2001). Allied health students are increasingly involved in international fieldwork placements which have the potential to address goals of both home institutions (where students come from) and host institutions (where students go to) (Pechak & Thompson, 2009). Home institutions see international placements as opportunities for students to develop intercultural skills for transfer back to domestic healthcare settings; setting which provide services to the home countries’ increasingly multicultural populations. Some, as in both case studies presented in this chapter, see the international placement as a unique context for the development of interprofessional skills. For some home institutions the international setting may offer students experience with caseload types not readily secured in the home location, as seen in Case Study 1 where students worked with children with complex disabilities. Host institutions in developing countries may see international students and their fieldwork educators as an opportunity to provide services for huge unserved caseloads in their country. Further, host institutions may wish to build partnerships which facilitate knowledge and skills transfer, staff professional development or research opportunities.

The goals of both institutions need to be understood by each other from the outset and continuously renegotiated, so that unrealistic expectations, power imbalances, and the risks of cultural tourism or postcolonial practice by students and staff from the home institution are managed. Threats to sustainability can also be addressed from the outset in such dialogues. The two case studies in this chapter illustrate many of the aspects of best practice in international fieldwork education placements. In addition to well considered and structured programs of preparation, in-country support and debriefing, both the programs have built evaluation into their cycle of activity.

CASE STUDY 1: TRUNG THI NGHÈ: AN INTERNATIONAL INTERPROFESSIONAL FIELDWORK PLACEMENT

Since 2001, the School of Community Health, Charles Sturt University (CSU), has taken 12 final year occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech language pathology students to work for 6 weeks at Thị Nghê Orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City,
Vietnam. Ideally, four students are selected from each discipline, so as to achieve the desired balance for interprofessional teamwork during the placement. Experience has shown that more than 12 students, or a large imbalance in discipline numbers, is detrimental to the interprofessional and student experience.

Thi Nghè Orphanage provides care for up to 400 children with physical and cognitive impairments, most of whom have cerebral palsy, though a number of children also have autism spectrum disorders and other associated impairments. Children spend much of their day in their assigned living area, referred to as their “room”, where they eat, sleep, and play unless they are mobile enough to go to school. Children remain at the orphanage until the age of 18 years when they are moved to other institutions which cater for adults.

Around 60 people are employed at Thi Nghè Orphanage. The majority are carers who look after the children in their room. There are approximately 10 teachers for children who are able to go to school, 15 Vietnamese trained physiotherapists, one paediatrician, a number of nurses, a pharmacist and a dentist, and several administrative and maintenance staff. In addition, many Vietnamese and expatriate volunteers regularly assist with the daily care of the children, either on a short- or long-term basis.

CSU actively supports placements which provide culturally diverse experiences. The university is based in several regional locations with comparatively small immigrant populations and the small scale of service providers in the region can limit opportunities for interdisciplinary practice in the field of disability. To address these contextual limitations, an interprofessional, intercultural placement was developed in 2001 in response to a request for assistance by the management of Thi Nghè Orphanage while CSU staff were on a field visit to Vietnam.

**Aims and Goals of the Program**

The aims of the program are twofold:

1. To build the capacity of Vietnamese carers, via education and training, to improve the opportunities for the children through optimising feeding, communication, play, mobility, and other activities of daily living.
2. To develop students’ basic competence in:
   - working with children with physical and cognitive impairments
   - assessing needs and building the capacity of staff and volunteers
   - working in an interprofessional way
   - working in resource-poor environments
   - intercultural competence and communication including working with interpreters.

Generic and discipline-specific learning goals are developed with students for the duration of their placement. Table 5.1 outlines the preparation process for students going to Vietnam. The timelines and content for preparation, in-country support and debriefing on return home have been refined over the years based on evaluation of the placement outcomes and management issues. Selection and preparation of students starts several months before departure.