

#1: Ethics in North-South Student Mobility

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10 ethical issues in mobility





Important Ethical Considerations for Preparing Students for North-South Mobility Programs

Target audience: Students, mobility program coordinators and pre-departure trainers

It is important to identify ethical issues related to North-South mobility programs. They can reinforce inequalities between institutions and between countries when the benefits are felt primarily by Global North students. But there are strategies to avoid this. Among them are long-term, sustainable and equitable relations through well-defined partnerships between institutions. The partnerships can facilitate mutual learning among students, faculty and staff at each of the partner universities. Many universities have partnership arrangements and facilitate North-South student mobility programs as one part of the partnership. Other important and ethical practices in such partnerships include research collaborations between faculty members, knowledge sharing and exchanges, including opportunities for the partner institution's students to study in Canada.

10 Important Ethical Issues to Consider as Part of North-South Mobility Programs

Drawing on ethical considerations identified by Karim-Haji, Roy and Gough (2016) in their report *Building Ethical Global Engagement with Host Communities: North-S Collaborations for Mutual Learning and Benefit*, the following 10 ethical considerations have been identified:

1. **Appropriate behaviour and cultural sensitivity:** this includes a range of practical information including dressing appropriately, acting respectfully and being sensitive to different cultural norms. Useful online resources can be found here: <https://forumea.org/resources/standards-of-good-practice/>
2. **Global inequality of opportunity:** free movement of Global North students must be contrasted with the challenges of obtaining visas and resources for students in the Global South to study in Canada. That may result in inequality of opportunities and the unidirectional nature of knowledge transfer. To improve the mutual benefits of North-South mobility programs, a comprehensive international education strategy for Canadian institutions can be an important starting point. See: <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/education/strategy-strategie.aspx?lang=eng>

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3. **Profits and service providers:** international experiential learning is increasingly profit-oriented, and universities often use third-party organizations (some of which are profit-oriented) to facilitate student mobility, thereby shifting the training and pre-departure preparation away from educators and university administrators. Further, host communities and institutions often become service providers tasked with enabling educational opportunities for students with high expectations of “having an impact” and with completing preparatory training for students when they arrive. To address this, universities must continue to keep pre-departure training a core part of their mandate, even when pre-departure training may be provided by third parties or host organizations. The BetterAbroad check-in guide offers 10 questions for consideration: <http://betterabroad.org/better-abroad-check-in/>
 4. **Power relationships:** asymmetrical power relations characterize many student mobility programs. Practices such as gift-giving can perpetuate stereotypes of the “giving North” and the “needy South”. It is essential that pre-departure training programs address this. Verge Magazine has a “Gift-Giving Guide for Overseas Volunteers” which is also useful: <http://www.vergemagazine.com/travel-intelligence/editors-desk/739-gift-giving-guidelines-for-international-volunteers.html>
 5. **Exploitation of host communities:** student mobility programs that are research-based frequently use host communities as research participants to get data for course work, research papers or theses. When that information is not shared with, and/or is not used to influence changes in, the host communities, those communities gain little. Students doing health-related placements may practise medical procedures without adequate ethics training (Huish, 2014). A useful resource on ethics in global health programs is produced by the American Medical Student Association: <http://www.amsa.org/advocacy/action-committees/global-health/ethics/>
 6. **Unethical marketing and advertising:** many stereotypes are created and reinforced through specific kinds of imagery and the language used to promote North-South mobility programs. Simplifying Africa through images of wildlife or needy children fosters paternalistic ideas about what students experience abroad, reducing the Global South to tropes of poverty and helplessness. A good resource is NGO Storytelling and Elisa Morales’s research on images in volunteering marketing, and her advice for more ethical photography: <http://www.ngostorytelling.com/2016/07/27/1587/>
 7. **Placements are becoming shorter and shorter:** this is in part due to student demand for shorter time frames. Some research has shown that communities prefer longer placements, of six months or more (Heron, 2011). Semester-long programs are becoming less common with increased offerings of two- or three-week study-abroad options (particularly in field schools or short-term volunteering programs offered by universities). Student desires must be reconciled with host community preferences to reduce exploitation and asymmetrical power relations. See: <http://virtualwayfarer.com/five-major-differences-between-long-term-and-short-term-study-abroad-programs/>



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8. **Over-emphasis on career/skills development:** universities promote skills building and career advancement over other important learning outcomes, such as cross-cultural understanding and social justice. That puts the focus of student mobility exclusively on the benefits for the students with little regard for host community needs and aspirations. As part of the pre-departure preparation and program impact of the Ghana program offered at St. Francis Xavier University, students learn about social justice and opportunities to effect change. Some options for student placements in St. Francis Xavier University's Ghana program include advocacy work in support of local initiatives. See: http://sites.stfx.ca/service_learning/sites/sites.stfx.ca.service_learning/files/GHANA_2015_2016_TentSched_o.pdf
 9. **Problematic ways of making sense of privilege:** Students require opportunities to reflect on their privilege of resources, access to bursaries, education, etc., to help them understand how privilege is historically rooted and reproduced through systemic inequalities. When students begin to feel guilt for their privileged status, they risk privileging their experiences of inequality over the experience of those who are truly disadvantaged. Expectations that students have about the quality of their experience abroad reflect their privileged positioning in society. Students may experience inconveniences of water or electricity shortage for fixed and short periods of time, knowing that eventually they can return to a better quality of life. Posting this information on blogs or voicing concerns about these inconveniences to host communities that cope with the same challenges on a daily basis is an important ethical issue, particularly since the experiences for host communities are not temporary. A resource that can be helpful for critical reflection on privilege is: "Talking to Students about Privilege and Power," found here: <http://www.theline.org.au/talking-to-students-about-privilege-and-power>
 10. **Making sense of unethical scenarios encountered:** students may experience unethical practices including corruption or graft; physical violence against women, children, people with disabilities or animals; and ridicule or mocking of people who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender or intersex, or who behave outside of prescribed societal norms. These scenarios may compel students to react in ways that can do harm to themselves and the people around them. Students require adequate ethics preparation to consider their position and privilege in these situations and how their actions have larger impacts in the communities. The video "First, Do no Harm: A Qualitative Research Documentary" is intended for pre-departure preparation and training, particularly for global health clinical electives and volunteer projects in the Global South. Access it here: <https://vimeo.com/22008886>

These ethical issues could form the basis of pre-departure training. The importance of effective ethics-oriented training has been addressed in a large and growing body of literature (see Desrosiers and Thomson 2014; Drolet 2014; MacDonald 2014; Thomas and Chandrasekera 2014 and Travers 2014, to name a few).



Innovative Strategies for Incorporating Ethical Dimensions into Pre-Departure Training and Return Orientation Sessions

The Global Development Studies program at Queen's University offers a placement handbook and an intensive classroom-based course, which notes that students should "begin to plan [the] placement at least 12 months ahead of [the] expected departure date" (Queen's University 2016: 3). As part of this preparation, students participate in meetings over the course of a semester during which they discuss "logistical and pedagogical aspects related to work-study placements as well as important ethical issues which underlie the idea of development" (8). The work-study placement is followed-up with a mandatory post-placement seminar course. The Queen's model and other programs that dedicate multiple sessions to ethical issues (before and after North-South mobility program placements) recognize that ethics training takes time.

Additional Resources

- A good starting point for students who would like to consider ethical issues in greater depth is a free, online course, Global Citizenship and International Experiential Learning, offered in French and in English. The six modules cover global citizenship identity, motivations, critical reflections on outputs and impacts, ethical considerations and getting the most out of the experience. Find it here: <http://globalcitizenshipedu.weebly.com/>
- Keeping a journal or a blog documenting the international experience is an excellent way to help you reflect on time abroad, think through any challenges and emotions, and keep in touch with loved ones back home. Ryerson University has posted a useful guide for doing this. Find it here: <http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/cpo/pdf/journal-blog-recommendations.pdf>
- Another useful resource includes the documentary "Volunteers Unleashed: <http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/episodes/volunteers-unleashed>

Endnotes

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Cover photo of a *Students for Development* program participant in 2009 courtesy of Universities Canada.