

## Acting locally, thinking globally in social work education

Jonas Mikael Christensen<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*The problems and challenges of Social work relate to both local and global contexts, and Social Work Education needs to be characterized by this, although how to fully realize it is complex. The purpose of this article is to problematize and detail how Social Work Education can be seen in higher education from the perspective of internationalization out of a Swedish context. The article should be seen as a contribution to Educational Science where internationalization can add to the understanding of social education. Research data has been collected from two groups of respondents: Social work students and lecturers in Social Work Education. The theoretical frame of reference is provided by a modified social-ecological model called the Entrecology model, a connector in education between the individual in relation to her or his surrounding context on different levels. The main conclusion is that the concept of 'acting locally, thinking globally, should be viewed as a major input for developing Social Work Education—A Glocal approach.*

**Keywords:** Higher education, Educational science, Internationalization, Social work, Social ecology

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### **1. Introduction**

Internationalization is a term widely used in higher education in Sweden. The purpose of internationalization is for the activities of those involved to stimulate certain types of exchange and knowledge development, irrespective of whether or not they are students, teachers or other staff. In the context of Social Work Education, internationalization means the creation of the conditions for cooperation and understanding between the nations, although the focus should be on meetings between individuals. Further, a distinction is made between internationalization and globalization; globalization aims for deeper cross-border integration, while internationalization aims for cooperation between nations. When referring to internationalization, it is important to make the distinction between *why* we are internationalizing higher education and *what* we mean by internationalization (De Wit, H., 2002). The purpose of this article is to problematize and detail how Social Work Education can be seen in higher education from the perspective of internationalization out of a Swedish context. This article should be seen as a contribution to Educational Science where internationalization can add to the understanding of social education. The article also sheds light on and widens the subject of social work, both for those involved in social research and others interested in pedagogical research.

To a large extent, the language of internationalization is incomplete and how we use the related terms is highly based on context. In the words of the French author and Nobel Prize recipient, Andre Gidé: "Man cannot discover new oceans until he has courage to lose sight of the shore". In the report "Living and learning: Exchange Studies Abroad" (Living and learning: Exchange studies abroad, 2013) a total of 2,500 Swedish students shared their views on the driving forces

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author, Asst. Prof. Dr., Malmo University, SWEDEN, [jonas.christensen@mah.se](mailto:jonas.christensen@mah.se)

they felt were important in internationalization: (a) The encouragement given to them by their home institution, (b) the structure of the international activities at their home institution, (c) the structure of the education, (d) the information about their future possibilities, (e) the exchange of experiences with other students who had also been abroad, (f) the use of experiences abroad within their education, (g) the integration of placements abroad in their education, and (e) credit given for courses completed abroad. In a global survey involving 1,336 higher education institutions in 131 countries (Polak-Egron, E., Hudson, R., 2014), it was outlined that institutions worldwide focus on internationalization. The most significant expected benefit of internationalization is the knowledge the students gain of international issues. In contrast, the respondents feel the most significant potential risk of internationalization is that international opportunities may only be available to students with financial resources.

In the majority of regions, the respondents indicated that their geographic focus for internationalization was within their own region. Europe is a strong focus area for most regions; however, limited funding is a major internal and external obstacle to advancing internationalization. The home institutions of the respondents report that they seek to promote values of equity and the sharing of benefits through their internationalization strategy and activities. This creates many challenges for the development of internationalization in education: Ever-increasing competition between institutions, student mobility imbalance between incoming and outgoing, socialization between domestic and international students, integration of international perspectives in education at all levels, and the planning and preparedness of teachers. In Nilsson's (Nilsson, B., 2003) research, the two main reasons for internationalization in Swedish higher education are outlined as the expansion of Swedish companies on the global market so that Swedes are able to fill important positions abroad and a new sense of global concern and solidarity with developing countries. Within the European Union and its development, the internationalization of higher education has held an important role in developing aspects such as openness, understanding, and positive attitudes toward cooperation. Official EU documents point out that support for cooperation and mobility is clearly to promote a European, not international, dimension in higher education (et. al). Programs for mobility in exchange have been developed, with Erasmus probably being the single most successful project within the EU. Parallel to this development, a shift from internationalization (cooperation between nations) toward Europeanization (cooperation within an integrated Europe) has occurred and can be seen as a consequence of the EU becoming a single market. As previously mentioned, the term internationalization holds different meanings in different countries. In some countries, it refers to the recruitment of overseas students; in others, it means exchange, and in some others, it means mobility. To put the concepts into practice, Nilsson (et. al) defines internationalization as "the process of integrating an international dimension into the research, teaching and services function of higher education. Social work might be one of the most international field of all and International social work is a growing field of interest."

Knight's definition (Knight, J., 2008) acknowledges the various levels of internationalization and the need to address the relationship and integration between them: "The process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education." Knight (et. al) also states that it is now possible to see two basic aspects evolving in the internationalization of higher education. One is 'internationalization at home,' including activities to help students develop international awareness and intercultural skills. This aspect is relatively much more curriculum oriented and prepares students to be active in an increasingly globalized world. Some examples of activities that fall under this at-home category

are: Curriculum and programs, teaching and learning processes, extra-curricular activities, liaison with local cultural/ethnic groups, and research and scholarly activities. The second aspect is 'internationalization abroad,' which includes all forms of education across borders: The mobility of students and faculty, and the mobility of projects, programs and providers. These components should not be considered mutually exclusive, but rather intertwined within policies and programs. Further, De Wit (2002) identifies four broad categories of rationales for internationalization: Political, economical, social, cultural and academic. These rationales are not mutually exclusive; they vary in importance by country and region, and their dominance may change over time.

## 2. Internationalization and social work education

Righard (2013) discusses how the various definitions of international social work have changed over time and she categorizes these changes into three groups: Modernization, radicalization, and globalization. In the last category where we are now, a big challenge for the social worker is to find strategies to face the challenges that arise in a global society. Globalization affects the social policy discussion in many ways (Cousins, M., 2005), and therefore, it also affects social work and Social Work Education. The need for international education in social work is clear, although achieving it may be complex (Merrill, M., Frost, C.J, 2011) Social workers are faced with new responsibilities, and it is important for the education to go beyond the national level (Healy, L., 2008) and (Nagy, G., Falk, D., 2000) claim that the impact of ongoing global processes on the social work profession is dramatic and that reformulating the education to include more international and cross-border cultural content is needed. They suggest the incorporation of international issues and comparison between the approaches, theories, and programs of other countries into mainstream Social Work Education along with the creation of more specialized professional programs.

Social work is described as contextual, meaning it bound to national traditions, laws, and local culture (Lorenz, W., 1994) and the content of Social Work Education in Sweden is, to a large extent, governed by national guidelines due to the professional title of *Socionom*. For example, at Malmoe University, at the Bachelor's level social work curriculum, international perspectives on social work is included as an integrated part of single lectures during the first and second semesters. At the Master's level, it works the same, with invited guest lecturers speaking about related themes and often on a comparative basis. With the exception of the programs, the individual courses Social Policies in Europe and Social Work in a Local and Global Context are offered which integrate an intercultural perspective focusing on social science, the welfare state in comparison, and social work practice. We need to understand social work in its local context by gaining a global understanding; therefore, the term *Glocal* (combination of global and local) is used in this article. Parts of these individual courses are also integrated in the social work programs. The main idea behind the continuous development of internationalization in Social Work Education in the social work curriculum at Malmo University in general is that social workers need to be prepared to address social work in a local and global context by studying internationally related cases and community problems that arise in their domestic practice. These cases contribute to a mutual exchange of solving global social problems as well as gaining knowledge of other countries and their social systems. Nevertheless, it seems that although the term 'internationalization' in Social Work Education is well established, and although the need for further international education in social work is viewed as essential, how to fully reach it is complex.

### 3. Theoretical frame

According to Meeuwisse and Swärd (2008), the cross-national comparison of social work is a question of assumptions and levels. The focus could be on the macro level, where comparisons are based on social policy; it could also be focused on profession (micro-meso level) or on practice-oriented differences (micro-meso level). This makes sense, as it may be more relevant and useful to use the term ‘cross-national and global social work’ instead of internationalization. To understand the complexity of international social work, we must take into account how the various sub-systems interact. The macro system (such as social policy) is therefore crucial for placing this analysis within the context of education. Both the individual and the environment change over time, and Bronfenbrenner (2004) maintains that these changes are crucial to our understanding of how the different systems influence the individual and her or his development. In addition, when personal development has a strong influence on family relations, this will create development on its own for the family. The same is true for institutional and cultural development; for example, the presence of strong individuals in an organization strongly influences organizational development. This explains why the development ecology model of Bronfenbrenner can be seen as a multi-level model (Winch, P., 2012). Resilience capacity on a mental, intra level (Christensen, J., 2016) and an entrepreneurial way of building, developing, and keeping networks gives the different levels in Bronfenbrenners Development Ecology model a broader understanding of what stimulates learning processes and our understanding of internationalization, education, and the profession in a social context. Transformation in a welfare context can be understood from both individual and social perspectives (Christensen, et. al).

Internationalization can thus be said to contain six levels of intervention: the intra-personal level (capacity of resilience), the micro-social level (person, client, focus on interaction), the meso-social level (group, institution, coherence), the exo-social level (society, institutions, educational system), the macro-social level (culture, nation, traditions, language) and the ex-macro-social level (international relations and EU influence). The supply of teacher competences such as experience of teaching in English, coordination of international social work at the departmental/faculty level, and management awareness and priority settings at the departmental level, are some of the presumptive critical challenges one faces in developing internationalization at home. Knight’s definition (Knight, J., 2008) acknowledges its various levels and the need to address the relationship and integration between them: “*The process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, function, or delivery of post-secondary education.*” When understanding Social Work Education and the role of pedagogy within it, we can relate to what Fayolle and Kyrö (2008) describe as the interplay between environment and education. They argue that entrepreneurship is closely connected to an education perspective in which individuals, society, and institutions are all linked to each other. This interplay is surrounded by culture, and it is in this context that entrepreneurship and pedagogy meet. Entrepreneurship is when the individual acts upon opportunities and ideas and transforms them into value for others. Ties, meetings, and networks are therefore closely linked to the individual, and in the meetings where the individuals from different contexts meet, learning takes place. Given this, a connection between the (extended) Development Ecology model and Entrepreneurship gives us the Entrepreneurship\* model:

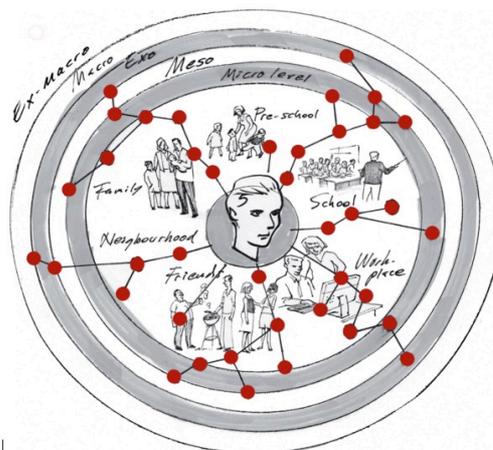


Fig. 1 \*The Entrecology model (Christensen, 2016)

Each link in the Entrecology model should be seen as each individual's own unique and personal network created through meetings on different levels; the starting point is the individual and the interplay between the surrounding context. When analyzing social networks as a tool for linking micro and macro networks, the strength of these dyadic ties can be understood (Granovetter, M., 1973). This strength (or weakness) gives dependency as well as independency in linkages. In addition, as pointed out by Cox and Pawar (2006), dimensions in international social work needs to have, a local as well as a global face and that a reality of globalization is that it requires a dimension of localization. Therefore, the Entrecology model can be seen as a connector in education between the individual and her or his surrounding context on different levels.

#### 4. Method

Research data has been collected from two groups of respondents: A group of 20 social work students on bachelor-level and a group of 13 lecturers (full-time) in the Social Worker's programme at the Malmo University. The teacher group is representative for the whole group of teachers (in total around 40) teaching Social Work at the Dept of Social Work. The group of lecturers was randomly selected and the students were participating in an open seminar focusing International Social Work at the Malmo University. The same open question was raised to both groups: What does the concept of internationalization in Social Work Education mean to you? The research data among the students was collected in a classroom before an ordinary lecture took place and all students participated. The students were each given 20 minutes for a written reply. The research data among the teachers were asked to give a written reply and each of these replies were used, each teacher was given 20 minutes after working hours. The replies from both groups were collected anonymously, and then the material was analysed separately divided into two main groups: A student group and a teacher group. Thereafter, interpretation and analysis was undertaken in each group. Each group was analyzed independently of the other, and no distinct comparison was made between the two groups.

##### 4.1 Limitations of the study

The selection group of students and teachers has been selected by two criteria's, a random (teachers) and a self-imposed principle (students). A random selection strengthens the validity as the likelihood of bias is likely to be minimized as it's among all teachers the selection has been

done, not only among the teachers who are engaged in the internationalization issues involved. As for the student group is admittedly a qualitative weakness that they participated in an open seminar for social workers, several of which have a high degree of likely interest in internationalization issues prior to participating. Meanwhile, the seminar was included in the study program. This, however do not clearly say anything about the partial motives why one part is likely to vary. The issue itself is open and allows for the respondent to freely express themselves which strengthens the reliability. Here, I would like to stress that, independently of methods, there are limitations and the key thing is to be aware of them and try to deal with them in the best possible way in line with the purpose of the study. Limitations could be lack of time, that the selected group was too small and that the environment created stress. Concerning the time given it was shown that no more time was asked for, the material and input which was transcribed reached a saturation due to analysis and the participants did not show stressful due to lack of time. In this study a combination of randomly selected teachers and a self-imposed principle by students has been used. Other methods could have been used, however it is essential for a researcher to be aware of the normativity which, intentionally or unintentionally, is hidden behind a statement which makes it essential to present a broad variety. The normativity in this study has caused consequences for the samples: samples which might have look different with another pair of normative “research eyes”.

## 5. Results and discussion

After studying the empirical material, we will discuss the material from the statements the individuals made in relation to the theoretical frame in relation to the two groups; the student group and the teacher group. Out of this, three perspectives are outlined and discussed: a global mobility perspective, social work local educational perspective and a social work professional perspective.

### 5.1. The student group

When people meet, many types of exchanges take place, including social, academic, and cultural exchanges. Personal meetings on different levels are key factors. They make the assimilation of knowledge and resources possible (Christensen, J., 2016) An exchange of knowledge characterized by mutual interest may also include a resistor, as stated by some of the respondents: “*We cannot understand that particular term in social work in that way*” and “*We are not doing social work in that way in our country*”.

In the process of change and if handled correctly, this resistance can represent a significant driving force for the reflective student to develop a local understanding. The starting point of learning is the individual, and her or his interaction in their environment. This interaction occurs at different levels, and in the academic session, these levels may be seen as individual, organizational or institutional and societal. The following statement can be seen as macro-social, as it speaks of culture, nation, traditions and language: “*Internationalization in Social Work Education for me is about to gain a deeper insight into different cultures, differences and similarities to use in professional situations.*” This shows that, according to Meeuwisse and Sward (2008) that the cross-national comparison of social work is a question of assumptions and levels. The focus could be on the macro level, where comparisons are based and related to the profession (micro-meso

level) or on practice-oriented differences (micro-meso level). On a micro-social level, the individual, and the focus on interaction is central as one respondent says: *"We try to understand each other, but we create barriers instead"*.

A reflection on the resilience capacity on which the intra-personal level is in focus can be seen in the following statement by one of the students: *"There's a hill you have to overcome. It is a challenge and necessity for development and challenges."* Statements from some of the students relate to social work occupations; they relate to the individual and the focus on interaction wherein the micro-social level can be seen, for example: *"Exchange, linguistic, cultural encounters, people, listen, be curious, ask questions, discuss and develop, learn from each other, perhaps the reduction of prejudice, abandonment, new ideas, or old ideas are confirmed, learn about social work in different countries, to learn from each other"*. The exo-social level can be outlined in the following statement: *"So, I imagine a picture of a network that stretches across borders where it is more possible than ever to communicate and collaborate between different NGOs and authorities and this relates to society on the whole as well as institutions"* *"No matter where we come from, we all want to feel good. Getting there is just as diverse as the meals and the way we eat together. Knowledge of other people's way is vital to be able to do a good job as a social worker"* is a statement like those of several students which shows that the group, as well as the individual in the field of social work, can be identified, meaning both the micro-social level and the meso-social level relate to each other. The ex-macro-social level could be seen in all statements, as it relates to overall global relations. According to Winch (2012) this relates to why the development ecology model of Bronfenbrenner can be seen as a multi-level model and that dimensions in international social work needs to have, a local as well as a global face and that a reality of globalization is that it requires a dimension of localization. Therefore, the Entrecology model can be seen as a connector in education between the individual and her or his surrounding context on different levels.

## 5.2 The teacher group

The statements from the teachers were highly characterized by views on the importance of exchange, mobility, and integration in local Social Work Education, as well as linkages to professional social work practice. The statements can therefore be categorized into the following three perspectives in relation to levels: the ex-macro level—A global mobility perspective, the meso-social level—The social work local educational perspective and the micro-social level—The social work professional perspective.

### 5.2.1 The ex-macro level – a global mobility perspective

The majority of respondents point out the importance of the possibility for mobility and that it has value in itself. One of the respondents highlights the importance of the environment and the development of students and teachers to meet. In the new contextual learning, the environment and reflection on how contextual and structural factors that affect the social work profession and organization can be seen. One of the respondents states:

*"This means that students and teachers themselves live in environments in other countries and at other universities. It also means that students are influenced by visiting lecturers and visiting students. Students must be in their courses and have the opportunity to learn about social work in different contexts. Students should gain an understanding of social work complexity by getting knowledge of contextual, structural, and traditional factors governing organizing, ethical attitudes, and professional values"*

Another respondent emphasizes the sense of coherence as a key driver in understanding social challenges globally:

“The internationalization of Social Work Education means that we should take into account what is happening in the world around us: how it can affect us, how we affect the world around us. We should be aware of that the theoretical perspectives must be thought of in both global and local contexts, and that social problems will arise in the context of both national and international levels. The transnational dimension, that we can enrich our activities by participating in international exchanges of different kinds, is very essential”

Several respondents see the value of mobility in general: “Internationalization means, primarily, that there is an exchange of students and teachers at the university to study and teach at universities in Europe and other parts of the world.” The importance of conceptual understanding and the common development of the subject is something that some of the respondents emphasize:

“Internationalization means an increased exchange of experience, knowledge, ability to support and development of joint projects in the subject and each business. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, with internationalization we can reach a common understanding of Social Work Education and thereby facilitate communication in the academic exchange”.

### 5.2.2 *The meso-social level - the social work local educational perspective*

International understanding will be made visible in various ways in teaching, which is an area that respondents consider somewhat important. Literature in another language than Swedish for students to be encouraged and to discuss social work in other contexts than the Swedish. The integration of guest teachers is another example. Also, internship opportunities and thesis work abroad is seen as advancing internationalization by several respondents: “*International perspectives on social problems, primarily through literature (current), but also by international guests*”. According to the respondents, the most important aspect is that international perspectives are highlighted and illustrated in education. Students are encouraged to “look up” and assimilate social work in other local contexts: “*Most important is that education must have an international perspective on social work theory and practice, in that we relate the discussion of social problems and efforts to countries other than Sweden, as it’s easy to get ‘stuck’ in the narrower local situation*”. The defense of experiences abroad as teachers and students carry with them and feed back into the local classroom is seen as an important support structure by some of the respondents: “*The enhanced international perspective can also be given space by placement (as is already the case today), but the better experience and knowledge that the international internship students have may be taken through to the mainstream as guest teachers*”. The development of Social Work Education in comparison is seen by several respondents as a key part in internationalization: “*It may be that students can bring a comparative discussion of the official problem of perception and social interventions that are based on the Swedish context and other contexts. But then it may also discuss the different contexts that are interesting*”. The role of education is highlighted by several respondents:

“Students in the context of the teaching given the opportunity to get deeper international perspectives in social work disciplines. In other words, the comparative learning operations can be included in most social worker training courses. The latter can be performed by, for example, differing Case or PBL-based teaching modules”.

A more general view bases its starting point in the responsibility for educators to provide professional knowledge and is highlighted by one respondent: “*Without international contacts, then our Social Work Education is a national education. A weakness in the profession may develop.*”

*The world we live in has changed. It is essentially a local, but also a global, challenge*". This shows that social networks is a tool for linking micro and macro networks in which the strength of these dyadic ties can be understood according to Granovetter (1973). This strength (or weakness) gives dependency as well as independency in linkages.

### 5.2.3 The micro-social level - the social work professional perspective

In encounters in practice, diversity and cultural knowledge are an important part of internationalization and seen as part of Social Work Education:

"Internationalization, for me, also means to have good knowledge about other countries and cultures "at home". That is, the ability to respond to potential clients/patients/users based on an understanding of other cultures, for example, norms, and how a social worker can work with this".

In social work expertise lies a general competence to understand the practical social work on the local level to apply their skills in different contexts:

"The social worker is a professional career. It is set up in higher education as 'socioinutbildningen' (a professional degree). Like other professional programs, they can use their degrees to work in different countries with some additional course(s). This means that we do not train for Sweden, but for international social work. Training must, therefore, contain general knowledge that can be applied in many contexts".

One view among the respondents demonstrates the challenge of defining the meaning of internationalization:

"In a way, internationalization sounds most like a cliché. It sounds good, but it is unclear what that means. At the administrative level, it seems to imply greater international cooperation and exchange on education, knowledge. For me personally, it has no special meaning. I would rather talk about globalization in the sense of social work today which involves new social problems to deal with".

### 5.2.4 Key-words coming out from the student and teacher group

The following keywords from both groups can be outlined from the written reply; *inequalities, opportunities, change, boundlessness, moving, flying, freedom, motion, proximity, distance, opposites, community, people, loneliness*. If we categorize these words into groups, three groups of levels can be outlined, one focusing the *individual level* (freedom, motion, loneliness change, opportunities, moving, flying), one focusing on the *organizational or institutional level* (inequalities, community, proximity, distance) and thirdly, the *societal level* (opposites, boundlessness, people). Internationalization of social work in a welfare context should thus be understood with the starting point originating from the individual perspective, and adding the individual in relation to an organizational, institutional, and social perspective.

## 6. Conclusion

The main conclusion of this article is that *'thinking globally, acting locally'* should be seen as a key concept in the development of Social Work Education. Among students, it seems that development of a *reflective capacity* when meeting others can be seen as adding momentum to this. Among teachers, it seems that integration in the local social work education and links to the professional social work practice is also adds momentum. This demands in-depth knowledge about individual driving forces and views on what is essential when it comes to international Social Work Education. We need to explore how we can raise our mutual understanding of social work

which assists us in developing a more global understanding, while at the same time, being aware of our different traditions and values. Therefore, as we must, according to what Meuwisse and Swärd (2008) point out, take into account how the various sub-systems interact in relation to the individual. Both the individual and the environment change over time, and Bronfenbrenner (2004) maintains that these changes are crucial to our understanding of how the different systems influence the individual and her or his development. In this, the Entrecology model can be seen as a connector in education between the individual and her or his surrounding context on different levels. The importance of allowing students and teachers to meet on a cross-border basis in Social Work Education built upon internationalization at home as a part of domestic local programs with global understanding—a *glocalized* view on social work—should not be underestimated when developing professional skills. This relates to the statement by Healy (2000) that Social workers are faced with new responsibilities, and it is important for the education to go beyond the national level. This study shows that a reformulation of the education to include more international and cross-border cultural content is needed according to Nagy and Falk (2000). A success factor for knowledge acquisition in international social work is in providing continuous education, where international courses can work independently, but also opportunities for integration within existing programs. It strengthens, stimulates, and develops internationalization at home, as well as attitudes toward it for both students and teachers. In order to stimulate and attract students as well as teachers in developing internationalization as a dimension in the education, a knowledge channel is essential. To facilitate this and to support interaction with the community in internationalization, efforts should be put into specific communication and educational tools.

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