

## COMMENTARY ...

# *Reflections on an international exchange experience in Germany*

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International travel has long been associated with opening and expanding the minds of those who travel; and exposure to differences in culture, language and environment often has profound effects. Academic travel—visiting an international college or university for the purposes of teaching and learning—adds an additional layer of experience, resulting in exposure to research and teaching which is being filtered and reinterpreted through a different cultural lens. In this reflective commentary, we discuss a number of experiences encountered on a two week academic study trip to Coburg, Germany, in June this year—but first, a description of our travelling party and impressions of the Bavarian region.

We were a party of four from the School of Social Work and Social Policy at La Trobe University, Bendigo Campus—Jennifer returning for a second visit to Coburg University after six years; Steven, a Year 4 Social Work Honours student ready for adventure in an already packed year of activity; Matthew Holmes, an Aboriginal graduate now working for the Department of Sustainability and Environment in Bendigo; and Catherine Cameron, a Year 3 student who was making her first journey outside of Australia. It was early summer in Europe with the fields and trees a lush green, crops growing thickly, the market places smelling of field strawberries and colourful flowers, white asparagus wonderfully juicy and tasty, and NZ apples everywhere! We were generously accommodated by the staff and students of the Social Work course at Coburg

University and, in particular, Tina and Nadine provided constant assistance with translation on our visits, which ensured full appreciation of both pleasure activities and for study and teaching purposes. We were fortunate to have not only a warm welcome everywhere we went, but also in-depth explanations of the social services we visited, which included Kiz, WEFA and the Südpunt Community Centre.

## AESTHETICS AND DELIVERING SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS

One of the most enduring impressions of the trip was the extent to which the German Social Service agencies demonstrate appreciation of aesthetics in relation to buildings and retrofitting for program delivery. Aesthetic considerations such as architectural beauty, environmental sustainability and engineering excellence were evident across the range of social service buildings we visited and provided a stark contrast to the Australian practice context in which services are predominantly delivered from office-like premises or facilities of somewhat mediocre design that offers little in the way of ambience. Notable features present in the German context included a focus on light, open design, super-insulated buildings with triple glazed glass, extensive use of recycled plastics and a focus on well-landscaped surrounds. This gave the impression of work spaces that were more relaxed and welcoming and that had a productive 'feel' for both workers and clients.

The staff we met showed a notable pride in their work



Market Day in the town square of Coburg



Catherine, Steven, Jennifer and Matt preparing for teaching sessions

environments and they were keen to discuss the various design elements of their workplaces. In discussing the design and construction of the built environment, it was clear there is an overriding sense in Germany that buildings should be designed to last, resulting in more thought and resources being allocated for the construction and renovation of buildings. This, at least in part, seemed to be linked to the Germans' appreciation of the historical architecture present in their cities and towns, much of which dates back many centuries, though post-war reconstruction has been extensive. Whilst Australia's relative lack of historical architecture may partly explain our less enlightened approach to the construction of the built environment, research would seem to suggest that we could benefit from an increased awareness of the effect of the built environment on health and well-being.

It was strikingly clear that social work in Germany plays a pivotal role in the early education sector. Unlike many other Western school systems, German primary school aged children tend to start earlier in the day (between 7 and 8 am) and finish school at around noon (German Education Server, n.d.). This relatively early finishing time, combined with the increase in the participation of both parents in paid employment, has contributed to the development of many locally funded children's centres, primarily staffed by social workers, who provide a range of cultural development and childcare services for German children.

### KIZ CHILDREN'S CENTRE, COBURG

We were made welcome at one such centre, Kiz, in Coburg, where the range of activities and services was impressive. In addition to providing afternoon care and lunch for the students aged 5 to about 12 years, social workers oversaw a range of cultural pursuits such as art, dance, creative play, music, woodworking and pottery, as well as homework assistance. Parents were encouraged to participate in activities with their children and students were welcome to stay at the centres until 5:30 pm. This arrangement provided a stimulating educational environment, but also a practical childcare service for working parents. The Kiz program was also integrated into the local community through contributing to special festivals and weekend events in the summer months.

A feature of the Kiz facility was the way in which conversion of old town buildings included attention to exciting interiors with spaces for differing purposes. In the three storey building which included staircases, small and larger spaces, a 'letting off steam' room and retreat areas, there appeared to be less concern about physical safety in the form of 'gates' and 'no go' areas. The staff team, made up of both men and women, were able to provide individual time with children who were experiencing problems. Their office area appeared to be used only for morning preparation and administrative work as they spent most time with the

children attending the centre. Children had free access to craft rooms, quiet time-out spaces, a boys' room and a girls' room for separate activities if they so desired, a homework room, and dining area amongst others. The program minimised the time spent at computers or watching television, and allowed some physical activities in balance with other pursuits. Winters in Germany are often very cold, so large indoor spaces were available for activities like table tennis, but the garden was landscaped and used through the warmer months, and a separate building fitted out as a workshop for woodwork and other construction activities was also provided. The whole facility sat in the streetscape with minimal advertising.

From a social work perspective, the children's centres provide a positive and constructive environment in which social workers can contribute to the daily and ongoing development of positive and engaged children, a very different role in early childhood development played by most social workers in the Australian context. In discussing



The off-road entrance to Kiz with outdoor areas, separate workshop and multiple indoor spaces



The Kiz craft room with shelves of supplies. Recycled household objects are used in art and craft work.

child protection issues with the social workers working at Kiz, it was clear that, although the social workers employed at the centre had the responsibility to report suspected abuse, overwhelmingly their role was to provide mentoring and support in the development of healthy, happy children. This focus on support and mentoring in the German system is to be applauded and, although the education system in Australia prohibits some aspects of the German approach, we left feeling that the positive approach taken by social workers in Germany towards early childhood development could act as a model to be used in the Australian context.

### AESTHETIC CONTEXTS OF SERVICES

Although an appreciation of aesthetic qualities of one's context and the relationship of aesthetics to improved client/patient outcomes have been in evidence throughout much of the history of modern Western medicine (EDGE 2003), social work, as a discipline, appears to have had little engagement with such issues. Fields such as architecture, nursing and allied health, psychology and the environmental sciences have, for some time, engaged with aesthetic considerations such as those in evidence in Germany, and such factors as lighting (Dumont & Beaulieu 2007), temperature (Wang, Federspiel, & Arens 2005) and colour (EDGE 2003); as well as with social connectedness and the maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships (Danes 2002; Rashid & Zimring 2008). The discipline of social work in Australia would do well to begin incorporating the insights gained in such research to the planning, design and retrofitting of social service agencies, a direction made all the more important by the need for global action in addressing the effects of climate change (Jureidini & Poole 2003).

One particularly interesting example of a community facility was that of the Südpunkt Community Centre in the south of Nuremberg. Here the bombed out industrial zone has been re-developed, with substantial funding from the European Union, and includes a co-located set of services for a multi-cultural population. The passive building design incorporates a library, training rooms with computer technology, a small concert hall that is available for schools and local functions, an information kiosk, a cafe, offices and other spaces for community use. The construction incorporates several older buildings that have been retrofitted without altering their facades, utilising triple glazing and a computer controlled temperature system—an engineer's delight! Windows look out over landscaped grounds with trees providing summer shade and allowing in the winter sun.

A service for people with disability, WEFA, was also a demonstration of what can be achieved in the construction of facilities, this time including workshops, training rooms and high-needs care areas. German excellence in the development of technology was evident at this service where the commitment to the clients spans the whole of life from

young adulthood to retirement. An emphasis on social inclusion through meaningful employment and recreational activities was evident.

### EXPERIENCING A GLOBALISED WORLD

As expected, there were similarities and differences observed in the education and practice of social work with many of these being due to the differing expectations of the social work role and quality of services to be delivered. In the social work course of Coburg University, one of the notable differences in approach to coursework was the varying emphases given to specific topics. One area of study which illustrates this point relates to the way students engage with the topic of globalisation.

Globalisation, '... the process by which the world is said to be transformed into a single global system' (Turner, Abercrombie & Hill 2000, p. 153), and its effects, particularly in relation to disadvantaged client groups, are a topic of interest to social workers the world over



The entrance to Südpunkt, a passive building design



The 'training' kitchen for people with disability at WEFA



Matt Holmes playing the didgeridoo with Steven on the clap sticks, for the people at WEFA

(International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] 2005). In the Australian social work context, globalisation is examined firstly by means of understanding the varied factors which have contributed to the development of globalisation, such as the shrinking of time and space due to modern transportation and telecommunications technology, and then via the impacts of globalisation such as worker exploitation, loss of community, excessive consumption and environmental degradation (Van Kreiken et al. 2006).

During our visit, we were invited to participate and to present our perspectives on globalisation to a Social Work Masters class and, during the ensuing discussion, it became clear that, in the German context, much more weight was placed on the study of global government structures. The attention to structural aspects of globalisation appeared to be because this was seen as a means of limiting the worst impacts of globalisation, as explored by German writers such as Ulrick Beck (2000). Globalising the structures of government is a topic barely canvassed by Australian social work students. On reflection, one possible reason for the differing focus in the German social work course might be the influence of the European Union. The relationships of individual governments with the European Union has had the effect of highlighting the potential for some form of multinational authority that could provide the mechanism for dealing with the adverse effects of globalisation. The lack of experience of any truly effective multinational framework in the Australian context would explain the relative lack of exploration of this topic in Australian social work studies. The illumination of new perspectives, such as this, was one of the real advantages of engaging in this international academic exchange.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Participating in academic teaching and study in a different culture, even for a short time, provided us all with a range of unique experiences which will undoubtedly influence us for a long time to come. In particular, this visit, albeit brief, gave us a different perspective on what social work is or can be; and insights into how different cultures interpret social problems, and their solutions, in different ways. It is unfortunate that Australian program development tends to favour American and British trends rather than giving attention to some of the contemporary European approaches. We couldn't help but wonder if the lack of regard for these long-established, and clearly high quality services is due to concerns about language difficulties, the history of socialist political ideologies present in Europe which is in stark contrast to our intensely neo-liberal context, or plain ignorance of what exists in Scandinavian and European countries in spite of being in a globalised world. However, the opportunities offered by globalisation remain, and perhaps in time Australia will take advantage of this in developing a more coherent and enlightened commitment to achieving wellbeing. □

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