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**Virtual International Group Study Program: Towards Understanding
Sustainable Development Goals and Community
Development in Nepal**

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focusing on how travel, on-campus, and virtual international programming can ensure that students develop intercultural humility.

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Abstract

To fill the gaps in international education left by the COVID-19 pandemic, many study abroad educators have become creative with their international programming by going online. This theoretical paper describes the conceptualization and delivery of a virtual collaborative program that was developed through a partnership between the Faculty of Social Work professors at the University of Calgary in Canada and Southwestern State College in Nepal. In this article, we share the model of the program and our motivations for developing the program; a formal evaluation of the model has not yet been conducted. Our pedagogical approach was grounded in anti-oppressive practices, which prioritizes the importance of engaging in empowering practices that share power based on mutual respect and learning. In our attempt to address and mitigate divides of students in the Global South and North, we sought to maximize engagement between students, educators from both institutions and social work practitioners (formal and informal) from Nepal to help promote intracultural learning. We also chose the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals as a site of inquiry with the aim of bridging divides and uncovering commonalities across the two countries – Canada and Nepal. With a mission to deliver an interdisciplinary approach to social work, in this paper, we outline the ways that virtual programming can be made collaborative, immersive, and experiential for all participants regardless of their global location. Lastly, the future of this program will be discussed as travel-based education reopens around the world. In presenting our model, we hope to inform the development of future anti-oppressive international education in social work.

Keywords: international virtual group study, social work, Canada, Nepal

**Virtual International Group Study Program: Towards Understanding
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Development in Nepal**

This article describes a new, short-term international group study program (GSP) to Nepal delivered virtually in Spring 2021 and 2022, led by two social work instructors from the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary (UC) in Canada, in collaboration with the Department of Social Work at the Southwestern State College (SWSC) in Nepal. The GSP entitled, *Community and Sustainable Development: Collaborative Field Study in Nepal*, sought to provide students with the opportunity to learn about key social issues related to community and sustainable development in Nepal and draw implications for the Canadian context.

GSPs have been touted as exemplary means to equip social work students with the skills necessary to work in a diverse world (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Dunlap & Mapp, 2017). The Study abroad has also been highlighted as an important educational strategy to develop global awareness, instill a lifelong pathway of self-reflection, and promote cultural humility (Belliveau, 2019; Fernandez, 2020). Cultural humility, first introduced by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998), is defined as “a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing power imbalances . . . and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations” (p. 123). Cultural humility is increasingly recognized as a necessary component for effective social work practice (Gottlieb, 2021; Zhu et al., 2022) and global learning (Habashy & Cruz, 2021).

Several models of study abroad programs have been identified. In their 2012 critical review, Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger summarized current

knowledge about international field education in social work and identity four competing models: “(1) independent/one-time; (2) neighbor-country; (3) onsite group; and (4) exchange/reciprocal” (p. 225). The authors conclude that an egalitarian international experience is premised upon the following:

The sending school and the host organization need to collaborate fully in all phases of conceptualizing the goals, objectives, policy, structure and strategies of the program. Such collaboration is anticipated to enhance mutual learning, assure a balanced division of power and responsibilities and minimize imposition of western values and misunderstanding caused by cultural differences. (p. 55)

Despite the call for and proliferation of study abroad programs globally and the overwhelming support for anti-oppressive (Patterson Roe, 2019) and anti-colonial ways (Villarreal et al., 2021) GPS approaches in the social work literature, there remains the need to advance such models. Anti-oppressive models of social work education recognize intersectional oppressive structures in society and work toward reducing these and the resultant inequities (Laird, 2008), and anti-colonialist paradigms focus on dismantling global structures of domination to redress harmful legacies of colonialism (Afevorki Abay et al., 2023; Carlson, 2017; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019).

Further, the recognition that going abroad may not be possible or feasible in the post-pandemic world due to rising inequality, increased political turmoil, and economic recession; hybrid social work programming may be an inevitable future resulting in the “need to redefine the ‘locality’ in social work practice” (O’Leary, & Tsui, 2021, p. 647).

Going Abroad Virtually

While the decision to provide this GSP virtually was a response to COVID-19 travel restrictions, it also offered an opportunity to revise how study

abroad could be re-envisioned to be more inclusive and sustainable while promoting anti-oppressive and anti-colonial pedagogy. The benefits of a global education have been clearly established. Global learning during post-secondary experiences helps students develop the intercultural competence and humility (Kako & Klingbeil, 2019) required to “operate effectively in global contexts ... [and] is equally important for living in our increasingly diverse and multicultural local communities” (Jones, 2013, p. 98). Additionally, the shared learning experiences required to induce cultural humility require students to “take risks and become open to change. Such learning may entail recognizing biases and prejudice and shifting frames of reference” (Smith & Paracka, 2018, p. 24). Students who participate in global learning activities experience a shift in worldview that enables them to build meaningful relationships with people of diverse perspectives, both in the classroom and in the community (Smith & Paracka, 2018).

Additionally, clear benefits of global study for building future skills, particularly in remote workplace settings, have been touted – particularly given the recent shift in workplace structures worldwide (Reuil, 2022). Despite these benefits, a 2017 report from the Centre for International Policy Studies reported that only 11% of Canadian undergraduates undertake an international mobility experience over the course of their degree. According to The Canadian Bureau for International Education (2016), the most significant barrier to education abroad is financial; 80% of students require financial assistance to participate. Virtual study abroad offers a potential solution to increase the accessibility of global education.

Virtual study abroad is not new. There have long been a variety of virtual international learning opportunities in post-secondary education. Opportunities such as collaborative online international learning have been practiced by universities (both formally and informally) since the early 2000s (Jones, 2020; The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020). In these programs, professors often

collaborate on a course or project to bring students from different backgrounds (nationally or internationally) together with the aim of relationship building, problem-solving, collaboration, sharing perspectives, and cultural growth (Minei et al., 2021; Lee & Park, 2017). Lipinski's 2014 case study of virtual study abroad on international business programming concluded that, despite the noted limitations, "virtual study abroad classes can stimulate learning, cross-cultural awareness, and heighten the desire for students to expand their knowledge base" (p. 114). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought these opportunities and limitations into sharp focus and acted as an accelerant for online education, generally (Li & Lalani, 2020). Spurred by the global pandemic, burgeoning research on virtual group study has brought to light the problems of exclusively offering in-person global study and highlighted many benefits of offering virtual global learning opportunities. According to Liu and Shirley (2021), "redesigned online study abroad course(s) engaged students in active learning activities and cultivated students' intercultural competence development" (p. 182). Virtual study abroad courses also helped students to overcome such barriers to entry for global learning opportunities as the high cost (and opportunity cost) of leaving their home school for an extended period of time (Custer & Tuominen, 2017); fear of geopolitical factors such as the rise of nationalism, and cultural and political conflict that deter many non-white and first-generation post-secondary students from participating in international education opportunities off campus (Robson et al., 2018).

The full long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global education is not yet known, but, as Upson and Bergiel (2022) and Tuan (2022) speculate, ongoing restrictions in many countries, such as border closures and quarantine measures, will continue to disadvantage less privileged students seeking global experiences – especially short-term group programs like GSPs. Indeed, virtual international experiences, such as virtual GSP "look set to endure post-pandemic"

(Tuan, 2022, para 11), with specific aspects of GSP likely to persist into the foreseeable future (Gallagher, 2021). In reframing the pandemic crisis as an opportunity, Brandauer et al. (2022) assert virtual international education can be a mechanism for achieving our “collective commitment to building just, inclusive and sustainable communities, a spirit of collaboration and a desire to seek out future-forward and innovative opportunities for continued global learning” (p. 9).

Critique of Virtual Study Abroad

In-depth evaluations of virtual international programs are beginning to emerge in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been shown that opportunities to internationalize ‘at home’ through virtual learning experiences can yield fruitful intercultural learning experiences (Custer & Tuominen, 2017; Soria & Troisi, 2014; Watkins & Smith, 2018). Nevertheless, there have been some challenges and drawbacks identified in the virtual learning environment that educators must be mindful of when designing and executing these international group programs. Challenges include the inability of students to consistently interact due to time-zone constraints (King et al., 2021; Krishnan et al., 2021), the need for unstructured socialization time for students to interact outside of an academic setting (King et al., 2021), and logistical challenges such as the use of different online learning platforms and types of technology (Krishnan et al., 2021).

While many see the opportunity for students to participate in virtual programming as a way to increase the number of students who are able to incorporate an international experience into their post-secondary program, it is important to remember that “more exposure to other cultures via international field experience highlights the fact that working across cultures can be complicated, which may subsequently dissuade students from engaging in these types of activities” (Lee et al., 2022, p. 206). Additionally, the favourable cost and

convenience may also deter students from traveling abroad in the long run (Lee et al., 2022). Importantly, King et al. (2021) noted in their study findings that students who physically traveled to their host country had different learning outcomes than those who participated in the same program virtually (p. 796).

The Nepal Virtual Group Study Program

The Nepal GSP was developed by two social work educators from UC. In terms of background and preparation, Christine Walsh has been to Nepal conducting extensive field visits to determine the suitability for the group study in Nepal in each of the two years preceding the virtual implementation, and Rita Dhungel, a native of Nepal, has extensive connections in Nepal including in the post-secondary educational sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social agencies, and the tourism sector. Her dissertation research was conducted in Nepal, where she continues to have an active program of research. Hana Curties is a UC Global Learning Advisor who has worked on programming, promoting, and studying intercultural development in students participating in travel and virtual education abroad programming. Curties provided logistical support for the program including recruitment and enrolment and led a mandatory orientation session for students to ensure that they were equipped to work in intercultural groups online. Walsh and Dhungel engaged in extensive consultation and research prior to implementing the GSP. In terms of consultation, over the course of approximately two years, the two first met with staff at UC International, other UC group study educators and experts, and members of NGOs and educators in SWSC, Kamdambari College, and Tribhuvan University in Nepal. Additionally, the two UC instructors completed a 14-day field study in Nepal in June 2019 to examine opportunities for mounting a GSP in Nepal. Also, Walsh et al. (2021) completed primary research on developing an anti-colonial/postcolonial framework to conduct international field education, which she used to successfully implement a 2019 GSP in Mexico.

The Nepal GSP was designed to build students' skills in intercultural practices to address such social issues – whether in Nepal, Canada, or elsewhere. The pedagogical orientation of this GSP was rooted in critical pedagogy (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005) and participatory methods as a means of disrupting the reproduction of “hierarchies of power and colonialism” (Pipitone, 2018, p. 54). In our teaching, we sought to move, in some small way, towards Nepali social work educator Raj Yadav's (2019) directive to “unmask the ongoing insidious effects of domination, exploitation, oppression, and injustice all too visible in the importation of West-centric social work in ‘Other’ contexts . . . to achieve progressive home-grown social work to ensure sustainable human development goals (p. 4).

Our intention in developing the GSP was to use critical/participatory principles and pedagogical frameworks to deliver a collaborative GSP that examines social issues in Nepal through a multi-disciplinary framework that focuses on the United Nations 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations General Assembly) 2015 in Nepal (United Nations Nepal, 2022), and, to a lesser extent, in Canada. In 2015 the global community agreed to the 2030 Global Agenda entitled ‘Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. This action plan which replaces the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is universal in nature and comprehensive in the range of issues and concerns addressed pertaining to development, economy, human rights, and the environment. The theme of ‘no one will be left behind’ is most critical so as to ensure that inclusive development is within the reach of all people groups and communities. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014), the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare jointly initiated a global agenda between 2012 and 2016 to support the UN in the preparation of the post-2015 development agenda, specifically to “strive with others for a people-focused global economy

that is regulated to protect and promote social justice, human rights, and sustainable development” and to “promote education and practice standards in social work and social development that enabled workers to facilitate sustainable social development outcomes” (IFSW 2014, p 3).

Cordoba and Bando (2022) call for “greater social work engagement with the United Nations’ SDGs to address urgent social and environmental challenges” (p. 519). Further, the role of social workers in the achievement of the SDGs is increasingly relevant in light of the inequities uncovered and exacerbated by the global pandemic (Öztürk et al., 2022). Relatedly, Muleya (2020) reinforced the relationship between social development and the SDG in reducing poverty and inequities. However, the SDG in relation to social work education is not without criticism. For example, a study in Malaysia identified the human rights approach as a challenge “due to the political implications and justice aspects which could be viewed as confrontational” and “limited activity in the area of environmental and sustainability” (Jayasooria, 2016, p. 27). Other authors propose the degrowth approach, one that reduces economic activity to achieve ecological sustainability as an alternative, which recognizes “the fundamental incompatibility between relentless economic growth and ecological conservation” (Powers et al., 2021, p. 9).

Given the clear direction from the literature for the need for international education and the salience of the SDGs in social work education to address social inequity among other social justice pursuits, we aimed to deliver the Nepal GSP with the learning objectives of the SDGs as our foundation.

The following section describes the course model. The GSP was comprised of two integrated and cohesive undergraduate elective courses, one taught by each of the social work instructors, in Spring 2020. While our ability to travel to Nepal to deliver the GSP was derailed due to the COVID-19 global

pandemic and the ensuing public health directives and travel bans, our desire to provide a highly engaged, experiential, and collaborative immersion experience for students from the UC and the SWSC was not. We also recognized an added benefit of virtual study abroad is the reduction of the environmental impact of international travel in accordance with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (n.d.), in alignment with UC's membership in the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Canada and contributing to making education accessible to more students a priority of SDG 4, Quality Education.

Collaborative. With support from UC International and administrators at the SWSC in Nepal, we decided to mount a virtual GSP. We worked collaboratively to ensure the delivery of the virtual GSP met, to the highest extent possible, the pedagogical approaches that we had established. That is, to be highly collaborative, interdisciplinary, immersive, and experiential. The virtual course was delivered in Spring 2021 and 2022, with only slight variations between each delivery year. In terms of collaboration, the GSP was designed with input from social work educators from SWSC, who were provided with remuneration for supervision and support of the approximately 20 Nepalese students who took the course each year. Each year, the Nepalese students and the approximately 20 UC students completed two group projects together, one for each of the two courses. Because of the broad aims and objectives of the course (described in more detail below), we hoped to attract students from a range of disciplines. The instructors were social work educators, and the majority of students were enrolled in social work; a minority of students were from other disciplines (anthropology, astrophysics, business, geography, health sciences, international relations, psychology, and sociology).

Immersive. Lectures and tours applied knowledge through experiential, collaborative, and reciprocal learning encounters that include Nepalese educators, community leaders, organizers, activists, and students. A key focus of this course

is fostering reciprocal learning and knowledge exchange opportunities with social work students from SWSC, engaged as co-learners on this course. Centralizing anti-oppressive theory and practices, learners were encouraged to participate in critical reflexivity and examine their perspectives on social justice and methods of achieving social change.

Experiential. Experiential learning provided students with exposure to and active participation in a wide range of Nepalese cultural activities, including spirituality, meditation, Nepali traditional dance and songs, and the preparation of traditional Nepali food (momo, achar, and chai). Students also learned the basic Nepali language and practiced this skill both inside and outside of classrooms. For example, students had the opportunity to apply their rudimentary language skills when introducing and thanking classroom guest speakers and interacting with Nepali students and community members while completing their group assignments.

All UC GSP students were required to enroll in both courses, for which they received two half-course credits, and complete the usual processes established for study abroad programs. The SWSC students were selected for their potential interest in the GSP by instructors and received a certificate of completion for their participation.

The Courses

The two courses were integrated both substantively and pedagogically and co-taught by both UC instructors. The objective of the community development course is for students to critically understand social justice issues from intersectionality lenses and explore a wide range of community development models/approaches and their applications in Nepal. The sustainable development course builds students' understanding of the SDGs as they relate to key social issues and community development in Nepal. The GSP builds on students'

abilities to work inter-culturally with the opportunity to explore, in collaboration with Nepalese academics, students, and community leaders, how such SDGs and social issues may be addressed through community-based interventions. Specific objectives of each of the courses are detailed below:

Community Development Course

1. Students will be introduced to the history, knowledge, and geo- and socio-political contexts of Nepal.
2. Students will increase their understanding of social issues and social policies in Nepal.
3. Critically examine the social service delivery system in Nepal and its impact on how community services are delivered to urban, rural, and disadvantaged and marginalized communities.
4. Demonstrate an understanding of the links between micro, mezzo, and macro social work practice and how they all work collaboratively to create change.
5. Demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of power in the community setting.
6. Demonstrate an understanding of the historical and current practices and tools used to mobilize communities.
7. Utilize practice skills used to overcome systemic barriers, and to promote human rights and social justice within diverse contexts and with diverse groups.
8. Describe social capital theory, assets-based community development, participatory action research, and community capacity building.
9. Demonstrate the skills necessary to critically self-reflect in the community setting.

10. Demonstrate an understanding of how the neo-liberal and neo-conservative paradigms marginalize vulnerable communities.
11. Apply knowledge of community practice in both local and international settings.

Sustainable Development Course

1. Students will be introduced to and involved in the process of critical reflection/analysis, group discussion, and action-related inter-global and cross-cultural work between (and among) Canada and Nepal.
2. Students will develop their capacity to engage with participatory, popular, and democratic learning processes.
3. Students will develop reciprocal learning and exchange methods with social work students from SWSC in Nepal.
4. Students will develop their knowledge and practice to work inter-culturally.
5. Students will be introduced to a selection of tools and approaches used to address the 2030 SDGs (e.g., human rights and environmental sustainability) at a local level.
6. Students will apply their knowledge of SDGs in relationship to Canada and Nepal

Each of the two courses has three assignments. The first assignment was a self-reflection assignment which prepared the students to begin their engagement, asking them to examine and describe their personal lens with regards to learning interculturality and the substantive content (i.e., community development or SDGs in Nepal). The second assignment for each course was a group project with small groups of SWSC and UC students designed to deepen their engagement interculturality and increase their knowledge of the substantive content. For the community development course, small groups of students from both countries met

virtually with community activists, educators, service providers, and community residents in Nepal to gain an understanding of key social justice issues in that country. For the sustainable development course, working in small cross-cultural groups, students presented their learning on their chosen SDG through a visual research project. The final assignment for the community development course had UC students identify relevant national laws/policies, programs, and services aimed at addressing one social justice issue and examined gaps in existing knowledge. The final assignment for the sustainable development course consisted of an individual written research report that identifies the social issues of interest and the relevant, sustainable development challenge in relation to social work or community development. Students are asked to use the SDG framework to articulate the issue that is being addressed in Nepal, what is working, what is not working, and how the learning can be applied in Canada, an example of which is the article by Buekner and Walsh in this issue.

We hope that the model we have shared is useful for others considering ways to approach the development and delivery of anti-oppressive, international GSPs between social work students and educators in the Global North and South. Further, we propose that examining the UN SDGs might be a useful platform upon which to begin this important work.

Future Directions

We are in the process of evaluating the virtual GSPs, the results of which will be made available in a subsequent publication. In the Spring of 2022, we delivered the GSP through funding provided by the Canadian Government Global Skills Opportunity, in which students in Canada and Nepal took ten additional hours to complete The Global Indigenous Skills program. The aim of this program “is to invest in global skills for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students,

cultivating leadership, identity awareness, and global networks related to Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, connecting, and being” (n. p.).

In the Summer of 2023, we will again work as partners with SWSC to deliver the Nepal GSP virtually; while recognizing the benefits of the study abroad, we still encountered several barriers to participation in travel programming at this time.

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