Chapter 1
Social Work Education, Research and Practice in India and Australia: An Introduction

Ilango Ponnuswami, Abraham P. Francis, and Nonie Harris

Abstract The increased interest among social work educators and practitioners from India and Australia has created many pathways for innovative and creative learning opportunities through exchange programs. Social work educators and practitioners in both the countries have proactively engaged in international short-term faculty and student exchanges and field placements, research activities and collaborative initiatives such as workshops, international conferences and joint publishing of social work texts. The authors, from Bharathidasan University (BDU) and James Cook University (JCU), noted the success of these original endeavors and particularly their potential to create momentum beyond the initial activity. They saw that focusing on collaborative social work learning in their own smaller contexts could create positive change and impact in ways they did not anticipate. This experience, replicated in other collaborative activities, provided enormous insights and learning on both sides, leading finally to the idea of documenting cross-cultural perspectives from India and Australia. In this chapter the authors present their perspective on the scenario of social work education, research and practice in India and Australia. Besides, brief summaries of all the chapters of the book are also presented.

Keywords Social work education · Research · Practice · International collaboration

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I. Ponnuswami and A. Francis (eds.), Social Work Education, Research and Practice,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9797-8_1
Introduction

India and Australia have geographical, economic and cultural similarities; their democratic governments founded in the shared experience of British colonial rule and administration. Today, the international relationship between both countries in political, economic, security, lingual and education matters is remarkably good. Both countries are members of Commonwealth of Nations, founding members of the United Nations and active members of regional economic organizations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and G20, a policy coordination forum that aims at global economic stability and sustainable growth. This shared cross-national experience and collaborative commitment has created pathways for many intellectual exchanges.

The Australia-India Council (AIC), perhaps, best reflects the current priorities of the relationship between India and Australia. The AIC was established by the Australian Government in May 1992 to broaden and deepen Australia-India relations through contacts and exchanges in a range of fields that promote mutual awareness and understanding. With staff in both India and Australia, the AIC funds new innovative projects that build sustainable collaborations and improve perceptions of Australia in India and/or India in Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017).

These international collaborative priorities are also apparent in the Indian and Australian tertiary education sector. This sector continues to expand in both countries, with students seeking international education opportunities beyond the bounds of their own countries. For example, in Australia, the commitment to international education has been given expression in the New Colombo Plan: “A genuine two-way flow of student exchange between Australia and the Indo-Pacific is the cornerstone of the Australian Commonwealth Government’s “New Colombo Plan”, launched in 2013 and aimed at ensuring Australian higher education students are work-ready and connected to the region on graduation” (Harris et al., 2017, p. 430).

However, we argue that student focused priorities, though valuable, potentially obscure richer international exchange initiatives involving academic faculty and practitioners. Social work educators and practitioners in India and Australia, reflecting the broader interests described above, have proactively engaged in international short-term student exchanges and field placements, research activities (Ponnuswami & Harris, 2017) and innovative collaborative initiatives such as workshops, international conferences and joint publishing of social work texts (Francis, La Rosa, Sankaran, & Rajeev, 2015). Over the past decade, we have collaborated together and with other social work colleagues from Bharathidasan University (BDU) and James Cook University (JCU). We found that our universities have much in common. JCU is located in the tropics and is “dedicated to creating a brighter future for life in the tropics world-wide, through graduates and discoveries that make a difference” (JCU, 2019, p. 1). BDU is also located in the tropics, with the goal of “creating in the region a brave new world of academic innovation for social change” (BDU, 2020). Our social work departments are both committed to social justice and enhancing
the lives of people in our communities (Baikady, Pulla, & Channaveer, 2014). This shared commitment has been the foundation of our successful collaborations. These commitments and activities align with a broad consensus across the literature (both Indian and international literature) that social work collaborative activity is valuable, that it plays an important role in establishing and increasing the global status of the social work profession and, most importantly, the standard of practice of its graduates.

In 2012, Assoc. Prof. Abraham P. Francis, invited Prof. Ilango Ponnuswami to JCU as a Cairns Institute Visiting Scholar. During this visit, Prof. Ilango engaged in academic discussions, peer-teaching, research planning and other academic activities. The collaborators found that although they were social work academics from very different parts of the globe, they shared many common research and teaching experiences. Consequent endeavours have included primary research, conference presentations and scholarly publications—and, in 2018, a successful proposal to the Global Initiative for Academic Networks (GIAN) to design and deliver the 5-day workshop on research teaching.

These endeavours provided opportunities for collaborative activities that have a long-reaching impact into the social work education sector. For example, in 2013, the editors of this book collaborated with colleagues from Bharathidasan University, India, and James Cook University in Australia to hold a Scientific Writing and Publishing Workshop in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The workshop gave an opportunity for social work post-graduate students and faculty to work together to increase their skills in research, scientific writing and publishing (Ponnuswami, Francis, & Harris, 2013).

The editors noted the success of original endeavours, such as the Scientific Writing and Publication Workshop, and particularly its potential to create momentum beyond the initial activity. They saw that focusing on collaborative social work learning in our own smaller contexts could create positive change and impact in ways they did not anticipate. This experience was replicated in other collaborative activities—joint conferences, workshops and collaborative research publications, with enormous insights and learnings gained from both sides, leading finally to the idea of documenting cross-cultural perspectives from India and Australia.

These efforts are indicators of genuine commitment to activity between institutions providing tangible benefit and strong collaborative foundations, often consolidated in Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) between institutions. MOUs acknowledge and recognise past engagement and achievements and are, also, a positive commitment to future collaboration—providing a foundation beyond current vision—opening the door to new possibilities. A 2018 Memorandum of Understanding between BDU and JCU was the product of many years of genuine and sustained engagement and collaborative work. An MOU comes from consistent effort that has delivered recognised, valuable and beneficial outcomes for the institutions that subsequently reach a memorandum of understanding. Our MOU acknowledged and recognised past engagement and achievements and was, also, a positive commitment to future collaboration—providing a foundation beyond our current vision—opening the door to new possibilities.
These various collaborative initiatives and outcomes from social work faculty at Bharathidasan University and James Cook University have occurred over the past eight years, and now culminate in this book project. It is our hope that this publication serves to inspire readers to see the benefits of international collaboration and, where possible to undertake replication and move beyond the reflections of the authors in this book.

The Purpose of This Book

This book is an effort to support scholarship and international collaboration in social work education, research and practice. It addresses a broad range of issues related to the social work profession in India and Australia; particularly issues relating to social work education, research and practice within a cross-cultural perspective. The focus is on social work in both contexts, and recognition of the profession, regulatory mechanisms, roles and functions of social workers in different settings, issues and challenges faced by the social work fraternity and cross-cultural insights and learnings. Our intention is to bridge the gap in social work education, research and practice by enhancing and creating more relevant learning opportunities for students and researchers. This book will share some of these initiatives, illustrate the need for academic rigour in social work education, enhancement of quality and standards of education, research and practice and share stories of innovation in practice. We believe this book is a celebration of social work collaboration across two countries underpinned by the values of social justice and human rights.

This book is collaborative in nature and includes research papers, practice experiences, reflections and innovative approaches to learning and teaching in social work education. Most of the authors have professional association with Australia, and hence, as a reader you will find references to Australian contexts of practice. This does not in any way mean that the authors or the editors have completely captured the work from Australia rather it should be seen as a way to continue collaboration, conversations and professional engagement to create an environment for learning and teaching in social work, with specific focus on intercultural perspectives and innovation in the sector.

Collaboration with academics in India has enabled us to share some of the work done together while supporting others to contribute to this book. We have retained the voices of the authors in all the chapters and allowed them to share their story as they have encountered in their research, practice and education. This book consists of some great lessons on inquiry-based learning (IBL), reflective practices, innovative approaches in education, decoloniality, community engagement and the role of community engagement in higher education. Also, the book includes papers on death, school mental health, health social work and working with older people, including discussions on cross-cultural practices, migration, criminal justice social work and conversations on decolonising social work research education.
Chapter Summaries

The following summaries provide an overall orientation to the volume:

This chapter is contributed by Prof. Ilango Ponnuswami, Dr. Abraham P. Francis and Dr. Nonie Harris introduces the reader to the concept and the rationale of the book and discusses the significance of the book in the context of international collaborations, resource sharing and capacity building initiatives undertaken by the authors over a decade in India and Australia. During this period, several activities, programmes and research ventures were conducted in both countries with a focus on social work education, research and practice by the authors themselves and many of the contributing authors of this book. Therefore, the introductory chapter paints a picture of the landscape of the contexts, nature of the activities, cross-cultural practices that have occurred during this process of a decade long engagement that not only enhanced our learning and teaching, but also helped us in making long-lasting partnerships, friendships and collaborations.

In Chap. 2, Dr. Venkat Rao Pulla and Dr. Abraham P. Francis endeavour to look at the impetus for social work teaching in India and Australia, two former British colonies. The chapter offers a historical analysis, including the incidental timing of the introduction of the professional educational programmes. The authors review the teaching practices and the pedagogic models in both the countries alongside their standards, accreditation and requirements of learning with a view to discussing the future of social work in both the countries.

In Chap. 3, Dr. Kalpana Goel addresses the importance of assessment feedback in higher education—and undertakes a cross-cultural perspective through the lens of the reflections of an academic’s experiences and perception on receiving and providing feedback in a cross-cultural higher education context. The chapter aims to bridge a gap within the cross-cultural context through research to advance best practices in higher education, especially in teaching social work.

In Chap. 4, Dr. Renu A. Shah locates inquiry-based learning—IBL within social work education both in India and Australia. The chapter discusses a set of inquiry-based pedagogies used by the author in her classroom teaching and field practicum processes. IBL requires conscious efforts from educators and also a firm belief in the immense potential of young learners and practitioners is presented here as a new direction to their overall development as a social worker.

In Chap. 5, Dr. Abraham P. Francis and Dr. Amy Forbes discuss the Competence, Confidence, and Compassion (3Cs) of social work education providing a detailed discussion on the need to respond to the challenges facing the sector, and sharing their approach with specific reference to their university. This chapter is based on a collaboration between two academic groups focusing on the role of the social worker as a multidisciplinary team member in the mental health sector. This chapter illustrates the increased need for social workers in the mental health field and how social work students can be trained to become engaged practitioners in the sector. In doing so, the authors have attempted to embed these 3Cs in their curriculum with
an emphasis on collaboration, professional development, student engagement and empowerment.

In Chap. 6, Prof. Ilango Ponnuswami and Dr. Nonie Harris address the complexity of honouring Indigenous knowledge, decolonizing our research teaching while considering the place and value of western research knowledge and theory. They argue that there are no simple responses to these complex considerations and, further, that research educators need to adopt a sophisticated and nuanced approach, focusing on collaboration and critical reflection.

In Chap. 7, Dr. Venkat Rao Pulla describes an understanding and approach to transformational learning and reflexivity. More specifically, the chapter presents explanations around the usage of concepts of reflexivity, positionality, privilege, situated knowledge and perceptions and the intricate relationships between these concepts. This discussion is provided as part of developing a practice framework in social work to build competencies.

In Chap. 8, Dr. Narayan Gopalkrishnan discusses the critical role of community development in social work education by highlighting how we are interconnected and interdependent in our lives. The local and the global are deeply intertwined, leading to complex transnational problems and shared risks that continue to impact heavily on communities. Cultural diversity has been discussed in the context of community development and what lessons could be applied in social work has been discussed in the chapter.

In Chap. 9, Dr. Joseph M. K. and Dr. Elsa Mary Jacob present their recent study on community engagement of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Kerala, India, during the 12th five-year plan period. The study revealed that promoting neighbourhood/community engagement programs have catalysed attitudinal change among the youth as well as the authorities in using the untapped youth energy for constructive and nation-building purposes. This research has potential for practice implications for the profession and portrays the significance of community approaches to research.

In Chap. 10, Dr. Hyacinth Udah examines the importance of decoloniality in social work education in Australia. The author suggests that the inclusion of Indigenous, immigrant and refugee communities’ ways of learning, knowing, being and doing is needed for effective social work education and practice in multicultural Australia.

In Chap. 11, Dr. Archana Kaushik talks about death providing some keys ideas around the implications for social work practice based on her recent research study. The author suggests that culture plays crucial role in perception of, and dealing with death. Insights on the needs of death education are derived from the cases in the study keeping in mind the cross-cultural contexts of practice in both countries. Kaushik calls for more palliative care social work activities to be developed and implemented in India and draw from the practice experience form others in the sector.

In Chap. 12, Dr. Sigamani Paneer, J. Raja Meenakshi and Dr. Shuchi Bharti share their work on evidence-based practice and its relevance to social work education. Using a case study approach, the authors discuss the importance of the use of evidenced-based practice in responding to the issues faced in the society and the need to be incorporated in the curriculum.
In Chap. 13, Dr. Saman Afroz draws readers’ attention towards social work in health care and by particularly highlighting the history, developments and recent challenges in the health sector and calls for revisiting the fundamental values and ethics of the profession. While acknowledging the health sector in Australia employs a significant number of social workers in comparison to the Indian context, the Australian health social work fraternity is also grappling with its own set of challenges. The lessons from both these contexts provide not only a rich understanding about the health sector but do provide some reflections on the professional experiences of the practitioner which again adds value to our shared understanding.

In Chap. 14, Dr. J. O. Jeryda Gnanajane Eljo, Dr. Ilango Ponnuswami, Ms. Preji. P. Daniel address the critical mental health needs in school. The authors argue that having an evidence-based and scientific school mental health program is beneficial for the wellbeing of young children. The authors suggest that culturally appropriate services are to be designed in such a way that services create an environment of positivity and engagement and the social work profession has a lot to contribute to making this happen.

In Chap. 15, Dr. Vinay Xavier discusses reproductive health. It is one of the important health aspects of an individual, couples and families as well as of global health. This study is initiated to understand the knowledge and attitude of adolescent boys about reproductive health and how social workers can better engage with youth in discussing matters related to reproductive health.

In Chap. 16, Dr. Purnima Venkat focuses on the trend of migration and provides a lens to the struggles of migrants. Migration has an impact on multiple stakeholders both in the location that receives migrants and the location that loses population.

In Chap. 17, Frank Darkwa Baffour, Mark David Chong and Abraham P. Francis discuss the relevance of criminal justice social work practice both in Australia and India. Drawing on from the recent developments and research in this area of practice, the authors argue for further engagement and research. This chapter offers some possible strategies to move forward with an agenda on collaborative training and partnership with organisations from both governments/non-government and academic institutions.

In Chap. 18, Dr. P. Udhayakumar and Dr. Ilango Ponnuswami address gerontological social work practice in mental health: The chapter offers a comparative analysis between Indian and Australian gerontological social work practice. The burden of geriatric mental health, geriatric mental healthcare system and health services utilization between India and Australia are discussed in this chapter.

In Chap. 19, Dr. Beena Antony Reji shares her research experience with older people and the need for social work interventions in promoting advance care plans. This chapter looks into the emerging trend of planning one’s own death with family and medical professionals, especially in an Indian context. This research chapter is based on qualitative data collected by interviews conducted with older persons which illustrates the role of the social work profession. There is a need to face, confront and prepare for death just like society prepares for all life events and happenings. The preparation to death is in the context of, medically and socially, how do we prepare for the “End of Life” situation. It is important to plan for death; this planning is
also called ‘advance care planning’. This has been discussed by incorporating voices from the research participants, and the thematic analysis provides a bird’s eye view of the issues faced by older people and highlights the significance of advance care plans.

In Chap. 20, Dr. Abraham P. Francis, Dr. Ilango Ponnuswami and Dr. Hyacinth Udah conclude with some reflections for the future social work education, research and practice in the context of post-COVID-19. This chapter is a celebration of ideas, insights and reflections on social work and is further strengthened by the views and voices from academics, practitioners and researchers in responding to the challenges faced by humanity post-COVID-19 world. While there are some sobering views, the readers are made to think creatively and reflectively to come into terms with reality and see the possibilities that await the social work profession.

This book is an ambitious task, but it is something that we thought to share with readers to see a new perspective that is emerging and make meaning out of the explorations that you might endeavour to do in your respective areas of practice.

Concluding Remarks

Learning is a continuous process that occurs in many ways—learning by doing, learning by seeing, learning from mistakes and learning from successes. When we compare India and Australia, we see differences in economic and social development as a result of which even social work practice contexts show differences. One suggested move could be improving practice standards in the Indian social work context. Another suggestion could be utilizing some community practices from the many tribal and rural communities in India and blending them with the Western practice. National-level association such as NAPSWI in India has a task of ensuring that the standards are created in the first place and then adhered to.

Finally, the final draft of this book was completed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, witnessing its overwhelming effects across the world. As social workers, we wonder about the post-COVID-19 world—what will this new and potentially profoundly changed world look like? What are the opportunities for social work education, research and practice? It is our hope that the contributions in this book can make a modest, but real, contribution to a new vision of social work practice.

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