



# A phenomenological study of an international teaching practicum: Pre-service teachers' experiences of professional development



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- New world views of education and culture gained in the international practicum.
- Deep understanding of educational systems enhanced teaching-learning practices.
- International practicum leads to awareness of diverse work conditions and culture.
- Length of international teaching practicum is critical for meaningful experiences.

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports a research project planned and organized by the School of Educational Studies of Universiti Sains Malaysia to provide an international teaching practicum experience to six pre-service teachers for six weeks in Maldives. Using qualitative data from an open-ended questionnaire and reflective journals, the six pre-service teachers' experience of professional development during their international teaching practicum is examined, analysed and described. The findings show that the six students experienced beneficial and meaningful professional development. Some challenges and limitations of the international practicum are also highlighted. Based on this study, implications for teacher education/training of TESOL/TESL teachers are suggested.

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## 1. Introduction

In a multicultural context, teachers and learners have the opportunity to learn from and about each other, and understand the different ideas and philosophies of diverse groups of individuals. By doing so, teachers and learners are able to teach and learn in an atmosphere that forges stronger relationships and facilitates better understanding of other's views, beliefs and cultures. This multicultural context is propagated by 'borderless education', which is a concept whereby the provision of education is not determined or influenced by factors related to time, space and geography (Middlehurst, 2006). In other words, education can be planned and managed anywhere and anytime, especially with the aid of technology.

The introduction of information communication technology (ICT), especially the Internet, in the field of education has

contributed to various initiatives related to the above borderless education. For instance, it has allowed educational institutions to initiate joint ventures and strategic alliances with external institutions that foster meaningful collaborations and networking (see Bowman, Boyle, Greenstone, Herndon, & Valente, 2000; Kabilan, Wan Fara & Mohamed Amin, 2011; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Ching-Fen, 2003), encourage students' learning experiences (see Looi et al., 2009; Lund, Tate, & Hyde-Robertson, 1998), empower teachers, contribute to overall school improvement, and share good practices and initiatives that are generated by teachers (Muijs & Harris, 2006). It is believed that institutional collaborations and networking will eventually lead to teacher collaboration, which is basically a critical element in the workplace condition that encompass both the "cultural and political environments" that can significantly contribute to pupils' learning, teacher development and school progress and improvement (Kelchtermans, 2006, p. 220). This notion of institutional collaborations leading to school improvement is possible due to the exchanging and sharing of ideas and practices between collaborating teachers. Discussions that transpire during the sharing sessions are ideal for the teachers to

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gain new ideas, refine and reconstruct existing knowledge and practices, and construct new knowledge and practices related to teaching and learning. These ideas, knowledge and practices contribute to school change and improvement, if practised and monitored by the participating teachers.

In addition to the above benefits, the international acknowledgement and recognition that an educational institution gains will spur many institutions to initiate and develop collaboration and networking with other international institutions. This motivation, at most times, is guided and driven by the economic and political objectives of a government that wishes to leave its mark in the international setting and increase and strengthen its relationships with other countries (Callan, 2000; Chan & Dimmock, 2008; Luukkonen, Persson, & Sivertsen, 1992). For example, in Europe, the European Commission (EC) sees “international collaboration at all levels (as opposed to harmonisation or competition)” as a key characteristic of European higher education, which should focus on developing “greater political weight with increased impact on a wider scale” (Keeling, 2006, p. 208) and therefore, become “the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (Keeling, 2006, p. 217). This means that the political will and educational policies of a country may become the determining factors that encourage (or discourage) collaboration of institutions in an international context.

In the Malaysian context, human capital development is identified as a focal point of globalization and transformation that will lead to the education of “a new generation of Malaysians who are able to engage actively in the global world” (MOHE, 2007, p. 49). The concept of human capital development as a component of globalization has also been the emphasis of numerous higher educational institutions around the world – Philippines (Symaco, 2011), Uganda (Bunoti, 2011), Australia (Hazelkorn, 2010) and Finland (Kyro, 2006). It is extremely vital that students develop global perspectives, and other related critical knowledge and skills, which can be attained through increased student mobility and exchange during their tertiary education, particularly in an internationalised curriculum (MOHE, 2007; Nilsson, 2003).

With the above initiatives and vision in mind, the School of Educational Studies of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) embarked upon a research-cum-international teaching practicum project with three secondary schools in Maldives, in collaboration with Villa College (VC), a premier university in Maldives specializing in the field of education. The aim of this initiative is to empower the selected pre-service teachers with skills and knowledge that are associated with learning, teaching and experiencing in the globalization era and in an international context.

The Literature underpins pre-service teachers’ professional development as an important area that needs critical attention. Professional development has the ability to move teachers towards a more professional stance in their contributions and understandings as future practicing teachers (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010) and help them develop a sense of professional community (Sim, 2005). Through this research, the university aims to identify the pre-service teachers’ professional development experiences and find ways to further improve the current practices of teaching practicum and thus, enhance the teacher education programme. It has to be emphasized that the aim of this study is not to examine skills and knowledge of the pre-service teachers per se, but to identify and investigate professional development experiences that are beneficial to these future English language teachers as a result of their international teaching practicum. For the purpose of this paper, the concept ‘beneficial professional development experiences’ is defined as pre-service teachers’ perceived gains of professional development that are extracted and derived from their experiences of teaching in the

Maldivian schools. These perceived gains of professional development, based on the pre-service teachers’ experiences, are identified using the pre-service teachers’ voices and views in accordance with the phenomenological-like nature of this study. Hence, the purpose of this article is to identify, examine and describe the pre-service teachers’ perceived gains of professional development during an international teaching practicum. In order to fulfil this purpose, the paper will: (1) identify research gaps through a review of existing research on international practicum; (2) examine pre-service teachers’ experiences of professional development using the phenomenological research framework and; (3) describe the perceived gains of professional development and its implications.

## 2. Literature review

Many colleges and universities in the United States, as well as in other developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, have initiated and developed some form of study abroad programmes (or internationalised curriculum) to enable their students to receive an international learning experience and gain relevant exposure (Thomas, 2006). These study abroad programmes, which have been initiated as early as in the 1970s, are usually in the form of student exchange programmes, short study programmes, teaching practicum, field experience, immersion programmes or even brief placements and attachments. Research indicates that such experiences are very beneficial to the students in terms of enhancing their knowledge and skills, world views and thus their cross-cultural effectiveness, coping with unfamiliar surroundings, providing a global perspective and, increasing self-reliance, self-confidence and personal well-being (see Carsello & Creaser, 1976; Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Kambutu & Nganga, 2008; Kitsantas & Meyers, 2002; Kuh & Kauffman, 1984; Lee, 2009; Malewski & Phillion, 2009; McCabe, 1994; Nilsson, 2003; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Rodriguez, 2011). The above new knowledge and skills (as well as other benefits) that are gained during international practicums lead to pre-service teachers’ increased professional competence (e.g. Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Ward & Ward, 2003; Willard-Holt, 2001). These competencies are essential elements of professional development that a teacher should possess and be able to translate into everyday teaching and learning practices in the classroom settings for the benefit of learning and development of students. Using the conceptual change theory used by Wilson (2001), Maynes, Allison, and Julien-Schultz (2012) hypothesise that these competencies can be linked to the changes in the pre-service teachers’ perspectives as a direct result of their experiences in the international settings. This significantly contributes to the pre-service teachers’ ‘personal and professional paradigm shifts’ (Maynes et al., 2012, p. 72) and enhances their cognitive and affective competencies by: (1) reflecting critically on their international experiences (2); integrating knowledge learned from that experience with knowledge possessed and (3); making decisions and taking actions on the insights acquired from critical reflections (Brookfield, 1998). Using Brookfield’s (1995) conceptualization of critical reflections may explain the pre-service teachers’ practices and actions during their international practicum. It is hoped that, during the international practicum, Brookfield’s (1995) ideas will assist and lead the pre-service teachers to:

1. realize that teaching is embedded in ideologies;
2. see themselves as professionals who are constantly developing and growing;
3. make the connection between their concerns as teachers, students’ learning experiences and the overarching educational process;

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