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Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas
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Internationaler Ausschuss

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Information: International practice placement semesters in the area of social work

Our faculty welcomes the fact that an increasing number of students are choosing to complete part of their course in a foreign country. Many are utilising the practice placement semester which is integrated into the bachelor social work programme as an opportunity to do so. We therefore wish to provide organisations offering practice placements and higher education institutes in other countries with information regarding the practice placement semester. Below, we provide information on the organisation of the practice placement semester.

The University of Applied Sciences is hoping, in providing this information, that many organisations offering practice placements in other countries will participate in the teaching of social workers and social pedagogues and will thereby, together with the University of Applied Sciences in Münster, contribute to the success of a teaching programme which is equally knowledge and practice based.

1. Introduction

Teaching programmes for social workers and social pedagogues should not just teach theory and develop the capacity to think in a scientific manner, they should also give students the skills they require to practice in the social work field. Clearly the teaching programme at the University of Applied Sciences cannot aim to train students for all areas of social work equally, but the teaching must enable students to confront the reality of social work by introducing students to some areas of work and enabling them to gain intensive practical experience in one area, to serve as an example.

The practice placement semester is of unique and emphatic significance within the course.

- Students may only participate in a practice placement semester once they have acquired basic knowledge and have demonstrated this by passing the relevant examinations. This means that students come to practice placement semesters with a firm foundation, which is laid down in the curriculum.
- The practice placement semester enables and requires students to become deeply involved in one area of activity over a prolonged period. This makes the practical experience more intensive.

- The practice placement semester is integrated into the course and students therefore receive intensive support from full time teaching staff at a higher education institute. Students can reflect on the interaction between theory and practice and use this interaction as a differentiating element during the remainder of their course.

The importance of the practice placement semester within the course is demonstrated by the following:

- The practice placement semester is an important part of the course structure,
- it enables students to experience examples of practice,
- it creates points of contact for considering relationships between theory and practice,
- it promotes examination of the role of the profession and
- it promotes a more conscious attitude to the course and a more directed approach to the concluding years of the course.

The practice placement semester is therefore a study semester which primarily takes place not at the University of Applied Sciences, but in a practical environment.

The practice placement semester is also of particular importance because it is a requirement for acquiring the state licence, which in Germany is awarded as the full professional qualification for the social work bachelor. The professional title Social Worker/Social Pedagogue is a regulated title in Germany. The state licence entitles the practitioner to carry out statutory duties, and support people in particularly vulnerable situations.

2. Timing considerations

In Germany, the university year is divided into two semesters, the summer semester (March – August) and the winter semester (September – February). In practice, this means that most students start their international semester in either March or August.

The practice placement semester (640 hours) spans a continuous period of 21 weeks which includes 30 working hours per week or 25 weeks which includes 25 working hours per week. Working hours may be arranged with flexibility in consultation with the organisation in which the practice placement semester takes place.

<i>Model: Period of the practice placement semester</i>	
Summer semester:	February/March – June/July
Winter semester:	August/September – December/January

In Germany, students regularly participate in at least four hours of teaching per week at the University of Applied Sciences during the period of the practice placement semester. These teaching sessions are of a supervisory nature and are intended to offer students the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences in the practice setting and their own professional role.

The international practice placement semester must also be accompanied by a course at a higher education institution. Practical instruction in the course of everyday work is not a substitute for courses at a higher education institute. (See also section 3.3.)

3. The road to a successful practice placement semester: What is expected of those involved?

For a practice placement semester to be successful, there are three people or organisations which need to actively involve themselves – the organisation offering the practice placement, the higher education institute and the student. We set out below what is expected of the organisation offering the practice placement, the student and the higher education institute, all of which need to come together to organise a successful practice placement semester.

3.1 What is expected of the student?

Students should not adopt the role of passive recipients of learning. Rather a successful practice placement semester depends to a large extent on whether students input their own aims and their own ideas of what they wish to learn, demonstrate a committed sense of curiosity and willingness to research, and actively participate. It is only by articulating their wants and expectations with regard to their practice placement semester that discrepancies between the student's and institution's expectations can be reconciled and a satisfactory practice placement semester, which brings benefit to the course as a whole, can be achieved.

As with any learning orientated practice, students require proper instruction. The quality of this instruction is dependent on the personal commitment of the supervisor and the institutional situation. The student's attitude is, naturally, of equally importance. The institution's commitment to active instruction, support and reflection is often only effectively realised when the student actively demands it. Arranging ongoing tutorial appointments with a supervisor at the start of the practice placement semester period has proved a useful step.

Students should

- clarify their own expectations for the practice period before commencing the practice placement semester,
- formulate criteria and questions for assessing the practical experience,
- collect information and formulate questions with regard to the structural elements of social work activity (the situation of and problem areas relating to the client groups involved, concepts and methods within the actual field of activity, socio-political and organisational features, internal organisation of the institution),
- develop a willingness to engage with a social work agency, with its specific way of doing things,
- be prepared to apply critical comments during reflective discussions,
- relate practice experiences to theoretical course material in a critical manner,
- reflect upon the connection between the specific methodological aspects and the socio-political aspects of social work,
- reconcile their own personal values and way of seeing people with their experience in the specific institutional social work context.

If students commence and complete their practice placement semesters with this attitude and this awareness of the importance of the practice placement semester within their course, they stand to gain the maximum benefit both from the practical instruction and from the accompanying teaching and evaluation sessions at the higher education institute.

All students who participate in an international semester are urged to acquire very good language skills and knowledge of the country to which they are travelling.

3.2 What is expected of the organisation offering the practice placement?

The practice placement semester can be completed at institutions and workplaces in which professional social work is carried out and in which it is possible to fulfil the teaching requirements of the practice placement semester through qualified instruction by a supervisor with professional experience.

Personal, expert instruction is a basic requirement for a positive practice placement semester. The teaching element of the practice placement semester should be delivered by experienced social workers.

During the practice placement semester, the practice supervisor / team should arrange specific regular periods for reflection with the student. A regular period for reflection demonstrates that the institution offering the practice placement recognises and accepts the student's learning status.

The basis of the student's activities during the practice placement semester is a written learning plan (see below in the appendix). The learning plan should take into account the student's expectations and be negotiated with the student's supervisor. These expectations should be attuned to the opportunities offered by the particular institution. The learning plan should be generated during the first four weeks of the practice placement semester and sent to the University of Applied Sciences' (contact details: see below at the end of this document). It is also recommended that the learning plan be discussed as part of the teaching given at the higher education institute.

Students must be given the opportunity to gain professional experience with social work clients. The practice placement facility should enable the student to learn by example, i.e. provide the student with a learning environment which does not overtax him/her, but which offers relevant professional social work experience. Instruction should require and encourage students to act autonomously, but protect them from being overtaxed and give them opportunities to reflect on their practice experiences.

3.3 What is expected of the higher education institute?

Students in the practice placement semester are awarded a grade for their work during the teaching sessions which accompany the practice placement semester, to which end they prepare a written practice placement report. This is either a structured and comprehensive report on the practice placement, or a seminar presentation to be submitted in written form, within the framework of the course.

The University of Applied Sciences in Münster will recognise a practice placement semester in another country if

- the organisation offering the practice placement has produced a learning plan in collaboration with the student and
- a detailed practice placement certificate is issued to the student at the end of the practice placement period. This certificate will state: the duration of the placement in terms of start and end dates as well as the total number of hours completed; brief information about the organization; the tasks completed by the student; name and qualification of the supervisor; and additional comments, for instance on the student and how they performed their tasks.
- the student submits a written report (either in the local language or in German with a summary in the local language).

4. Contact

The University of Applied Sciences in Münster is always available to answer questions from and provide information to foreign institutions offering practical placements and higher education institutes.

Our contact persons are:

- the practice office (Martina Kriener/ Britta Schürmann, Email: fb10_RePP)
- the relevant official for international affairs (Prof.in Kulkanti Barboza Email: barboza@fh-muenster.de)

We would like to offer our thanks for your work in teaching our students.

Yours sincerely,

This and further information can be found at:

<https://www.fh-muenster.de/sw/internationales/partner/starseite-internationales.php>

Appendix

Recommendations when compiling a learning plan for the practice placement semester

The collaborative planning at the beginning of a practice placement should, as noted above, be recorded in writing in a learning plan. The learning plan clarifies the planned way in which the practice placement student is introduced to the practice field, professional practice and professional responsibility.

The practice placement student's individual learning wishes and expectations are to be referred to in the learning plan, following detailed discussion with the practice placement supervisor and consideration of the actual learning opportunities within the agency. The learning plan will be sent to Prof.in Barbaosa at least four weeks before the commencement of the practice placement.

Please formulate concrete learning objectives, so that these may be checked off at the end of the practice placement.

Recommendations for the content and structure of individual learning plans:

1. Formal structure of the practice placement (maximum ½ page)

Please list, on **letter headed paper** from the agency:

- Agency and concrete location of the practice placement (Where exactly will the practice placement student carry out their work)
- Name and qualification of the practice placement supervisor
- Name of the practice placement student
- Length of the practice placement, from... to...
- Working times, for instance full-time or part-time
- Signature and stamp of agency

2. Professional context of the agency where the placement is done (maximum ½ page)

Please list:

- Legal contexts, objectives and tasks of the facility
- Relationship to social work practice fields
- Service users and clients
- Social work methods and type of work

3. Content of the learning

Please list:

- Possible tasks, work focus and learning opportunities for the practice placement student
- Concrete learning objectives, related to the length of the practice placement
- Forms of learning, for instance by work shadowing, observation, carrying out of particular tasks and activities, participation in team meetings and external supervision
- Practice placement supervision forms and practice placement supervision content.