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# Exploring the relevance of sustainability values and principles - Impact of International Social Education (ISE) in a local context

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## Abstract

This article explores the relevance of sustainability in international social education (ISE). Our empirical data is based on a survey of 30 social work students from Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Sweden. Theoretically, we draw on Bronfenbrenner's theory of social ecosystems and Dewey's emphasis on democratic learning. We use a qualitative approach based on Strauss' Grounded Theory, which allows us to dig deep into the meanings of the students we interviewed. The interviewed students experienced more or less continuously that learning in an international context is learning with all senses, is a "24/7 learning", and is learning in another language (at least most of the time). The results of our survey underline that acquiring knowledge in an international context contributes to a comprehensive understanding of social work as a profession and to the formation of a broad and professional identity. This includes a broad range of critical and systemic thinking skills that enable enquiry, integration and holistic thinking, i.e. sustainability.

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*"Education should not be a rigid system of production. This destroys creativity, innate genius, and humanity. An education of nurture is a need for a conscious planet"* (Sadhguru)

## Introduction

Our welfare societies face a growing number of cross-border challenges. They are confronted with rapid changes in society that come with an increased use of digital technology, economic constraints, the challenges of an increasingly diverse population, and the transformation of work. Societal change is a challenge for many citizens as they struggle to keep up with and adapt to new technologies and

societal changes, which in turn place new demands on the social professions (Lester 2020; Rosa 2016; UNCTAD 2020).

In the future, artificial intelligence can radically change our whole concept of what intelligence is. This will fundamentally alter our ideas of what education, teaching, and the tasks of teachers mean. The difference between humans and machines is perception. Perception is something that no machine will ever have. The machine can collect data, analysis, and even act, but that's about it. All these factors are functions of the intellect that can be copied and even improved by artificial intelligence. Distinguishing ourselves from machines in a meaningful way and not just perceiving their functions can only be done on the level of perception (Bearman *et al.* 2022). We understand this phenomenon to mean that we, as humans beings, are able to potentiate our perceptual ability.

The question, which can only be answered in a hint here, is how perception can be trained and promoted. It is the merit and life's work of the American philosopher and cultural theorist Shusterman to examine the human body as an essential place of perception. He argues that the body is not only the important place where one's ethos and values (and, therefore, to a certain extent, one's philosophy of life) is manifested physically and can be developed attractively. The body also serves as a medium through which one's perceptual abilities and consumptive skills can be refined through critical reflection to enhance one's scope of vision and agency for virtue and happiness (Shusterman 1997, 2008, 2012).

What can be deduced from this information is that future education will increasingly have to consider the fact that we have a body and that this body, among other things, is to be taken seriously as an object of perception in education. According to Shusterman (2006) the body, emotions, mind, and culture are deeply co-dependent. Our mental life relies on somatic experience. It can neither be wholly separated from bodily processes nor reduced to them. We as humans think and feel with our bodies, especially with the body parts that constitute the brain and nervous system. Our bodies are likewise affected by mental life.

The initially mentioned challenges require action that contributes to a holistic understanding of societal needs, not least in a field such as social work, improved evidence-based health and effective solutions for health promotion and disease prevention (European Commission, 2021). In the Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2021-2024, the main strategic direction is to 'create a more resilient, inclusive and democratic European society' (ibid).

Given the increasing number of people with disabilities (WHO 2021), human capital, i.e. knowledge, skills and health that people acquire over their lifetime, is a powerful driver of growth and contributes to the cohesion of society (World Bank Group 2020). In this context, developing and maintaining a sustainable work and care environment would greatly benefit. There is a clear correlation between knowledge development and acquisition on the one hand and sustainability on the other (Kirkoff and Lebel, 2006; Mikalauskiene and Atkociuniene 2019). As stated by Fiselier *et al.* (2018), knowledge, skills and attributes developed in higher education will influence the graduate´s lifetime sustainability impacts.

The UN 2030 Agenda aims to realize the human rights of all and put the world on a sustainable and resilient path through the application of the Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), e. g. to ensure healthy lives and well-being (Goal 3), promote lifelong learning (Goal 4) and revitalize global partnerships (United Nations, 2023). Against the backdrop of the right to social inclusion, as emphasized in the European Pillars of Social Rights (European Commission, 2018), appropriate inclusive solutions tailored to the needs of all citizens are urgently needed.

What role should universities play in transforming societies? The social mission of universities is, among other factors, to bring about transparency and comprehensive cooperation. Education and research are components of innovative societies. On the individual side, they require a roadmap for lifelong learning. This role gives higher education institutions a key role in fulfilling the social dimension of sustainability. They are called upon to contribute to increasingly complex, rapidly changing societies (Christersson et al., 2022).

This research paper aims to examine the relevance of sustainability in international social education (ISE) based on a course module in Social Work and Welfare offered at the Malmö University (MaU, 2022). The participating students from Universities in Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Sweden and other countries gave extensive answers to our questions. Our research question is: How can an international classroom in social work education contribute to sustained experiences?

**Theoretical frame**

Social work practice is a complex learning system that essentially comprises levels in knowledge exchange. Hence social work occurs in contexts where the practitioners' ability to gather, analyse and synthesise information about individuals' interactions with their environments is essential. These contexts can be described in terms of different levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998): (i) the micro-social level refers to how the individual understands her identity vis-à-vis her immediate environment; (ii) the meso-social level refers to how the individual understands her identity in interaction with different groups; (iii) the exo-social level refers to how the individual understands her identity as part of and in interaction with society, and its various institutions and educational systems; (iv) the macro-social level refers to how the individual understands her identity vis-à-vis culture, nation, traditions and language, and, lastly, (v) the ex-macro-social level refers to how the individual understands her identity as part of a global society, internationalisation and international relations. Students can reasonably be expected to relate the academic content of social work studies to their future professional identities in these contextual levels.

Social work students in the current political and societal context are primarily called upon to provide individual assistance (e. g. client, family). This level is the 'primary' level within which they interact. To understand the context of social work holistically, the contextual understanding that affects social work needs to be extended to include two other levels: the organizational and the societal level. For personal and professional understanding, social work students need an awareness of the societal and organizational levels, including a local and global understanding. This includes cultural skills and competencies (Garran and Rozas 2013; Ronau 2009). The ability to recognise oneself in the narrative of the interconnected world in local realities is part of glocal education. Niemczyk (2019) explains that the term 'glocal' can be understood as a useful idea because it is a critique of some contemporary notions of globalization:

> '… merging the global and the local means bringing together local learning, engagement and impact with global communication, collaboration and knowledge. Education is broader than just the education system itself. The education system has a societal context and is seen as 'shaped by or the result of societal forces (geographic, demographic, social, economic, cultural, political and religious)' (Niemczyk, 2019).

In short, reflective learning (fostering the ability to build and elaborate new ways of understanding creatively) and reflexive learning processes (meaning the 'movement' from focusing on oneself to connecting with others) in international social education enable participants to see and understand themselves from a broader perspective and strengthen their own professional identity (Christensen and Thönnessen *et al.*, 2020).

Being future-oriented, having a holistic view, believing in sustainability and, finally, being human are some essential qualities that make a good social worker. Some additional skills could include balance,

empathy, ethics, systemic understanding, communication, building personal relationships, a sense of humour, time management, and theoretical and methodological skills (Rufener 2014; Walden University 2019).

Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger (1991) placed learning in the context of social relationships. In doing so, they showed that participation in a community in which knowledge is constructed is particularly decisive for acquiring knowledge. Lave and Wenger distinguished the so-called community of practice from other forms of social cooperation (such as networking). A Community of Practice (CoP), according to the authors, is a practice-based community of people who face similar tasks and want to learn from each other. It does not have the same meaning as the term working community. In the interest of finding solutions, a CoP acts in a largely self-organized way (ibid).

To contribute to a discussion on how a CoP in knowledge sharing can be developed and meet contemporary societal challenges, a critical, creative and holistic approach to learning and knowledge creation should be developed. Knowledge sharing is both about receiving and getting knowledge. Cassai (2013) has shown that participants in CoP seem to focus not just on what was shared but also on how it was shared and that CoP´s could therefore provide a background supporting common rules by which sharing of knowledge is supported.  We need to be aware of the macro, meso and micro levels of learning when thinking about sharing knowledge about CoP, which includes using a common language, shared concepts and commonly accepted strategies (ibid.).

Our society and all its institutions are in a constant process of change. This brings with it the requirement to develop the capacity for lifelong learning (Schön 1973). It is difficult enough to adapt our institutions to changing situations and requirements. However, it is even more difficult to develop institutions that are "learning systems", i.e. systems that are capable of constantly changing themselves (Schön 1973). Therefore, the interaction between professional and occupational roles and the environment is the key to learning and change processes. A modified model of Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecology by Christensen (2016), illustrates this interplay as an environment in which the plurality of actors contributes to the construction of shared knowledge towards a continuous and processual perspective - individually, collectively, and across all sectors of society (see also Kyong-Hee 2015). When discussing knowledge exchange in a CoP, personal networking, professional (and interprofessional) development and/or the constitution of subjects, this model can be seen as a holistic tool to analyse and explain the dynamics of political, economic, social, technological, environmental and knowledge-based variables.

**Contemporary sustainability education**

A literature review commissioned by the United Nations (2005) for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014) identified key competencies (common skills and learning outcomes) that should enable students to a) ask critical questions, b) clarify values, c) envision a sustainable future, d) think systematically, e) respond through applied learning, and f) explore the dialectic between tradition and innovation (Tilbury 2011; Tarrant and Thiele 2016).

Tarrant and Thiele (2016) have synthesized DESD and related literature to produce the following set of key sustainability competencies or skills:

• Critical thinking and systems thinking skills facilitate investigative, integrative and holistic thought and navigation between tradition and innovation and the clarification of values; and
• Communication and collaboration skills facilitate the empowerment of students as adaptive and interactive lifelong learners, stewards for conservation and agents of change.

In contrast to Tarrant and Thiele (2016), we draw on the historical roots of understanding learning in an international context and emphasize the important role of knowledge discovery and acquisition

based on an empirical investigation. In this sense, we firstly identify key competencies following the American pragmatist John Dewey and his transactional approach. Second, our empirical research will reveal our students' experiences of learning processes in an international setting.

John Dewey was a North American philosopher and educational reformer. His ideas on problem- and experience-based as well as on experiential learning and adaptive intelligence have been widely used. Experience and subsequent reflection - it has been argued, for example - should improve managers' ability to manage sustainability transitions (Thomassen and Jorgenssen 2021). Others showed that contemporary sustainability education can be based on John Dewey's democratic pedagogy (Tarrant and Thiele 2016; Williams 2017). In addition, it has been suggested that Dewey's work can serve as the basis for contemporary early childhood education for sustainability (Luff 2018). Other sustainability theorists and practitioners pointed to Dewey's epistemology, which emphasises the link between concept and application and how this may influence the inclusion of the theoretical and practical as part of the learning processes in a given curriculum (Hopkins 2018). Dewey's importance in the historical development of competency-based experiential education, particularly, his ongoing contribution to contemporary sustainability education practice, is evident (Jickling and Wals 2008).

Dewey's answers regarding the relevance of learning processes support us in understanding sustainability in learning processes in an international context (Engel 2007; Westbrook 1993). We found the following references (Tab. 1):

| |
|---|
| Dewey emphasizes an appropriate balanced relationship between systematic (school) education and unsystematic education (= general life experience) gained, among other things, in immediate human relationships. |
| He emphasizes the nature and importance of the environment: A person´s real environment consists of the things whose change is accompanied by a change in one´s own behaviour. |
| In short, the 'environment' consists of the circumstances that promote or impede, stimulate or suppress the characteristic activities of a living being. |
| The influence of the environment is subtle and pervasive (unconscious). |
| It is about creating a special environment for education. |
| 'We never educate directly, but indirectly, and by means of the environment'. |
| 'What matters is whether we leave the work to an accidental environment or create a special environment for that purpose'. |
| Dewey emphasizes the importance of language: 'Since language has a tendency to become the chief instrument of learning many things, we must study how it acts'. |
| Dewey refers to both the self and the body as 'transactional', placing value on the importance of the dynamic, symbiotic individual who is related to, fundamentally relates to, and equally relies on and is constituted by such relations with others. In the context of sustainability, the reference is that Dewey's vision of a symbiotic body contributes to treating others (human and non-human) with greater respect and appreciation. It also has implications for somatic self-consciousness and a holistic understanding. |
| Fallibilism: 'There can be no absolute truth'; 'Making errors is important for learning processes. |
| Experimentalism: We learn by action and by experience (not primarily by intellectual understanding). |

Table 1: Dewey's statements on the components of learning processes (Source: The Authors)

Today's competence-based sustainability education takes place in a socio-ecological context that differs from Dewey's views. Today, people are much more involved in global-local interactions, and ecology is an established and influential science. If one invokes Dewey, one can turn the argument around. Then the learning areas just filtered out represent the cornerstones of the debate on sustainable learning and can be seen as effective for further discussions on the conditions and implications of sustainable education.

In summary, Dewey's advocacy of fallibilism ('there can be no absolute truths'; 'errors can never be excluded') and experimentalism ('the way to truth is through experimentalism and empiricism') combined with his somatic philosophy ('mind emerges from body's more basic physical and psycho-

physical functions') and the importance of the social atmosphere provide a historical and theoretical basis for the preservation of ecological systems and the development of sustainable communities (Dewey 2008; Shusterman 2012).

For Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1994; 1999; 2005), the interactions between systems and the transition of humans from one system to another are at the forefront of his considerations. With this approach, he examines various framework conditions under which human (especially child) development occurs. He states, among other things, that it is important for personal development that a person's various systems be compatible with each other, that experiences and behaviours learned by a person in one system be applicable in other systems and that the person should also have influence over the design of the various methods in which he or she participates.

In addition, Bronfenbrenner's approach also served to capture empirical phenomena (Epp 2017; 2018). Dewey's transactional perspective has also been used in contexts other than educational (Thomassen and Jorgensen 2021; Engel 2007; Shusterman 1997; 2008; 2012). Taken together, these two theoretical perspectives form the framework within which we analyse students´ learning processes.

**Method**

To what extent does learning in an international context differ from learning in 'normal' learning situations, and where is the benefit/added value? We strongly believe that internationalization makes sense and that glocal, professional understanding combined with global consciousness is part of this.

In social work, primary competence could be seen as client competence (Wilson *et al.* 2013). The client is part of an environment, just as we are as individuals in the sense of interacting with our environment. Ecological, environmental awareness (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 1999, 2005, Bronfenbrenner/Morris, 1998) at the micro, meso and macro levels in conjunction with sustainable learning (Dewey) belong to the core topics of sustainability.

The questions we raised to our students should not be seen as a normal course evaluation, but instead more of a "cultural evaluation" to be understood as cultural competence (Wilson et al., 2013). By this, we mean that we acted with sensitivity and understanding of the individual's experience. Written data was collected from all 30 participating students as part of the study. Students were informed that they could stop answering the questions at any time. Students were announced prior to data collection that their written reflections, which were completely anonymous, would be treated independently of the course evaluation and quality assurance and that the data collection would be used to produce a scientific research paper. The written data collected consists solely of the students' thematic reflections. Students' reflective writing was seen as an exercise in learning scientific concepts. The written documents can be seen as a 'window' into the students' thinking (Alvermann 2004; Davis 2003; Mason 1998; Wallace *et al.* 2004).

Students were individually given one hour to answer the questions (see down below) at the end of the class in their classroom. We recognized them as interacting communicative beings. This attitude included the environment and the community in which the students lived. They were beings with different needs and attitudes and came with different political points of view; they communicated with each other in different ways; they had different forms of competences with which they communicated with each other; they had developed their own ideas in their texts; they really tried to describe something substantial in their texts.

These are the questions we asked:

1. *What have you learned about yourself?*
2. *What have you learned about your future career?*

3. *Where/on what occasions did you learn (in class and/or outside of class, if yes, please specify)?*
4. *Describe the special importance of learning and interacting in an international group for you!*

Our method is based on the Grounded Theory (Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1998), according to which there are three phases of coding: Open Coding (the process of breaking down, examining, conceptualizing, and categorizing data), Axial Coding (relates categories to subcategories, specifies the proportions and dimensions of a theory, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis) and Selective Coding (this is the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships and filling in categories that need further refinement and development).

**Analysis**

**Open Coding**: Firstly, we wrote down the answers of the 30 students and sorted them among the four main topics (headings). Secondly, we established 13 core categories by looking at all the responses and categorizing each reaction into a general theme (an umbrella term). Multiple assignments were possible. The numbers in parentheses indicate how often statements were made that could be assigned to the respective core categories. The core categories were (Tab. 2):

| Core category | Referred to as … | Number of nominations |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |
| 1 | Self-reflective learning | 20 |
| 2 | Communication skills | 4 |
| 3 | Professional view | 16 |
| 4 | Language skills | 3 |
| 5 | Diversity in awareness | 18 |
| 6 | Networking | 3 |
| 7 | Problem-solving capacities | 13 |
| 8 | Collaboration skills | 4 |
| 9 | View on societal challenges | 15 |
| 10 | Understanding professional culture | 13 |
| 11 | Meaningfulness | 15 |
| 12 | Normativity reduction | 19 |
| 13 | Glocal understanding | 15 |

Table 2: Core-categorization due to open coding (Source: The Authors)

**Axial coding**: In the next analysis step, we further reduced the core categories. Some core categories were merged, and others were omitted because they were not of importance to the students. The authors decided which topics we omitted and which categories we merged. The entire analysis was carried out jointly by the authors. In this way, we were able to "serve" an essential quality criterion of qualitative research, the so-called intercoder reliability. After this step of analysis, our working table then looked as follows (Tab. 3):

| |
|---|
| Former 1 = I: Self-reflective learning (General precondition) |
| Former 3 = II: Professional view (overlapping with former 3, 12 and 13) |
| Former 5 = III: Diversity in awareness (overlapping with former 5, 12, 13) |
| Former 7 and 9 to 11 = IV: These belong together. They are summarized as 'individual achievements' ' |
| Former 12 =V: Normativity reduction (overlapping with 3, 5, 12) |
| Former 13 =VI: Glocal understanding (overlapping with 3, 5, 13) |

Tab. 3: Analysis due to axial coding (Source: The Authors)

The former core categories 2, 4 and 6 and 8 were sorted out. Core category 2 was only mentioned four times. Communication skills do not seem to be a core topic for social work students. This could be because they are difficult to integrate or teach in an international degree programme like ours, or because their presence is simply assumed in a degree programme like social work. The core category 'language skills' was mentioned only three times. The reason for this could be comprehensive language skills acquired by our students´ before-the start of the module or/and the requirement of comprehensive language skills as a prerequisite for participation in the international module. Core category 6 was also mentioned only three times. We assume that the topic of 'networking' is still too early in the students' careers. Only when they have started their professional careers, or perhaps even when they have established themselves in their respective professions, can the topic of "networking" become a central professional key. Finally, core category 8 was also mentioned only four times. The students are probably not yet intensively concerned with their professional tasks and the importance of cooperation. Rather, in keeping with the spirit of the times, they place particular emphasis on their individual achievements.

This reduction step just described means that only six of the original 13 core categories remain. In the following, we provide an example statement for each of these categories (Tab. 4):

| |
|---|
| I 'It was interesting to share and to learn from the others'. |
| II 'The strength of this course regarding practical implementations is that comparing and evaluating the benefits of comparing informs oneself on how I would implement change or improvements in the workplace'. |
| III 'Social work in Germany is often seen as an exclusively practical work, not so much academically driven. For my future career, I learned how important it is to stay reflective with one's work and exchange knowledge on a glocal level'. |
| IV 'I have learnt to see social work in an international context'. |
| V 'I find it quite hard to find moments where I did not learn new things. It was a constant shift between learning social work, international studies and intercultural socialization'. |
| VI 'We were very nice to one another about our language skills from a different perspective. It´s also challenging in many ways. We also were very different in coping with the pandemic and ideologies linked to the problematic context of COVID-19. If I had to keep something I learned, this would be that we need a lot of communication, even if we might think it´s not needed'. |

Table 4: Example of statements due to categorization (axial coding) (Source: The Authors)

**Selective Coding**: However, we reduced these six core categories once again and came up with two central 'core-core categories': A) Glocal understanding of the profession (containing former I, II, III, VI); B) Professional identity formation (containing former I, II, IV, V). In the following, we will illustrate the procedure of reducing the content of statements using diversified examples (original statements of the students) (Tab. 5):

| Original Statement | Open Coding | Axial Coding | Selective Coding |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |
| 'I learnt that there is no right way to deal with social problems, but there are different approaches with different outcomes'. | 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 | I, II, III, IV, V, VI | A, B |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 'It creates global awareness for political issues that are relevant to everyone in the world. In addition, you start to think outside of your own box. One could realize that everybody in this world is a part of a large community, despite language and cultural differences'. | 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 | I, II, III, IV, V | A, B |
| 'I learnt to practice mindfulness but also empathy. I learned about myself that I value theory but only in connection with practical experience'. | 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 | I, II, III, IV, V, IV | A, B |

Table 5: Examples of the (final) codification process (Source: The Authors)


The two ´core-core categories´ have such a broad meaning for the students that they occupy a more or less central position in all interviews. Moreover, these two categories are so broad that they overlap with almost all the topics addressed.

**Discussion**

We, as researchers, must fully acknowledge that our own beliefs and values will affect our evaluation. The interviews with the students and their assessments helped us a lot to objectively summarise and describe the processes that took place.

We find that when it comes to learning processes and knowledge acquisition, we can´t just focus on professional development per se. We also need to look upon the single human being outside his or her profession. Professional awareness is not only about understanding one´s own role or tasks but also to see one selves as part of human society. Nevertheless, the profession is important to understand every single human being in it´s environment. Higher education has a central role to play in this. Reflective learning and reflexive learning processes in international social work modules encourage participants to see and understand themselves from a wider perspective. Ultimately, this also promotes professional development. The discovery and acquisition of knowledge takes place locally and globally. We are all present locally. The global awareness required at the same time is promoted in the international courses.

Our findings show that learning in an international context results in transnational, multiprofessional understanding of the profession and context of social work. We suggest that our reflections should be placed also on a more general educational level (in higher education) as a take away for all practitioners. Sustainability in terms of personal development does not only occur in the classical educational context but is directly and indirectly forced by many everyday experiences and reflections. This includes having diverse learning experiences in one community, while having students identify with multiple communities at the same time.

Our study suggests that sustainable learning experiences depend on whether perception can be trained. The ability to deal sensitively and with understanding with our own experiences and the experiences of others is an important cornerstone here, because in this way we strengthen our own ability to develop in non-normative ways. Promoting cultural competence in international social education as part of professional understanding can contribute significantly to sustainable learning processes.

Learning in an international context means "24/7 learning". This means that learning processes not only take place in defined spaces and times that are specifically designated for learning, but that appropriation also, and perhaps even precisely, takes place outside these defined spaces and times. Learning does not only take place in the classroom, but also in the group, where learning content is "digested" during breaks and after lessons. Learning outside of defined spaces and times means that learning also takes place in free time. This becomes particularly clear when the international group

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cooks in the youth hostel, for example. They agree on what to eat, who does the shopping, who cooks and who does the dishes. Language acquisition is not in the foreground here, but happens "incidentally", without this being implicitly intended. The situation is similar with professional knowledge. During joint leisure activities, students can think aloud about what was discussed in class and what was accepted or not. Follow-up or comprehension questions can be asked much more easily because the inhibition threshold to ask them in front of the whole group is much lower in the smaller (leisure) group.

Based on what has been said, it is possible to characterise what a professional identity means for young international students. They say it is about broadening horizons and experiencing that there is not one, ideal solution, but many different approaches, all of which have their advantages and disadvantages. Again and again they emphasise the importance of reflexivity: one is thrown back on oneself, on their more or less cherished habits of looking at the world and themselves. The learning experiences in the group (which we described as CoP in the theory section) contributed to this to a high extent. Another issue with the young people is the self-confidence they gain through experiences in a foreign country and exchanges with like-minded people in a foreign language. Sustainability experiences are directly related to this.

## Conclusions

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005) can be considered a necessary but insufficient circumscription for education for sustainability. However, skills such as critical thinking or systemic thinking provide crucial pathways and prerequisites for the discovery and acquisition of knowledge and awareness. Sustainability encompasses three pillars, namely the social, the economic and the environmental dimension, which means that we need a comprehensive understanding of sustainable experiences. This is where the emphasis on mindfulness can help us. Universal challenges in social work and its contextual environment (e.g. artificial intelligence) require a focus on internationally shared knowledge. Therefore, the development of conditions and structures (e.g. curriculum development; in-service training) for reflective learning processes and activities that support the understanding of this global dimension is crucial. This understanding can be exemplified by the intersection of global and local dimensions in learning processes. There is a need for the intersection of international and local dimensions in understanding such processes (e.g. border-crossing meeting places; involvement of practitioners). In this sense, improving students' ability to increase their self-confidence should be seen as an important factor in students' learning processes.

Reflective and reflexive learning processes in social work education enable participants to understand themselves from a broader perspective and strengthen their own professional identity. Creating a community-based environment is seen as an essential component of reflective knowledge. To create this environment, a contextual understanding of what influences personal and professional development is required. In summary, universal challenges in higher education require a focus on internationally shared knowledge, including the development of reflective learning processes and activities. This can be crucial for the implementation of sustainable higher education.

## Limitations

Our empirical study is prospective, meaning that we interviewed students when they were right in the middle of the action. Our study is about sustainable learning, which in turn means that the actual learning success only becomes visible at a later point in time. Therefore, our study has only limited validity. To determine the extent to which the learning processes described were sustainable, we plan to conduct another study with the same participants at a later date.

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