

## **Interview with Assoc. Prof. Niki Edwards**

### **How did you benefit from the DAAD programme on a personal and a professional level?**

Australians are very outward looking people: we are travellers and explorers. Perhaps this relates to being in the “Antipodes” far away from many Global North and Global South Nations. We compensate for our isolated nation by reaching out to other countries. Despite it taking more than a full day to get to Fulda when flying out of Brisbane, the capital of my state of Queensland; the long journey to Fulda University of Applied Sciences was well worth it.

Undertaking the DAAD Fellowship allowed me to embrace “possibilities”. I chose Fulda University of Applied Science to work collaboratively with in response to the high international regard for the social work programs run there. I have not been disappointed. Social work is a globally recognised profession; social workers given their focus on social justice, human rights and anti-oppressive practice can contribute problem-solving knowledge and skills to many of the “big” issues facing the world. Coming to Germany enabled “eyes wide open” to how Germany conceptualises, understands and responds to local, national, and global issues. The experience of being immersed in Germany society enabled me to soak up and critically examine many issues but through the eyes of Germans and the EU.

So, I acquired new knowledge and some of my pre-existing ideas about Germany and German social work have been challenged. This can sound trite but experienced academics sometimes need the experience of cultural immersion to really “see” and begin to better appreciate life through another nation’s experiences.

I am privileged to have taught two courses with German social work students in attendance. I taught critical perspectives of disability and globalisation with particular regard to colonisation and social work. As a facilitator of knowledge rather than an ‘expert’ I was able to use critical pedagogy to engage with the students. Drawing upon critical reflexivity in search of transformation learning, both the students and I dialogically discussed and debated a range of sometimes contentious issues. I am confident that many of them have completed these courses with improved sensitivity and insights. I know that I walk away with huge personal learnings from these students. Sharing perspectives makes us all grow as global citizens committed to social inclusion of everyone.

My connections with German social workers and Fulda University of Applied Sciences were strengthened. I met with existing colleagues and relationships became deeper, more nuanced and more productive. Social workers are excellent networkers: I built new relationships with social work colleagues. Those relationships will continue over time and have great relevance to research possibilities and collaborative initiatives between our respective universities. Further, dialogue and connections open up possibilities: on the agenda are shared degrees; joint PhD arrangements; student exchanges; and a very important research project examining internationalisation of social work.

Immersion offered wonderful opportunities for seeing the beauty of Germany – her landscape, her history, architecture, food, the influence of how multicultural Germany has

become and local customs and habits. I visited museums and ate German food in local restaurants. I have fallen in love with dumplings, and I do not have the right words to describe how incredible German cakes are. How wonderful that the local recipes and traditions continue.

My time here was far from touristic and focused on academic knowledge and research. I also visited Hadamar which continues as a psychiatric centre today; and given my focus on diversity, disability, and inclusion – this was a harrowing visit. I respect the German approach to history in relation to the Nazis and the Holocaust. We must keep our eyes on the rear vision mirror, be mindful of what is happening now and look to the future. I am deeply touched and impressed that history and its impact has not been “sanitised” but there is a solemn and respectful acknowledgement, exploration and commitment to human rights and social justice post World War 2 that permeates German society. I value my opportunity for deep critical reflexivity in regard to these experiences too. It humbles me and reminds me how Australia has a lot to live up to in respect of supporting people with disability, racism experienced by First Nations peoples, intolerance of “difference” and a grudging acceptance of diversity; plus, how afraid I am of the emergence of far-right politics in Australia – and across the world.

### **What kind of feedback did you get from people in Germany (students, colleagues)?**

I was welcomed by Fulda University academic colleagues with “open arms”. Although I am disappointed that I do not speak German, everyone made such an effort to communicate and share time with me. People I connected with were focused on upskilling my knowledge and giving me insight into how social work is taught here. The sociological imagination was definitely activated. Great ideas shared.

Students were initially hesitant about speaking and learning in English. But they became brave and confident. Discussions were robust and there was a lot of critical thinking and deep engagement in exploring unknown territory presented in my seminars. In particular, we explored concepts important to international social work that included (far from limited to)– how white is social work across the globe?; colonisation and decolonisation of social work; technology and social work. Students actively participated and critical reflections demonstrated nuanced insights and changing perspectives around the role of social workers in a world dominated by ableism and globalisation.

### **Did the DAAD programme open new doors/perspectives for you for the future?**

I returned to the University of Southern Queensland with increased understanding of innovative approaches to curriculum design, teaching and pedagogy – the German way. We are looking to joint qualifications that can be designed to enable smooth movement of German and Australian students into higher degrees.

There are discussions around academic exchanges and sharing of online and face-to-face teaching expertise as well as collaborative partnerships between our two universities.

There are “opportunities” to do so much more due to relationships developed by sustained face-to-face engagement. This is far from possible over the internet or via online quick conversations.

Relationships have developed based upon respect and trust and a strong commitment to contributing to the wellbeing of students, staff but more important – the global community.

Assoc. Prof. Edward would like to acknowledge the DAAD for the opportunity to participate in the Visiting Lecturer Programme. She also would like to acknowledge the Fulda University of Applied Sciences for welcoming and hosting her as well as the University of Southern Queensland for enabling her visit.