Building bridges between global concepts and local contexts: implications for inclusive education in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh

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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1514763

Published online: 22 Aug 2018.

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Building bridges between global concepts and local contexts: implications for inclusive education in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper reports on the implications of participation in an Australian Award Short Course Awards programme for inclusive educators from South Asia. Seventeen educators from Nepal, three from Bangladesh, and one from Sri Lanka participated in the short course in Brisbane, Australia with a follow up component in Kathmandu, Nepal. The aim of the short course was to provide a platform for sharing knowledge of inclusive education as a global concept, and how such knowledge could then be implemented in the local context. While in Brisbane, participants completed a Return to Work Plan (RWP) indicating how they anticipated applying their new knowledge in their respective workplaces. Data were collected both pre- and post-programme with follow-up individual interviews and focus groups once they returned to their home countries. Findings revealed that participants gained a broader understanding of inclusive education and ‘diversity’ that counter the perception of inclusion as restricted to only a specific area of ‘special education’. For many participants, work habits changed as they applied their learning to include a greater range of diversity in their home countries. While the initial impact appeared localised, there were positive indications for longer-term sustainability. This research may assist other educators from developing countries to maximise the benefit of participation in similar short course programmes.

**KEYWORDS**

Diversity; inclusive education; foreign aid

**Introduction**

Over recent years, less developed countries such as those in South and West Asia have attempted to develop inclusive education policies and practices in schools as per the global trend towards inclusion (UNESCO 1994). However, to date, the implementation of inclusive education in the region has been variable. One reason for this difficulty to implement inclusion comes from the lack of consensus on what inclusion actually means and no clear and consistent strategies to implement inclusive practices (Waitoller and Artiles 2013). Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou (2011) suggest that the ‘idea of inclusion’ goes beyond the provision of special education for students with disabilities. Inclusion is education that provides for all students beyond the perspective of
marginalisation. Rose (2010) suggests that inclusion needs to be built upon recognising the social and cultural diversity of students rather than on the deficits of students. Other common reasons for the variability include a lack of adequate resources (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Sharma et al. 2017) and inadequate preparation of teachers for teaching the diversity of learners in classrooms (Forlin and Dinh 2010; Sharma et al. 2013). One approach to supporting educators in developing countries to better prepare teachers for inclusion is to provide a platform for sharing knowledge about inclusive education and developing strategies to apply inclusive practices in local contexts. Deppeler (2012) suggests that focused attention on improving the collective professional knowledge and practices of teachers is needed as cornerstones for inclusive schools. Some researchers suggest that poor progress in entrenching inclusive policies and practices is linked to persistent and deep-rooted beliefs about who owns and provides the impetus for the inclusive education agenda (Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai 2016). While the fundamental principles of inclusive education are often consistent with local cultural imperatives, perceptions may exist that the inclusive policy agenda is borrowed, and largely driven by foreign aid and international policies (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai 2016) rather than being developed in partnership with local stakeholders.

While inclusive education may be understood simplistically as the removal of barriers to education to allow for the participation of all children in schooling (Ainscow 2011), the implementation of inclusive education in different national contexts across the world may be quite disparate, especially between developed and less developed countries (Srivastava, de Boer, and Pijl 2015). It is important to acknowledge the role that culture plays in the conceptualisation of inclusive education in different national contexts (Sharma, Loreman, and Macanawai 2016). Further, Polat (2011) suggests that inclusive education can vary significantly not only between cultures and education systems but also within cultures and education systems. Each country’s cultural and contextual considerations must be at the forefront of decisions about implementing inclusive education policies and practices. For example, worldwide approximately 57 million primary age children do not attend school (Srivastava, de Boer, and Pijl 2015) while in the Asia-Pacific region, around 17.5 million children do not complete primary school and of the children not in school, one-third have a disability (Walker et al. 2011). In countries that have no mass education, have low literacy rates and widespread exclusionary pressures on educating particular groups like girls (Booth 1999), have children in rural and remote areas or those with disabilities, the major contextual challenge may be to get children to school. Thus, the starting point for inclusive education in countries such as these with low rates of school access and attendance may be more about access to education for all rather than on making schools more inclusive (Srivastava, de Boer, and Pijl 2015).

External aid agencies provide funding to developing countries to promote the implementation of national priorities such as inclusive education. However, for inclusive education policies and practices to be successful in these countries, external aid should take a long-term approach through extended guidance and follow-up support, rather than offering short-term quick fix professional development programmes that may do little to support local change that is sustainable (Sharma et al. 2013). The purpose of this study was to identify the impact of a short course on inclusive education from the pre-course application, to the Australian component of the programme, through to the
post-course follow-up in their local contexts where participants have applied their new knowledge and understanding of inclusive education.

**Context**

**South Asia**

South Asia is one of the most densely populated regions in the world geographically. It also comprises the largest concentration of poor people with more than 500 million people living below the poverty line (DFAT 2018). The area has a long history of social and political turmoil that has impacted the region’s social and economic development. Over the years, countries including Australia have provided funding to build capacity and to support economic and social growth in the region. One specific Australian Government source of support is the Australia Awards South and West Asia Short Course Program. The aims of the Short Course Awards align with the Australian Government’s Australian Aid policy of promoting prosperity and reducing poverty (DFAT 2017) through investments such as education. This initiative provides opportunities for staff in public, private, and non-government organisations in developing countries to undertake short-term study and professional development in Australia with the aim of building human capacity to contribute to development in their home countries (DFAT 2014). The focus of this paper is one particular programme, the Australia Awards South and West Asia (AASWA) Short Course programme. The purpose of this AASWA short course was to build the capability and expertise of educators from South Asia in the technical components of inclusive education. Further, the AASWA short course was designed to broaden understanding of a range of services, strategies, and providers of inclusive education in Australia that potentially could facilitate equitable access to education for children and youth with disabilities in the South Asia region.

The participants in the AASWA programme were comprised of educators from three developing countries in the South Asia region: Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. To date, attention to inclusive education in these countries has been limited mainly to special education rather than taking into account a broader range of diversity beyond disability (Polat 2011). While the need for targeted learning support of children with a disability is important, the narrow focus on special education may inhibit a deeper analysis of broader cultural and contextual issues that impact on the quality of education for all children (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011). For example, there are large disparities in access to education of children living in poverty and from different ethnic groups in the home countries of the participants in the AASWA programme. This point is significant as those who live in poverty often experience academic deceleration and develop special educational needs as they pass through the school system, leading to their eventual exclusion from those sections of the school system that offer the greatest prospects for upward social mobility (UNESCO 1996).

Contextual features such as the geographical nature of the three countries also present challenges in terms of physical access to education. Nepal and Sri Lanka, for example, comprise lowland plains and mountainous regions that make travel within regions of the country difficult while Bangladesh, a low-lying riverine country, is susceptible to both drought and flooding that provide similar challenges. An added challenge is addressing the needs of the broad diversity of ethnicities that are present in these countries given
the rural and remote location of many of these groups. These and other contextual influences along with limited infrastructure in these countries contribute to the difficulties in implementing inclusive education in the region.

While many Australia Awards programmes have been delivered in this region, little research has been conducted that examines the changed perceptions of inclusive education that participants gain or how participants are able to apply their new understandings from their involvement in these programmes. Similarly, historically there has been little follow-up of the longer-term impact beyond the actual participation in the programmes. Lately, there has been a call for research into how a model of inclusion developed in western countries (such as the one presented in the AASWA short course) is adapted and applied to developing countries (Carrington and Duke 2014). Thus, the aim of this research was to investigate if and how the AASWA programme, developed and delivered by Australian educators, extended participants’ understandings of inclusive policies, processes, and practices, and how changes in understanding were implemented and sustained in the participants’ specific local contexts. As part of the research, we were interested in the challenges, if any, that the participants faced in implementing changes to inclusive policies, processes, and practices, and how these challenges were met. The knowledge and understanding gained from this research may better support educators in other developing countries in maximising the outcomes from participation in programmes such as the AASWA short course in home countries.

**AASWA programme structure**

The AASWA South and West Asia short course programme comprised a two-week component of inclusive education policy and practice, delivered in Australia with ongoing online support from university academics in Australia for participants on their return to home countries. A follow-up workshop was conducted in Nepal six months later. The programme content was developed using the three key dimensions of the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow 2002) framework: developing inclusive policies, fostering inclusive culture, and evolving inclusive practices. The programme structure was comprised of workshop activities, visits to exemplary schools in the area that provide embedded inclusive practices and principles, reflective conversations, and professional planning for participants’ return to their home countries. Structured networking events were included to introduce participants to a range of educators with expertise in inclusive education, as well as thematic discussions and experience sharing among the programme participants based around these three dimensions of inclusion.

It was important for the participants and programme deliverers to have a shared understanding of inclusive education. However, different interest groups may understand inclusion differently (Riddell 2007). To gain an awareness of where understandings were similar or different in relation to inclusion, participants engaged in an introductory activity in which they deconstructed current education policy, culture, and education practices in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. This activity allowed a shared understanding and vision for inclusive education to be made explicit. It was important also to have an awareness of the participants’ pre-existing knowledge and understanding of inclusive education, and so participants shared their individual journeys and experiences in inclusive education with the Australian university programme leaders. From the start of the
programme, the participants were encouraged to take on active roles in the conduct of the programme. For example, on the first day, participants nominated a different leader from their group for each day of the programme. The leader’s responsibility was to time manage the group and to liaise with the university programme leader and the welfare officer about any concerns or challenges the group encountered as well as starting the day with a brief report on the highlights of the previous day’s activities through photos and a presentation. Rather than a stand and deliver model of programme presentation, active participation and engagement was encouraged throughout the programme. Participants engaged in workshops on trends and policies in inclusive education around the globe, understanding a range of disabilities including autism, intellectual impairment, and learning difficulties as well as being introduced to a range of inclusive models to support diverse learners. Further workshops and discussions on action learning and on mentoring in inclusive contexts as well as interactive meetings with local education authorities involved in inclusive education and disability support occurred. Table 1 below shows an overview of the programme. Participants also contributed daily to their own personal learning and action planning journals with reflections on their personal learning objectives, key learnings, and experiences and establishing links to support their RWP (Return to Work Plan) development.

Table 1. AASWA programme overview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Morning Activities</th>
<th>Afternoon Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>• Orientation–Welcome to university and to local context</td>
<td>• Orientation–Sharing participants’ personal journeys and experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Welcome lunch and networking</td>
<td>• Deconstructing inclusive education policy, culture and practices in Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
<td>• Visit to a special school</td>
<td>• Visit to a traditional P–12 school (primary and secondary education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Visit to state education authority headquarters to hear about inclusive education policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Debrief and reflection (RWPs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days 3–6</td>
<td>• Presentation reporting on learning from previous day</td>
<td>• A range of interactive workshops on context-setting, inclusive policies and cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interactive workshop on context-setting, inclusive policies and cultures</td>
<td>• Debrief and reflection (RWPs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend</td>
<td>Social programme and team building and rest day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 7</td>
<td>• Visit to a traditional primary school</td>
<td>• Visit to two traditional primary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Visit to a disability organisation (Autism)</td>
<td>• Visit to disability resource centre (resources for children with disabilities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Debrief and reflection (RWPs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days 8–9</td>
<td>• Presentation reporting on learning from previous day</td>
<td>• A range of interactive workshops on inclusive cultures and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interactive workshop on inclusive cultures and practices</td>
<td>• Debrief and reflection (RWPs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 10</td>
<td>• Post-programme survey</td>
<td>• Individual presentations of RWPs with round table discussion and feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Presentation reporting on learning from previous day</td>
<td>• Graduation with awarding of certificates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Finalising RWPs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School visits were an integral part of the programme and occurred at two key junctures: on the day following orientation and mid-way through the ten-day programme. The first visits allowed the participants to contextualise the learning that was to ensue in the following days while the second round of visits allowed participants to reflect on their new knowledge and to consider what this might mean for their own practice in their home contexts. The school visits included traditional primary and high schools that catered for broad diversities of students to highlight the Australian approach of embedding inclusion within the curriculum. In addition, there were visits to special schools specialising in particular disabilities such as intellectual disability, physical impairment, ASD, and speech-language impairment (SLI). The purpose of the school visits was to look at different models of service and to observe good practice for inclusive education. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to observe the support mechanisms and the use of additional staff, such as Educational Assistants, in a range of schools and engaged with staff and students with questions about how inclusive education has been implemented in the local schooling contexts.

A major output of the programme was the development of Return to Work Plans (RWPs) that the participants enacted on returning to their organisational settings in their home countries. The purpose of the RWPs was for participants to apply their new knowledge and understanding of inclusion to their local contexts. Prior to arriving in Australia, each participant nominated an inclusive education priority, challenge, or issue in his or her workplace or organisation and submitted a RWP proposal of how they envisioned they would be able to address these issues from their learning and participation in the programme. At the end of each day of the programme, participants reflected on the knowledge building activities and experiences from the day and continued to modify and refine their proposals, applying this new knowledge and understanding and advancing the proposals into their action plans. The Australian component of the programme culminated in each participant presenting his/her intended RWP to the wider group and to university academics for feedback and further consideration. Post-programme implementation and monitoring of the RWPs occurred through ongoing online conversations and a follow-up workshop and discussion with the participants in Nepal approximately six months after the Australian-based programme was completed.

**Methodology**

**Sample**

Data were collected from the cohort \( n = 21 \) of stakeholders from Nepal \( n = 17 \), Bangladesh \( n = 3 \) and Sri Lanka \( n = 1 \) who participated in the inclusive education AASWA short course programme. Five participants had a disability: two were hearing impaired, two had a physical disability, and one had a visual impairment. Two participants from Nepal identified as parents of children with a disability.

As shown in Table 2 above, the cohort comprised eleven participants \( n = 11 \) from NGOs and ten participants from government organisations \( n = 10 \). Eight different NGOs were represented with seven specifically related to working with people with disabilities. The three participants \( n = 3 \) from Bangladesh were from BRAC, one of the world’s largest non-government organisations. As an organisation, BRAC works beyond
disability and focuses more broadly on helping the poor and on reducing poverty across the globe (BRAC 2016). The participants from BRAC were the only ones who were working in a context that was focused explicitly beyond disability. The Nepali participants included representatives \((n = 9)\) from government (including policy makers, teacher trainers, and teachers working with people with disabilities) and NGOs (all disability-specific organisations) \((n = 8)\) with the sole participant from Sri Lanka from the government \((n = 1)\) and working in a role to improve the access to higher education for persons with disability.

### Procedure

Data for this qualitative study were collected over a six-month period. Sources of data included: participants’ Expressions of Interest (EOIs) to participate in the programme, pre- and post-programme surveys, individual online interviews, focus groups, and Return to Work Plans (RWPs). As this study sought to gain insight (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015) and to develop a deeper understanding (Tracy 2013) of the impact of a donor-funded short course programme on the development of inclusive education in the participating countries, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate. To be included in the AASWA programme, participants had to provide an initial EOI that outlined what they hoped to learn about inclusive education through their participation in the Australian-based programme. The pre-programme survey included demographic data identifying each participant’s gender, country of citizenship, the name and nature of the organisation (non-government or government) for whom they worked, and their work roles. Participants identified if they had a disability and the nature of that disability. Each participant took on an individual RWP where he/she nominated an inclusive education priority area in his or her work context that would provide the basis of the RWP for implementation in the home country. As part of the process, participants justified the significance of the priority as well as identifying their intended outcomes of these individual projects. Throughout the two-week programme in Australia, the participants developed and refined their RWPs, culminating in presentations of their intended plans on the final day. The post-programme surveys, completed at this time also, identified what participants had learned from the programme and how they would apply this learning in their work and national contexts.

Individual participants participated in online interviews approximately one month after they returned to their home countries. These interviews focused on the participants’ progress in implementing their RWPs. The final data collection occurred through focus groups conducted at a workshop in Nepal approximately six months later. In the focus groups, participants shared the outcomes of their RWPs to date and discussed the successes and challenges they had encountered along the way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>NGO</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>All working in disability focused role/context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>All working for BRAC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Working in disability focused context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Working contexts of participants.
Given the large volume of data collected, the data analysis occurred in several stages. First, the multiple sources of data were organised into chronological order. The chronological ordering of data facilitated comparisons of the data over time (Tracy 2013). The data were analysed using an iterative approach in which the researcher first read and re-read the whole set of data repeatedly (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). During this data analysis phase, words and phrases that appeared to capture the essence were highlighted and coded into broad categories (Merriam and Tisdell 2015; Saldaña 2009). Short quotes were extracted from the data to illustrate key themes and categories. The categories were continually refined during the analysis process (Tracy 2013). Following the initial coding of data, the researcher grouped specific sets of data for comparison. For example, the pre-and post-programme surveys were analysed simultaneously so that any changes in participants’ perceptions of inclusion before and after the programme became evident. Further, the complete sets of data for each participant were also analysed separately. This approach allowed the researcher to see any changes in participants’ knowledge and understanding over time as well as revealing individual successes and ongoing challenges of implementing the RWPs in home countries.

**Findings**

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the multiple sources of data: broader understandings of inclusive education; changes to work practices in participants’ local contexts; and, the contextual factors impacting the implementation of sustainable inclusive education practices. Each is discussed in the following sections.

**Broader understandings of inclusive education**

Prior to participating in the programme, the participants identified that they were hoping to gain more knowledge and understanding of inclusive education and observe how inclusive education was being implemented in Australia with some wanting to replicate these practices on return to their contexts. In comparing the participants’ responses pre- and post-programme, growth in learning emerged in several key areas: broader understandings of inclusive education and a better understanding of the differences between special education and inclusive education.

The post-programme data revealed that participants extended their understanding of inclusive education beyond a disability focus. As one participant from Nepal noted, inclusive education ‘is beyond disability, it is about celebrating diversity’ (Ditya) and another participant (from Bangladesh) stated, ‘It is not only for disability but also for ethnic groups, girls, vulnerable and for the diverse group. If we cover these four sectors, we cover all Inclusive Education’ (Labiba). Further, another participant identified Nepal as a diverse country where ‘more than 125 caste, ethnic groups and marginalised’ people co-exist and acknowledged that ‘it is very important to include and to address this diverse need’. It was encouraging to note that participants gained a broader perspective of inclusive education as the participants were from countries that have widely diverse economic, cultural, social, and ethnic groups that need to be taken into consideration when implementing inclusive education policies and practices.
While most participants extended their understanding to include sociocultural differences, one participant, Suan, who identified as a ‘parent [of a child with autism] and a special educator on autism’, expanded her view beyond one disability to include other disabilities. She commented that, ‘Previously, we were focused only on Autism but now we are focused on other types of disabilities’ (Suan). As all participants were working in a disability-focused organisation or in the area of disability, it was understandable that their original understandings of inclusion focused on disability rather than a broader view that includes more diverse considerations that consider race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, or socio-economic status. These findings concur with those of other research (see Polat 2011) and were expected in the AASWA programme.

Greater understanding of the differences between special education and inclusive education was also evident in post-programme responses. When asked to identify the differences between special education and inclusive education in a pre-programme survey, words such as ‘disability’ and ‘special needs’ featured prominently, while post-programme ‘diversity’ and ‘learning’ dominated. A lack of clarity and uncertainty was evident in pre-programme responses with one respondent noting that ‘special education focus on disability and inclusive education focus on inclusion’ and others indicating that they were ‘not sure’ or were ‘waiting to figure out the differences’ between special education and inclusive education. However, after the programme, a typical response was that special education ‘provides education specifically to students with special needs’ whereas inclusive education is about ‘providing education to all students (normal students and students with special needs) in the same classroom on the same topic’. Of the 21 participants, only two (n = 1 from Nepal and n = 1 from Bangladesh) developed RWPs that looked at factors of inclusion beyond disability. However, while gender-based issues were included in the titles of the RWPs as well as a disability focus (for example, the project Integration of disability and diversity in gender-focused policies in BRAC and networking for learning and sharing), further descriptions of the project did not include any further acknowledgement of the gendered component.

Changes to practice

While broader understandings of inclusion were evident following the programme, many of the changes to practice identified by participants focused specifically on disability. This was not surprising as eight participants (n = 8) worked for disability-specific non-government organisations and ten (n = 10) of the remaining thirteen (n = 13) participants worked in a disability-focused government role. Changes to practice identified by participants focused on two specific areas: curriculum and teaching practices. Prior to the programme, most participants indicated that students with disabilities needed a separate curriculum. However, after the programme there was general recognition that the curriculum should be a curriculum for all with curriculum adjustments and adaptations to suit the needs of students. Comments included ‘adjust the content of the curriculum’, ‘adapted curriculum’, and ‘disable friendly assessment’. Prior to the programme, the participants identified few specific teaching strategies to cater for the diversity of students in their classrooms. However, post-programme, the participants identified a broad range of strategies and resources that included individualised plans, ICT-based teaching, pictorial teaching material, using tactile materials for blind people, and disabled-friendly teaching materials.
In addition to identifying different teaching strategies, the participants nominated specific resources needed to support the learning needs of students with disabilities as well as services that were required to support the families of children with disabilities. Prior to the programme, participants identified practical aids such as the use of ramps, visual documents, and sign language as the key resources to help meet the learning needs of their students. However, after the programme, there was greater emphasis on more systemic approaches with the nomination of the use of human and financial resources. For example, when identifying the types of human resources, the participants used terms like ‘trained skilled knowledge’, ‘expertise’, and ‘teaching techniques for teachers’. It appeared that the programme made the participants more aware of the need for a systemic approach to precipitate significant and sustained change to inclusive education policies and practices in their home countries and a need to consider the language of inclusion that would provide better and more targeted support. A greater awareness of the need to adapt inclusive education policy to local contexts rather than replicating the policies and practices that they observed in action in Australia was also evident in post-programme responses.

**Contextual features impacting the implementation of inclusive education**

As stated earlier, participants developed their own individual RWPs over the duration of the AASWA short course programme and attempted to implement these plans on return to their local contexts. The topics for the RWPs provide an insight into the contextual features impacting the implementation of inclusive education in the three different home countries. The RWPs spanned three specific themes: advocacy (such as the RWP project Advocacy and networking project to promote access to inclusive education for the girls/children with disability), awareness raising (n = 9) (for example, Awareness raising on inclusive education through a radio program), and resource development (n = 9) (for example, Developing a Teachers’ Manual on inclusive education for children with autism). Several participants combined several themes such as in the project Development of an awareness booklet on inclusive education in Nepal, in which a resource was developed to help raise awareness of inclusion in the wider community.

As noted previously, all participants from Bangladesh (n = 3) were from BRAC, an organisation that focuses beyond disability to include other marginalised groups in society to help reduce world poverty (BRAC 2016). Of the three RWPs from the Bangladeshi participants, one RWP, Integration of disability and diversity in gender-focused policies in BRAC and networking for learning and sharing, specifically targeted both disability and diversity. However, this RWP was the only one that explicitly looked at inclusion beyond disability. While participants appeared to develop broader understandings of inclusion beyond disability from the programme, it is interesting to note that the RWPs in general remained disability focused in spite of the participants being able to modify their RWPs. Thus, it appeared that the new understandings had limited impact on the ways of thinking about inclusion in their workplace contexts.

**Successes**

While the impact of the programme may have been limited in some respects initially, some continued successes were evident. Approximately one month following the return
to their home countries, all participants identified that there had been varying degrees of success in implementing their RWPs. For example, participants identified some increased financial support for developing and implementing inclusive policies and practices, positive feedback from other stakeholders (from parents, colleagues and the government), increased resource development and distribution for teachers and children, and increased enrolments of children with disabilities in resource classes. At the workshop in Nepal approximately six months following the Australian programme component, the participants shared the extended outcomes of their RWPs, identifying further successes and ongoing challenges. While initially the impact appeared to be localised and limited, the follow-up workshop revealed some positive indications about longer-term development and sustainability. In line with Sharma et al.’s (2013) research, the ongoing contributions and support from the university programme provider appeared to be contributing to more sustainable change to policies and practices. For some participants, there seemed to be a shift in perspective from localised implementation towards more systemic changes, such as to policy. The need for infrastructure and family/parent support was noted in post-programme responses with more explicit detail about the types of infrastructure and the types and uses of resources to support learning. It appears that the successes in the short term from awareness raising and advocacy may have led participants to consider further possibilities at a systemic level. It was noted that the sharing of the new knowledge and understanding of inclusive education resulting from participation in the programme was positively received at an organisational and government level for many participants. Thus, changes to policy in the future were considered as a reality.

Ongoing challenges

While successes in the programme were evident so were ongoing challenges. The main challenges to implementing inclusive education fell into two main categories: the geographies of the local contexts and a lack of financial support. Both of these are inextricably linked to each other. Geographical conditions in the three participating countries are diverse and challenging. For example, one participant from Nepal noted, ‘I’m working in Kathmandu and the planning is in Nawalparasi which is about 150 km away’. While this distance may not seem overwhelming in a developed country, it can be an almost insurmountable challenge in Nepal, one of the poorest countries in the world with difficult access to remote locations and limited infrastructure (Lohani, Singh, and Lohani 2010). Added to the geographical isolation, one participant spoke of ‘village people’ in remote locations who were lacking an understanding of disability, with some parents in these settings not supporting the education of their children who had disabilities. To overcome these misunderstandings and to better inform people in remote areas about inclusive education, one of the participants spoke of going ‘door to door’ to talk with parents in remote areas to discuss ‘allowing their girl child’ to attend school. This method of communication is both time consuming and costly. However, without infrastructure to support other methods of communication (such as through ICT) or travel to these locations, it seems to be one of the few ways to communicate with people in the remote areas of the country. Upgrading ICT infrastructure and increasing ICT access and use are among the biggest challenges for the region in moving forward economically (World Economic Forum 2018). Of further concern is that technological readiness in
the region has stagnated over the past decade (World Economic Forum 2018). Maudslay (2014) argues that issues with travel, a lack of school infrastructure, and a lack of appropriate support may result in high numbers of children with disabilities not attending school. Further, she argues that the assumption that disabled children are less likely to access education than their non-disabled peers should be treated with caution, as there are no data available on out-of-school children with disabilities. Thus, it appears that there is a broader issue of access to education for all children in rural and remote contexts of Nepal rather than only for children with disabilities.

The second challenge for implementation of inclusive education was a lack of financial resourcing. While several participants noted increased access to funding post-programme, financial resourcing to promote inclusion remained an ongoing challenge. Previous research has identified a lack of resourcing as a key barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education (McDonald and Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Sharma et al. 2017). While a lack of financial support emerged as an ongoing challenge in all three countries, the use of the financial support varied in the different national contexts. For example, the participants from Nepal identified that financial support was needed to allow personnel to visit remote locations, to build capacity through ongoing professional development, and to allow ongoing resource development. Participants from Bangladesh, however, stated that funding was needed to support the development of curriculum for children with autism and for programmes to raise the awareness about autism in local villages. The participant from Sri Lanka noted that as the numbers of people in the population identified as having a disability were low, inclusive education was not high on the government agenda and so it was difficult to get financial support from the government. This participant also noted that financial support was lacking to employ special education teachers and to develop curriculum resources for disabled students. It appeared that this participant remained focused on children with disability rather than looking more broadly at diversity to consider financial resourcing for children of different race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, or socio-economic status.

Recommendations and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify the impact, if any, of an Australia Awards short course programme on the development of inclusive education in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. First, the limitations of this study must be acknowledged. For example, this study centred on one short course programme with a small cohort of participants limited to three countries in South Asia: Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. However, the findings add to the weight of the body of literature around the difficulties of effecting sustained change through short-term donor-funded programmes. For example, Riddell (2014, i) notes that the impact of individual projects ‘is overwhelmingly positive even though sustaining benefits remains a challenge’. However, we must also note that in many countries, aid has seemingly made important contributions to development and poverty reduction, for example enabling ‘millions to go to school’ (Riddell 2014, 39).

The impact of the programme across and within the different national contexts was varied. In the short term, the impact appeared to be limited and localised in all cases. Given the geographies of the countries represented and the lack of infrastructure within Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, the limited impact is unsurprising. However, over
time there were indications of more sustained changes in the different national contexts, both in thinking about inclusion and in creative ways to implement inclusive practices. Only time will tell if these changes are sustainable long-term and their impact more widespread.

Based on the findings of this research, three key recommendations are made to inform further programmes. First, it is suggested that, in future, organisers of Short Course Awards such as this need to consider how programmes can be designed to encourage broader systemic change rather than ad hoc implementation left to participants on return to home countries. This approach would require greater accountability for enacting change by participating organisations post-programme. Further, consideration needs to be given to a more strategic approach to the RWP and their implementation to maximise sustained impact on return to home countries. Participants from the three countries represented a range of government and non-government organisations and were from different branches within organisations (such as the participants from BRAC). It is understandable that each participant would have a specific focus for the RWP based on the particular branch or organisation that the participant was representing. However, greater consideration needs to be given to how these individual RWP could contribute more coherently and strategically to a broader systemic approach for wider and more sustained impact. Although local ownership and participation are acknowledged as key components for effective aid programmes, structured multi-stakeholder engagement is missing in most aid projects (Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017).

The second recommendation for future programmes is a greater focus on diversity. While participants developed broader understandings of inclusive education, a focus on disability still appeared to dominate conversations. This is understandable given the work contexts of the cohort. However, the inclusive education movement has been informed by declarations such as the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO 1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO 1994), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2008). The principal premise of these core policies is that all children should have access to quality education (Unterhalter and Brighouse 2007) regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, socio-economic status, and any other aspect that might be perceived as different (Polat 2011). Thus, to eradicate exclusionary practices of any kind, broader considerations of inclusion beyond disability must be made explicit in all programmes. This extends to the language used by the deliverers of the programme to embrace difference and diversity rather than a narrowed focus on disability.

The third and final recommendation relates to the need for programme deliverers to have greater advance knowledge and understanding of the unique contextual and cultural factors present in the differing nations of the participants. While some of these understandings emerge throughout the programme, there is potential for greater impact if these shared understandings are evident from the start. Thus, the third recommendation is that programme deliverers undertake intercultural awareness training tailored to the specific national contexts prior to engaging with the participants. In this way, a better understanding of how to apply global concepts of inclusion to local contexts will be developed.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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