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Northumbria Social Work students gain global perspective on 4,000km South African placement

Supported by the [Turing Scheme](#), the students, who have all now graduated from Northumbria University, gained insights that will shape their future careers. The journey helped research and teaching staff forge lasting international partnerships that will influence social work education at Northumbria University.

From 18th November to 11th December 2025, the group travelled across Bloemfontein and the rural KwaZulu-Natal region of Pongola, working alongside a range of local organisations and institutions.

Accompanied by Hellmuth Weich, International Lead and MA Social Work Programme Lead and John Cavener, Head of Subject for Social Work at Northumbria, the students engaged with 13 agencies. These included Child Welfare Bloemfontein, Childline, government social workers, the University of the Free State, and traditional healers from the Sotho, Tswana, Xhosa and Venda communities.

The journey provided hands-on experience that differed significantly from social work practice in the UK. One early highlight was meeting 12 traditional medicine practitioners in Botchabelo, where students explored how traditional African approaches are integrated with Western models of health and social care.

Reflecting on their experiences in South Africa were students, Fran De Mondosa Alves, Ruth Ncube and Alice Henderson.

Ruth Ncube highlighted a key difference between social work in the UK and South Africa: “A lot of the organisations spoke about the importance of spirituality and understanding the individual as a whole. That was different for me because you don't often get that with the organisations in the UK.”

Fran De Mondosa Alves described the collaborative nature of social work. She said: “It was very much community driven, where there's always someone who knows someone who can guide you and use the community to find the right answer. A big emphasis for me throughout the whole experience, was just how welcoming and optimistic people were.”

Alice Henderson discussed putting the trip into perspective: “Being at the end of our master’s and preparing to go into practice came at a really great time, as it got us thinking about how we will go into practice and implement some of the approaches used in South Africa.”

Ahead of the trip, the students climbed the highest peak in the Lake District, raising funds to donate to local agencies in South Africa.

As John Cavener shared when joining the group for the second leg of the journey: “What I observed was a group of students who were fully engaged with the material that they were being presented with. These are the type of practitioners that come to Northumbria and go out into the world.”

Alongside their professional learning, the group took part in a range of cultural experiences. These included meeting the local King Ingosi Ntshangase, enjoying a Big Five game drive, spending time on a Free State farm, and giving an interview on local radio.

The students also engaged with healthcare settings through the University of the Free State Faculty of Medicine, exploring the impact of poverty on women and children through lectures and visits to three hospitals.

The trip has opened doors to future collaboration. When the group presented their research at the University of the Free State, the professor leading the session immediately requested a memorandum of understanding.

Hellmuth Weich highlighted the wider educational value of the experience: “Our department has an internationalization policy, but also a decolonialization policy. Hopefully people can see that their qualification will open doors for them internationally.”

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