

Inspiration or Desperation: The challenge of innovation in field education in the Australian context

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In September 2015, I presented at a conference at the University of Sydney, prior to the biannual AASW symposium. My topic was titled “Frontiers in Field Education” and we tried to answer questions that included: What does the future hold for field education? What are the promising/exciting opportunities that we can find in the literature and research? What does social work mean in 2015 and beyond? What are the implications for field placements?

Three years on, we are still asking the same questions, facing the same issues and the answers are not much clearer. In essence, there is an oversupply of social work programs and other courses that require a Work Integrated Learning experience, a undersupply of quality placements because of an overstretched health and human services sector, an increasingly diverse student cohort who often have significant learning and personal needs, academic staff who are under increasing pressure to raise scholarly output and generate more external funding, and a reliance on sessional and adjunct staff to undertake a range of field education tasks, such as supervision and liaison. Field education programs have also experienced a significant increase in international student enrolments over the past three decades and, although the Australian government has capped the amount of Commonwealth Grant Scheme enrolments for 2018 and 2019 at the 2017 funding level for domestic students, there has been no capping of international admissions to universities (Department of Education and Training, 2017).

Bogo (2015) states that field education has received more systematic attention than any other component of the social work curriculum; yet, field education programs are all describing a crisis in their ability to implement the best pedagogical practices for students. Curriculum items within field education programs such as number of hours, liaison contact hours, supervision arrangements, student tasks on placement, and documentation processes are strongly regulated by the AASW accreditation standards (ASWEAS, 2012) which have been recently reviewed. And although they appear to be fundamentally appropriate and reflect our practice wisdom, none of these standards has been based on empirical evidence. For instance, Australian programs require 1000 hours of placement but many programs

overseas, such as in the UK and Ireland, exceed this minimum based on the belief that additional field experience enhances readiness to practise. Yet, as indicated by Raskin, Wayne, and Bogo (2008), these requirements are not founded on evidence. Liaison is another unexplored standard: most programs have reduced their contact visits to one – but not because it is believed to be best practice – it is usually an economic consideration. Yet studies have shown that supervisors, in particular, value the contact and support and the fact that this can lead to the development of further collaboration between the school and the field (Armenta & Linseisen, 2015; Cleak & Venville, 2018). The national survey of field education programs undertaken by James Cook University and Queensland University of Technology in 2016 reported that many programs have up to 50% of their students receiving external supervision or a combination of external and group supervision (Zuchowski, Cleak, Nickson, & Spencer, 2016). Again, this development is not often founded on best practice principles but a response to the grave undersupply of placements able to provide one-on-one or traditional supervision, and this alternative model also places a major financial impost on already stretched field education programs.

So there is no question that field education in Australia is under siege and there appears to be no abating of the increasing number of students enrolling in social work programs. For example, Victoria has recently added another social work program to its stable of seven, and in Victoria and Queensland, existing programs are opening new campuses in growing population corridors. The explosion of international students enrolled in Master's of social work programs may dwindle as government changes to the Skilled Occupation List loom (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017), and there are some indications that employment opportunities for new graduates are reducing as well.

The response from field education programs and health and human services have been creative and brave with a flourishing range of innovative placement models and designs to better compete for student placements. The participants in the national survey described a range of strategies including the establishment of placement hubs between universities and agencies, multidisciplinary health clinics, rotation models and the development of new practice settings.

One of the most important challenges in cultivating a successful field placement for students in these newer settings is related to supervision. Although there has been an increase in the number of such agencies beginning to employ social workers, the majority of such placements require the recruitment of an outside social work supervisor. And in order to do this well, the literature suggests that the external supervisor needs to cultivate a relationship with the task supervisor, have an understanding of the specific culture\ perspective of the agency and that specific supervision training would be beneficial for both parties. (Dickinson, 2017; Maidment & Woodward, 2002; Plath, 2003). And, despite the fact that the UK has also been experiencing rapid growth in student enrolments and limited placements, the introduction of new practice learning guidance in respect of placement criteria has stated that a final year student cannot be placed without an onsite social work supervisor (Jasper, 2013). The standard states “In order to support the development of professional identity, students should not be the sole social work representative in a setting” (The College of Social Work, 2012, p. 3). There are no similar criteria provided in the

ASWEAS standards and in fact, they currently suggest that they should occur in final year placements – why?

So what of the future of field education and what opportunities are possible? And what evidence can we use to forge a way forward which is not based on knee-jerk reactions and a response to purely economic considerations? The experience from the HWA program should have shown us that good ideas need more than a restricted funding round that does not lead to sustainable growth and capacity building in quality placements.

The global standards for the education and training of the social work profession approved by both the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) General Assembly in July 2014, state that: “Field education should be sufficient in duration and complexity of tasks and learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for professional practice” (IFSW, 2014, 3.7). If we agree that this is a standard for programs to adhere to, then it becomes an important benchmark to assess the usefulness and viability of these developments going forward. The overwhelming need to find enough social work placements could result in programs placing students in agencies where there is an increased risk that their learning opportunities will be compromised.

Schools of social work globally are using a range of strategies to reduce their reliance on a largely voluntary-based model of placement procurement. One model, described by Wayne, Raskin & Bogo (2006), proposed that students undertake two years of classroom-based study, and followed by a two-year internship in a social work agency. Other schools, including a number in Australia, have developed new agencies used primarily for educational purposes, and modifying existing agencies to integrate service, education, and research (Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Human simulation to teach and assess competence across theoretical knowledge and practice skills are being used in some places in the US but the AASW (2012) does not accept the use of simulation as a valid substitution for placement hours (Robbins, Regan, Williams, Smyth, & Bogo, 2016). Other strategies employed in the US include looking for suitable placement sites in non-traditional settings. Law enforcement agencies, fire departments and general emergency medical services respond to a continuum of crisis situations and social workers can help these systems take a more holistic view in addressing the emotional and psychological needs of individuals, families, and even communities following a crisis (Dickinson, 2017). Social workers have worked in veterinary settings in the US since the early 1980s and today, some schools of veterinary medicine and some veterinary private practitioners employ social workers or counsellors with other degrees, but their role in offering field placements vary (Brackenridge & McPherson, 2016).

The UK is trialling a couple of interesting models. The Think Ahead (2017) program is a new, fast-track route into social work for new graduates and graduates looking for a career change and designed to provide accelerated learning and experiences in mental health settings. After six weeks of an intensive residential course, participants are placed in a multidisciplinary mental health service and supervised by a consultant social worker with integrated teaching days and assignments. After Year 1, students receive a postgraduate

diploma and in Year 2, students are placed in a National Health Service Trust or Local Authority and are awarded a master's degree. The students are selected on their academic success in their undergraduate degree and they are paid while they are training so this is viewed as an expensive alternative to traditional training. Another innovation is a trial at the University of Suffolk of a new apprenticeship model which is led and designed by employers to reflect employer need but in partnership with the higher education providers to ensure that they are able to satisfy the academic standards. However, all of these development ideas are being funded to ensure that they are sustainable over time and that they adhere to the strict practice standards set by the UK government (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2017).

So what is the way forward? Collaborative relationships between schools have already been described above with the establishment of new placement opportunities but more could be done, despite the common perception that every placement is precious and individual agencies need to be "courted". One of the findings of the national study showed that many programs have been widening their geographical scope and hence increasing their competition with other programs and traditional relationships are being replaced by other supervisors' priorities (Zuchowski et al., 2016). In one study, field educators reported that the most meaningful incentive for their retention was access to additional training at no cost and the most influential factor affecting their decision to continue in this role was the quality of the students (Zuckerman & Levine, 2017). A recent Victorian study asked supervisors what would increase the likelihood that they would take a social work student on placement. Although supervisors feel supported by their organisations, participants indicated that staffing and workload demands and practical issues such as space for students, impacted on their ability to provide a quality placement (Hill, Egan, Cleak, Laughton, & Erwin, 2015).

The impressive range of perspectives in this special issue describe many of these new and promising frontiers with specific populations and contexts and describe creative responses and adaptations to the challenges outlined above. We applaud the Australian authors writing in this edition and their contributions offer a range of experiences and ideas which enriches and deepens our understanding of the issues facing field education programs as well as innovative ways to develop new models of placement engagement, forging university–community partnerships and creating work-based learning opportunities in non-traditional settings.

It seems fitting that we begin with the paper written by Egan and a number of academic colleagues which outlined the establishment of the National Field Education Network (NFEN) which is a collaborative response to the current crisis in field education and has 186 members across all stakeholders. In particular, the group interrogated the concept and evidence linking field education as a signature pedagogy and advocates for strengthening our social work teaching and learning approaches in field education through research and inquiry.

Horstmanshof and co-authors offer an evaluation of an innovative model of fieldwork which placed osteopathy, social work and social welfare students together in a University Health Clinic. This model reaffirmed the benefits of interprofessional learning experiences but, as we have come to know, its future will depend on sustainable costing options.

Another innovative and collaborative initiative is described by Gartshore and co-authors who describe a project which located social work students in public schools to assist in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of school students in regional and remote communities. The pilot was supported by funding through the Federal Government Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) that specifically targets low socioeconomic communities.

It is not surprising that a number of writers focused on the particular learning needs of international students who now form a significant cohort in many field education programs. Diamandi and colleagues outline some of the reasons behind increased international students' enrolments in the Australian tertiary sector and some of the challenges they face in making the transition to study in Australia that include how these impact on placement and the supervisory relationship. The paper describe some of the strategies that the university has introduced, including curriculum redesign, the introduction of a hurdle retirement, student integration seminars, field educator training and the establishment of a campus-based community centre.

Goel and co-authors explain how they established an innovative and unique placement for international students in partnership with a community-based service working with older clients. The project increased the number of suitable placements for international students and enhanced both the competency skills, and motivation, of social work students to work with older people.

Koeck and Ottmann's paper is based on a qualitative study involving interviews with five international students to explore their experiences of the placement interview, such as how students felt prepared for them, and the degree to which their language proficiency, social connectedness and other cultural factors represented a challenge. The findings suggest that international students need be to better informed about, and prepared for opportunities associated with field placement and the often implicit associated requirements and expectations.

Crane and colleagues outline a "place-responsive" approach to field education that has emerged from a five-year experience with an Indigenous community, Cherbourg. Significant attention has been paid to the application of decolonising principles within this Indigenous context, which includes being prepared to re-examine and adjust how the university engages, relates, practises and assesses how the interests and strategic goals of the host community could be translated into community-nominated and supported projects, and how it links students in flexible processes that transcend their institutional requirements.

The next group of authors offer a range of learning tools that can facilitate learning on placement. Rose and de Ridder observed that field educators often struggle with teaching social work theory to students and they describe a joint project across three different health sites to provide students with frameworks that enable them to integrate the role of theory with their practice on placement.

Fox and Higgins continue this theme of the importance of the integration of theory and practice and suggest that, although many models exist that support this integration for micro practice, there has been minimal focus on models that supports theory–practice integration in relation to meso and macro interventions. They offer a visual Three Stage Theory Framework that focuses on populations and communities rather than individuals and families to support student learning.

The same authors contribute another teaching and learning model, the Cake Model, which uses the analogy of the process of making a cake to provide a useful method of analysing and ritualising the placement journey. From the “recipe”, the “ingredients”, then “assembling” them and “baking” the cake, this metaphor helps to understand and structure the timelines of the placement and the authors utilise a number of case studies with students and supervisors utilising the Cake Model to demonstrate its application.

Graves continues this theme and offers a framework for organisations and for individual field educators when thinking about field education. The 7Rs of field education can be used as a communication tool or a framework for the placement by outlining the requirements and critical processes involved in student supervision.

On the same theme, Short and others discuss the need for the theoretical frameworks that inform social work and welfare professions to engage thoughtfully with personhood and advocates for genuinely respecting each person’s unique dignity and rights. This is a small, participatory, experiential and action-oriented research approach that focuses on writing *with* people rather than *about* people.

To further the focus on knowledge building on placement, Neden and colleagues describes a small study within a hospital setting which integrates research into practice knowledge and skills to demonstrate it's values of this for students and potentially increasing their employability and career skills as graduates. The findings highlight a number of criteria in designing for integrative learning on placement, such as establishing a context, identifying authentic client needs and organisational goals and using reflective writing and supervision to scaffold conceptual understanding and knowledge building.

Eltaiba records the student voice who participated in interviews after their placements at various agencies and settings in Qatar. The purpose of this study was to examine students’ assessment of the effectiveness of field placement and its contribution to their training in social work at Qatar University.

The paper by Loos and Kosteki endeavours to be inclusive of the perspectives of social work students’ and field educators and describes a qualitative exploratory study examining the key processes and issues facing them within formal supervision, specifically in health practice contexts. In particular, the study provides some insights about how the supervisory relationship cultivates the integration of theory and practice, critical reflection skills and the development of professional identity within the supervisory relationship.

Hall reports on a study in his university which measured the impact of rural and international placements on students' academic performance. As one of the few Australian universities that still runs an integrated field education curriculum, the challenges associated with this model for students in remote placements, include the need for equity in the delivery of unit content, the reliability of information and communication technology and the capacity for student support.

Social work educators and supervisors have an ethical duty to ensure that students become competent social workers and with students spending almost half of their academic hours on placement, field education programs have a heightened obligation to establish good professional standards and processes. The diverse range of papers offered in this edition are all concerned with the quest to provide thoughtful and creative models and ideas for providing quality student placements in challenging times. What is now needed is a more coordinated and structured strategy that is sustainable, evidence-based and properly resourced.

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