

Editor's Introduction

“To Boldly Go...” Charting Rough Territory in Field Education

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Welcome to the 2018 Field Education Special Edition of *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*. The idea of producing this special edition of *Advances* originated at a 2015 Field Education Colloquium convened by the NSW Combined Universities Field Education Group (CUFEG), which is an umbrella organisation for work-based learning in social work and welfare. (A list of member institutions is appended at the end of this section.) Historically, CUFEG has been at the forefront of charting new territories in field education, a crucial area of social work and welfare education, having successfully convened three Colloquia and collectively negotiated for over 20 years with state-based children’s and health services. We maintain an anti-competitive stance, striving to cooperate in a competitive field placement environment. We, as the guest editors, represent the whole of CUFEG and want to thank our colleagues for their inspiration and contribution, and to give special appreciation to Maree Higgins who admirably filled the CUFEG Chair at the beginning phase of this edition. As editors of this special edition, we continue to represent the CUFEG spirit of collaboration by pooling resources from our three separate universities during the editorial process. We would like to thank our respective institutions (University of Wollongong, Western Sydney University and Charles Sturt University) for their acknowledgement of the importance of this work.

In considering the format and content of this special edition, we have drawn from the themes arising from the 2015 CUFEG Colloquium and subsequent meetings of the National Field Education Network. These themes included administration, research and resources in field education provision, the experience of students in field education, the quality of placements in field education, field education policy, the roles and responsibilities of the hosting agency, industrial issues for field education and the positioning of field education in the conceptualisation of social work and welfare as a profession. In the face of an increasingly evidence-based workforce environment, Plath (2006) urges us more broadly to consider redefining the nature of evidence in social work. We have gratefully borrowed from this approach when considering some of the uncharted territories in field education. We have sought contributions that critically approached issues emerging in the

current landscape of field education as demonstrated by the aforementioned themes. In addition, we encouraged works that also incorporated an understanding of the pressures on field education provision, the increase in parallel qualifying social work programs (both government and privately funded), and the creative opportunities that now exist for producing quality student learning experiences. To this end, we have collated 12 research and discussion papers, four practice papers and one book review for this edition, all of which will progress the body of knowledge in this field.

In nominating an *Editors' Choice* from this special edition, we have looked at papers with two primary criteria in mind. First, we were looking for an innovative approach to field education issues. Flynn (2017) contends that social innovation initiatives have the capacity to be quickly responsive and potentially revolutionary but may also err on oversimplifying causation and acting without regard to data and knowledge. We must therefore consider the need to approach innovation intelligently, crucially so in the current landscape, for providing both pathways to learning and workforce preparation for the next generations of social work and welfare students. On the one hand, we as editors argue the need to rethink student learning in the face of exponential growth in new technologies. Information and communication has a contemporary dimension that should be embraced, yet not without losing the humanity of social work and welfare. It is, after all, essentially about people. More broadly, we need to have intelligent innovation as the spread of neoliberalism continues to have influence across many levels of society. For the human services sector, this spread has often meant more stringent levels of accountability for funding and, arguably, less funding available for service provision. This situation creates time pressures and staff freezes in organisations which are asked to do more with less, and may therefore have lower capacity to offer field placement experiences to students. Further, the need for innovation is urgent as we cater for an increasing number of tertiary education programs, all of which report continual growth in student numbers. A key aspect of innovation in field education for CUFEW is that it promotes collaboration in what is clearly a competitive environment.

Second, we assessed each paper in terms of which would likely have the greatest impact. There is little point in providing opportunity for discussion and reflection on contemporary issues, pressures and creative approaches if we are not taken on a journey towards making an impact on policy, practice, research and learning. These spheres are inextricably linked and mutually influencing, but require insights that are both bold and compassionate. As the late Professor Natalie Bolzan (2007, p.56) emphasised:

Social workers work with, or on behalf of, individuals, groups and communities to identify, minimize, and ultimately remove disadvantage associated with social arrangements, both formal and informal.

In this way, we can seek to ensure that our impact creates purposeful social change that also tends to people's distress, in all forms of social work practice (including field placements). Taking these dimensions of collaborative innovation and impact into consideration, the *Editors' Choice* for this issue is "Exploring formal supervision in social work field education: Issues and challenges for students and supervisors" by Melissa Loos and Tina Kosteci. An insightful collaboration between a practitioner and an academic, the article critically

analyses the nature of social work learning and innovative models of student supervision within that area. The article demonstrates positive impact on social work education, with flow-on consequences for an empowering framework for practice.

We are extremely delighted that Associate Professor Helen Cleak agreed to provide a Guest Editorial for this special edition. Helen was the keynote speaker at the 2015 CUFEG Colloquium and impressed everybody with her clear articulation of the “frontiers” in 21st century field education. We trust that her wisdom, and the combined wisdom of all the contributors, will inspire you to think creatively and purposefully about social work and welfare field education.

References

- Bolzan, N. (2007). A definition of social work for practice. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 1, 52–65.
- Flynn, M. (2017). Science, innovation, and social work: Clash or convergence? *Research on Social Work Practice*, 27(2), 123–128.
- Plath, D. (2006). Evidence-based practice: Current issues and future directions. *Australian Social Work*, 59(1), 56–72.

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