

Innovations in Field Placement for International Social Work Students: Forging University Partnership with Community Sector in Elderly Care

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ABSTRACT

Australian social work schools face a challenge to find appropriate placements for the increasing number of international students enrolled in their Master of Social Work Qualifying (MSWQ) programs.

An innovative and unique placement for international students enrolled in the MSWQ at the University of South Australia was organised in partnership with a community-based service working with older clients to meet two objectives: increasing the number of suitable placements for international students; and enhancing both the competency skills and motivation of social work students to work with older people.

Upon completion of placement, students were asked to complete an on-line survey utilising both quantitative and qualitative measures. The article reports on changes in students' insights, knowledge and skills gain, their perception of older people, willingness to work with older people and the challenges students faced on their placement. Strategies for enhancing students' experiences on placement and developing and strengthening partnerships with community-based organisations are discussed.

Keywords: *Field placement; Social work, International students, Older people, Community-based organisations*

INTRODUCTION

Australian universities are experiencing difficulty finding placements for the increasing number of international students enrolled in social work degree programs (Cleak, Anand, & Das, 2016; Harrison & Felton, 2013; Harrison & Ip, 2013; Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett & Diamandi, 2014). Evidence suggests that fewer social work students want to work with older people than in other fields of social work (Chonnody & Wang, 2014; Heycox & Hughes, 2006). The University of South Australia (UniSA) and St John Ambulance SA-Community Care, developed a partnership to construct appropriate placements for international students.

The article reports findings from a post-placement evaluation of international students' experiences on placement working with older people. In this article the literature on social work field placements for international students and the need for training of social work students in the field of elderly care is reviewed. The placement process, including the setting, preplacement interviews, training workshop and projects design are discussed. The data-collection methodology of post-placement evaluations is explained; the findings confirm an exclusive learning experience gained by students and present some of the challenges experienced on placement. The discussion and conclusion highlight the importance of community-based projects and draw attention to the need for better planning and structure of placement processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Increased demand for placements

Overall, there has been a rapid growth in student numbers in tertiary institutions and an expansion in the number and range of social work programs (Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work, 2016 cited in Harris et al., 2017; Healy & Lonne, 2010; Lawrence, 2017). This expansion has led to a greater demand for placements in the human service sector (Hosken et al., 2016).

It has been noted widely in the literature that social work schools in Australia and overseas are grappling with the challenge of offering high-quality field education for domestic, international and increasing numbers of highly diverse students. Alongside this increase in students, welfare organisations are facing funding cuts, privatisation of services with increase in workload for existing staff, resulting in an increased focus on essential service provision, instead of discretionary activities such as providing student placements (Bellinger, 2010; Cleak & Smith, 2012; Hosken et al., 2016).

International Students

In March 2017, there were 480,092 international students in Australia, which is 15% more than in March 2016 (Department of Education and Training, 2017) and is four times as many as in 1995 when there were 111,300 international students in Australia (Australian Education Network [AEN], 2013). Universities face significant challenges in seeking placements for international students. Li and Zhang (2015) contended that a deficit model is the predominant view of international students. Students are portrayed as passive, lacking in independence and unable to write in proper academic English. This perception

may result in a reluctance to engage international students on placement. Sawir (2005) commented on the perceived lack of language proficiency, both written and spoken, as a major issue faced on placement by international students themselves.

International students are also perceived as culturally different and generally, questioned on their identity, religious practices and language ability (White, 2006). Differences in cultural values, attitudes and behaviours could also be a cause for initial “disorientation, discomfort and disapproval” for many students irrespective of their age while on placement (Crabtree, Parker, Azman, & Carlo, 2015, p. 50).

Matthew and Lough (2017, pp. 25–26) reviewed social work literature on international student placements to identify challenges and gaps in placement from the perspective of students, field educators and their supervisors and to suggest strategies to overcome these challenges. The significant challenges experienced were “language and cultural barriers, value differences, cultural shock and struggle with identity.”

Australia’s changing demographics and need for trained social work professionals

The percentage of Australians aged 65 and above is increasing. It is estimated that there will be a 4.1% pa increase in this population between 2012 to 2030. In 2012 there were 2.8 million people aged 65–84 years and this number will grow to 4.8 million in 2030. The population in the age group 85 and above is predicted to rise from 420,308 in 2012 to 766, 117 in 2030 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013). Alongside this percentage increase in older people, the literature reports fewer social workers are willing to work with older people (Chonnody & Wang, 2014; Dorfman & Ingram, 2009; Heycox & Hughes, 2006; McCormack, 2008). Recommendations to enhance students’ interest in working with older people include an infusion of age-related course content in the whole program, having a one-off course on aged care, or preparing students through work-integrated learning (Duffy & Healy, 2011; Lun, 2010; Silverstone, 2000). Based on their study’s findings, Mason and Sanders (2004) recommended field practicum as the best way to attract and train students for practice in aged care.

Creating innovative field placement in elderly care for International students

The aim of the placement at St John Community Care was to provide international students with an opportunity to interact with older people and design well-being plans to sustain health and well-being in older age. The approach optimised cultural strengths such as bilingual language proficiency and the life experiences of international students. Pre-planning involved a series of interviews with students followed by a three-day training course. Ongoing training was assimilated into the placement. Utilising a strength-based approach, students were matched with clients to work in partnership to create profiles and plans, achieve meaningful goals, pilot innovative projects, review and improve existing projects and program development. At the end of their placement, students were asked to answer an on-line survey using a mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) design. It is the results from the survey which provide the basis for findings in this article.

Pre-placement preparation and planning

Placement setting

Fourteen MSWQ students, 13 international and one domestic, completed a 500-hour placement at St John Community Care – Flourishing Life Program (FLP) in semester two of 2016. The placement model was constructed between FLP and the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy (PSW), over a succession of placement cycles. Five placement students were on-site at St John Community Care and nine students worked off-site. Students received on-site supervision from a team of qualified professionals from other social science disciplines and social work supervision supplemented the on-site supervision as there was not an AASW qualified social worker within the organisation.

The FLP program, consisting of three part-time staff, worked collaboratively with other St John staff to provide students with an opportunity to work with clients residing in their homes. Most clients were older adults aged 70 years and over, who were physically frail, experiencing challenges such as chronic disease, mental illness, or disability, were experiencing a degree of social isolation or exclusion and/or were not able to speak English.

Preplacement interviews, training workshop and projects

Each student was interviewed by St John Community Care staff, to determine competencies, core values, learning styles, relevant life experiences, and reflective thoughts regarding their social work role. Wilson and Kelly (2010) have highlighted the value of pre-placement training and preparation in enabling a successful transition to the field placement. Students attended a three-day training course developed by Vanessa Leane, based on her current doctorate research at UniSA, underpinned by psychology and social work theories and therapies (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Saleebey, 2009; Seligman, 2011). One of the features of the training was a demonstration of a strength-based inquiry interview with an older person called a 'discovery conversation.' The methodology of the inquiry was designed to enhance students' empathetic, reflective and critical thinking by utilising a series of open-ended questions and enabling the older person to choose their core values. The outcomes of an inquiry included the creation of a strength-based profile and wellbeing plans designed to enable clients to express and use strengths described as core values coupled with capabilities.

The presence of older people at the training enabled students to gain knowledge of working with an older cohort, challenge ageism and increase communication skills. Clients were eager to engage in conversations with students, share their life stories and provide presentations about their lives including bi-lingual presentations. The training was designed to deeply challenge preconceived perspectives of older people as social and economic burdens, to understand how they could personally be part of implementing a strength-based approach within the aged care system through their placement.

After the training, staff met with students to determine their strengths. They matched students to clients and constructed the composition of student project groups on this strengths basis. This strength-based matching process was a crucial element of the placement model. Students were provided with a project brief for each project with expected wellbeing outcomes and they were assigned two to three small projects during

their placement. The projects, all based on the research and experience of Vanessa Leane, a PhD student and staff member of St John Community Care at the time, were all strengths-based and designed to promote wellbeing and agency in older adults. A summary of key projects is below.

Table 1. Community based well-being projects for older people

PROGRAM	PURPOSE AND PROCESS
The Treasured Story Project	Students worked with older people to transform memories into stories in written and video format to share with family, friends, schools, universities and their community. Students were matched with older migrants who spoke the same dialect to assist and or complete bi-lingual life stories e.g. Chinese, Korean, Arabic and English translations. Upon story completion a presentation was held to share and celebrate their life story with invited guests.
Living Library for Children	A translation of 10 completed life stories into children's stories suitable for a primary school educational curriculum.
When We Were Young and Living Library Poster Exhibition	A poster exhibition (When We were Young), using a chosen memory and a childhood and present-day photo. Each student utilised their interview with participants to create a written profile, with photos of the past and present, to construct a Living Library Poster Exhibition with the support of volunteers and staff. The exhibition was to be showcased at conferences, universities, libraries and schools.
The World of Story-Telling Event	An Event and Exhibition with fifteen older participants, representing 14 different nationalities. Each student shared a profile of a participant's life and core values, including an online link up with a student's grandmother in India.
Living Library Circuit	Students visited older participants in their homes and in residential care, asking meaningful questions and listening reflectively to their thoughts and stories.
Cultural Life Experience	A home-based program, designed to cultivate intergenerational, multi-cultural interactions which enable an older person to support and empower the learning, conversational and language needs of international students and new migrants.
Meaningful Moments	The aim of the program was to provide students with an opportunity to understand what activities or interactions may be a source of positive emotion to clients diagnosed with dementia and to create those experiences with them.
Power of Pets	A project design where students and volunteers supported the companionship of pets in the lives of older people.
Musical Moments	Volunteers and students provided personalised musical performances in the homes of clients, which also included conversations about the meaning of music.
Computer Companion	Two students assisted in uploading laptops and tablets with relevant apps and programs to be used by volunteers with clients. Students also assisted in the development and execution of workshops for volunteers to learn how to increase technology engagement in older people.
The Wellbeing Program	Nine students were matched with two to three clients to construct wellbeing plans designed to use identified strengths, including finding the best resources required to implement plans, and commence the accomplishment of short or long-term wellbeing goals.

POST-PLACEMENT EVALUATION

Methods

Students were asked to complete an online survey after placement had finished to help assess the relevance of pre-placement training in preparation for, and during, placement.

This included assessing self-perceived change in perception towards age and older people, valued field placement experiences including reflective practice, knowledge and skill development, and constraints and challenges experienced in the placement. The online survey included information about the nature of study and its objective of enhancing teaching and learning experience in the program. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Students were emailed information about the study and a link to the survey. Email reminders were sent to all students asking them to complete the survey which remained open for at least 30 days.

The data were collected both quantitatively and qualitatively using a mixed-method approach. Demographic details on age, gender, ethnicity, spoken language and status as a domestic or international student were sought to see if these variables could affect responses on the main questions. Some questions were in a *yes or no* format whereas questions relating to confidence level were on a 4-point Likert Scale (*low, moderate, good and very good*). The remaining nine questions were open-ended inviting feedback and comments in specific areas.

A total of 14 students were on placement. For the purpose of this research we focused on the experiences of 13 international students 11 of whom answered the survey. Most students were in the age group 25–35 years (9 out of 11), and predominantly females (8 out of 11). The students identified themselves as Chinese (3), Indian (4), Nepalese (2), Korean (1), West African (1) and they spoke their native language at home. The majority (7/11) had experience of living with grandparents, whereas four of them had done volunteer work involving older people.

For the purpose of this research, qualitative statements were manually coded and categorised under the six broad questions of the study. The categories are as follows: the relevance of three-day training; learning experiences that are valued; self-assessment of social work knowledge and skills development; self-assessment of change in perceptions about age and older people; assessment of readiness to work in the aged care sector; and constraints and challenges experienced by students in the current placement. Similarities and differences in responses were noted. Direct quotes (statements) were used to present the authentic voice of students. Minor corrections in spelling and grammar of written quotes have been undertaken for better readability without compromising the original expression and meaning.

LIMITATIONS

The study is limited as it presents the students' perspective through an online survey where respondents cannot seek clarification if the question is unclear and responses could be brief in the absence of an explanation, helping them to understand the full context. Thus, there is a possibility that an interview response could be substantially different from the survey response. Also, there was no pretest done to evaluate the knowledge, skills and preconceived ideas about old age. Responses were recorded after the completion of placement thus limiting its ability for comparison on same variables.

FINDINGS

The purposes of this study were twofold. The first purpose was to evaluate the experiences of international students on placement and the second was to evaluate how placement and practice led to change in students' attitudes and prepared them to work with older people.

The findings from the survey are discussed in accordance with the survey questions as listed in the methods section.

1. To gauge the relevance of three-day training in preparation for work /engagement with older people

In this study, students' responses to the relevance of strengths-based training were positive. Most of them considered that pre-placement training was vital for developing an understanding of strengths, conversational and interview skills, analytical evaluation of strengths in action, rapport building, and establishing collaborative working relationships with older people. It was evident that students focused on meaningful interactions with clients demonstrating client-centred practice. In the students' words:

The training gave more insight into how to engage an older person in a meaningful way, a way that brightens up their day and gives them purpose.

Knowing how to get the most out of a conversation with an older person helps towards their wellbeing, such as asking open strength-based questions. The 'discovery conversation' demonstration during training followed by the opportunity to personally engage in an inquiry conversation with older people was regarded as the most useful learning experience.

The interaction with elderly people during the training sessions was very helpful to us. Especially for international students this training helped in knowing about the elderly people in the context of Australia.

Students received explanations of how to apply both social work and psychology theories from a strength-based perspective. One of the students commented that:

[She] learnt how to recognise and acknowledge one's own strengths and strengths of others.

Another student revealed:

... in the beginning, the client was feeling a bit shy, but I focused on the character strengths and some of the inherent skills of the client. As a result, client was attracted to the points, which were raised by me, and overall it turned out to be successful session.

2. To identify learning experiences that are valued by students

Students had the opportunity to engage in a diverse range of activities and projects. The open and informal practice context provided them with the freedom to interact, build rapport and relate with older adults, which was crucial in increasing their confidence, communication skills and cultural awareness.

One of the students commented:

I participated in a project that was designed for the older people with dementia. It was a totally different experience for me. It gave me a fabulous opportunity to practice learned social work theories and interpersonal skills with dementia clients.

Students regarded projects which utilised narrative and reminiscence therapy within a culturally and linguistically diverse context as important, noting that older people were provided an opportunity to be heard and valued at a community level and, at the same time, students gained a valuable understanding of diverse cultures. One student who was engaged in transcribing the older persons' stories into children's stories commented on how he/she could draw upon strengths of clients and his/her own strengths to create an innovative project.

I came up with creative and innovative methods to share the older persons' stories, such as creating children[s] stories as well as making a short video using both my strengths (e.g., illustration, language, writing, video-making skills) and the strengths of the older persons (e.g., editing, writing, computer, language, creativity, doll-making, basketball playing and leadership).

3. To self- assess social work knowledge and skills development in the field of ageing and aged care

It was evident that students learnt through a strength-based inquiry (a discovery conversation) with older people constructing and engaging in meaningful activities with them. Their increase in confidence was evident from their feedback, sharing reflective thoughts that it was inspirational and it motivated them to work with older clients. The following three excerpts show reflections on learning that took place:

I learn[ed] how to open discovery conversation and gather more information from the clients. It help[ed] me to build my confidence.

I can confidently say that I am feeling that I have become competent especially when it comes to working with aged people.

I think working with older people is a privilege because they have lots of life experiences and I have learnt so much through my interaction with them.

The meaningful interactions and feedback from the older people enhanced students' skills of reflexivity:

I would rate my learning as 8/10, as there was still many things to be learnt but had very limited time. At the end of each session they will give you the feedback and seeing them smiling will increase your confidence level.

Inspirational life stories motivated students to remain focused in social work education.

Through the three-month working, I was encouraged and inspired by one of my client's stor[ies]. He was born in the background of Second World War. He experienced the invasion of [the]

Japanese, the three years of civil war between the Nationalist and Communists part[ies], the liberation of China, Cultural Revolution and reform and open the gate of China. From his story, we can found that life is still full of the interesting things, even in the darkest period of WWII. *This wonderful experience will keep motivat[ing] me to continue my study of social work in ... Australia.*

Many students stated that their listening, communication and interpersonal skills had improved, and they could see its effectiveness in changing the clients' conditions. The following statements from students evidence this:

It enlighten(ed) my interpersonal communication skills.

I was able to polish my listening skills and interpersonal skills.

This project helped me understand a lot of needs of my clients only by listening to them.

Students reported gaining experience in application of theories such as the strengths and empowerment approach, narrative and reminiscence therapy, assessment and planning, and learning creative ways to improve the happiness of older persons. Depending upon the project they were involved it required them to be a representative, take a leadership role and work as a team member.

I can confidently say that I have learnt client assessment and planning skills through different wellbeing projects.

Application of theory into practice, build confidence, reflective and critical thinking, how to recognise the hidden strengths, empathy, respect to all, professionalism, teamwork and so on.

It has helped me a lot in building ... leadership skills.

Another gain was to get love, affection and respect from older persons; this was felt by the majority.

4. Reflexivity

One of the aims of field placement is to develop reflective thinking and reflexivity in students. Students were not only engaged in reflective thinking with clients, but they were also encouraged to complete journaling at the end of each day and reflect upon the learning. They identified benefits in writing reflective notes and discussing it in supervision and eventually changing focus on theories applied with an enhanced understanding of what works and why. The following excerpt reflects the importance of reflective practice:

I still remember that I was having difficulty in gathering important information from one of the well-being client[s]. After finishing the client meeting, I wrote my reflective notes and I even had a discussion with my tutor and field educator regarding the arising issue. I came to [the] conclusion that I have to apply Validation theory instead of Narrative and Reminiscence theory

with that particular client. Eventually, the new theory worked so well that I was able to collect [an] adequate amount of information from the client in the second meeting session. The bottom line is that this placement proved to be phenomenal in terms of development of my reflective skills.

Student feedback confirmed the value of the supervision sessions and journaling in enhancing reflective practice. It plays an important part in encouraging reflective practice and this was evident from the following excerpt:

By engaging in continuous direct supervision and external supervision increased my reflective thinking and engaging in reflective journal gave me perfect idea about my goals.

Through reflection, students were able to make sense of abstract concepts that they had studied in class. One of the students wrote:

... before this placement, client's interests remain a priority at all times' stated by Code of Ethics (AASW 2010) was only a vague notion for me, and I [had] no idea about how to use it. The placement helps me really understand the meaning behind this concept, which became the guideline for me during the social work practice. I found that when I uncertain about how to do for the next stage, if I just follow the principle of regarding the clients' interests as priority, I can make sure that my decision is right and ensure my social work career [is] on the right track.

5. To self-assess change in perceptions about age and older people

Students were asked to report on their perception about age and ageing prior to the placement and after completion of the placement. The common perceptions held by students prior to placement were: older people are “vulnerable,” “isolated,” “frail” and in “need care and support most of the time,” and “older people are difficult to change.” The following account from a student reveals how that student regarded “difficult to be convinced” as a barrier to plan and change in their well-being plan.

It is never easy to convince them for any required change which is necessary for their own benefit.

However, this was their view *prior to* working with older people. The changes in perspective were noted by students as revealed in the following excerpts.

Older people are warehouse[s] of knowledge and skills; there is a lot to learn from them; they are unique; they are treasure to the community.

I have experienced that every senior citizen is unique and special in their own terms. Younger generations can learn so much from their incredible life experiences, high social values, invaluable skills and knowledge.

Another student revealed:

I thought that the older persons are weak and not good with computers. But the older persons that I worked with have many strengths and capabilities. I learned to work with their strengths and not to underestimate their capabilities.

Many international students, especially those from Asian backgrounds regarded older people as valuable irrespective of their diminishing physical capacities. Experiential learning with older people showed a few students the limited time they were spending with their own grandparents and why they should increase this engagement.

Before the placement, I have no idea about the older people really need the caring [to] such a big degree. Now, I understand, especially for my grandmother and grandfather, they also need me accompany with them, they are not the superman. I should spend more time to stay with them.

6. To assess readiness to work in the aged care sector

Apart from one, all students wanted to work with older people after completion of their degree program. This was a huge gain in terms of preparing a social worker workforce willing and appreciating work with older people. Some of the excerpts below reveal their thoughts on why they would choose to work with older people.

I would if I was able to provide meaningful interactions and assistance.

I would like to work with elderly because it gives me satisfaction and happiness in my jobs.

Working with older people is always a pleasure and motivational one. I would like to be a companion for them and relief their stress to some level by listening them.

7. To investigate constraints and challenges experienced by students in the current placement

Although there was a great appreciation of learning that occurred, students identified challenges faced in the practice setting. Some challenges related to the placement set-up as not everyone could have office space within the organisation and thus were accommodated at UniSA. Initially some students experienced a lack of client contact while matches were being organised and did not have sufficient opportunity to work with many clients. Most international students did not have their own car, so they spent a lot of time travelling on public transport. They were further challenged due to limited English language ability, age difference with clients and cultural differences. Most students found having a location supervisor *and* an external supervisor challenging. However, as they progressed on placement, they appreciated the learning that happened with two supervisors. The following excerpts reveal their sentiments:

I did not get as much one on one client interaction as I would have liked, to have been able to use strength-based skills more often, because I was more involved in the living library circuit where there were a few students visiting a client at a time.

Found it bit difficult to sense out the different activities at the beginning as things were always changing. And, been placed between two agencies or two field educators it was not easy to coordinate my learning.

Managing time to meet placement requirements was also a challenge felt by students.

Time management, as we need to juggle both the coursework and placement work.

To overcome the challenges of spoken language, students were matched with clients from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, this was considered to be a constraint in learning about cultures other than their own. Some narrative bilingual projects were time consuming as revealed by this student:

As there are many needs from the Chinese clients translating their long stories into English, which cost lots of time for me. I wish I could have more chance to meet the Australian[s] and to practise my oral speaking and deeply understand the culture of Australia.

Despite various constraints and challenges there was positive feedback.

There wasn't anything really that restricted my learning because even constraining issues or frustrations still aids learning as you must learn how to work through them or with them regarding processes and procedures.

The collaboration resulted in an empowering experience for students, and staff and clients of St John Flourishing Life. The opportunity for older participants to be involved in placement training and purposeful projects with students created experiences which enhanced a sense of value, worth and dignity to, not only receive support and empowerment, but to also contribute in a meaningful way to students' learning. One older person expressed this view in written feedback through FLP:

Unbelievable, it gave me a lot of confidence for who I am. I felt that students were interested and accepting, and it was as good for me as it was for them. A very memorable day. It gave a pat on the back as if to say, 'you can do it'. No, it was well done. No complaints.

Another older participant expressed:

Working with the students is a kind of mutual learning. We learn from each other about the difference in life experience and everyday knowledge. Things that younger people know are different from ours and it is vice versa. So, the learning is reciprocal. An enjoyable experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study indicate that community-based placement settings offer a strong opportunity for student learning. Students expressed an increase in confidence in applying social work theory into practice. Similar findings were reported by Mason and Sanders (2004) where students expressed that the learning they had gained through interactions with older people increased their confidence levels. A highlight for many students was the development of effective communication and interpersonal skills and the ability to be innovative and creative in preparing well-being plans with older adults.

Students reported an increase in self-confidence in working with older people in a reflexive way. Although, their experiences on placement were highly valued there were challenges and constraints especially for international students, due to their limited English and a lack

of cultural knowledge of the host society. Similar sentiments were echoed in the studies conducted by Sawir (2005), White (2006) and Fox (2017). Extra support for these students and more planning in the beginning phase of placement is vital to placement success as postulated by Liley (2003) in her study of student placement in a health setting. She found that students expressed discomfort at the beginning of the placement; however, this response did not last until the end of the placement. She credited the change to experiential learning/practice in a setting that was essential to build the confidence level of students.

Caution in matching students with clients of similar cultural background must be exercised to ensure there is equity in task allocation and opportunities for wider experiences. Engstrom, Won Min, and Gamble (2009) found bilingual students had similar experiences in a hospital setting – they felt they were spending more time and doing more work as interpreters for the clients and other professionals thus being required to work with a different clientele.

Present research does not report supervisors' perspectives on supervision arrangements and this would be a useful addition to future research. Students' feedback indicated that they found two supervisors (onsite and offsite) difficult to manage initially. Students' exposure and direct work experience through innovative and creative projects changed their preconceived attitudes about older people and increased their interest in, and willingness to work with them, as a career choice. It was the positive experience with older people that inspired and motivated participating students (Cummings, Adler, & DeCoster, 2005). These findings are consistent with Masciadrelli (2014), who also found a significant decrease in ageist attitudes and increased competence in working with older people because of experiential learning. This research thus strengthens the argument previously expressed by earlier researchers (Cummings et al., 2005; Gelman, 2012; Mason & Sanders, 2004).

It is noteworthy that all students, except one, expressed their desire to work in the aged care sector after graduation. According to Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas, and Metrey (2002), it is a feeling of self-efficacy in what students have confidence in doing that predicts a career interest and occupational choice.

CONCLUSION

Not only does this innovative placement model provide an answer to generating placement opportunities for international students but paves a way to position social workers to fulfill a vital role of empowering a culturally diverse and ageing population. This strength-based approach accommodates and supports international social work students on placement providing them with meaningful, positive, learning experiences. Students considered it a valuable field practicum enhancing self-efficacy, confidence, knowledge, reflective and communication skills and motivation to work in the age-care sector. Learning areas included professional integrity, cultural competence, application of theory especially strengths and empowerment approaches and remaining client-focused in their practice.

The study has implications for social work educators to think innovatively of ways to develop new models of placement engagement, forging university–community partnerships

and creating work-based learning opportunities in a non-traditional setting, encouraging future professional engagement with older people and overcoming systemic constraints to engage with international students. The benefits for students and clients are obvious, heralding the possibilities for social change within placement structures to improve living well in old age and professional practice to engage, design, implement and sustain quality of living.

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