

## Practice Reflections

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# Supporting Social Work Supervisors and Students in Field Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to share our learning about attempts to improve the support provided to social work supervisors and field educators through use of technology. Firstly we canvass the current context of field education, highlighting the challenges of a neo-liberal environment. We then describe and reflect on the process and challenges of developing and evaluating an interactive website that was designed to support social work supervisors and students. Finally, we reflect on the challenges for academic social work staff involved in field education in relation to the engagement and support of those involved in providing social work student placements.

**Keywords:** *Social work education; Field education; Social work supervisors; Student supervision.*

## INTRODUCTION

As we are academics directly engaged in social work field education, this paper is written to join a conversation, and share ideas in relation to the challenges and opportunities involved in social work placements (Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett, & Diamandi, 2014). Our focus is on the preparation and support of those involved in the provision of social work field education, and particularly those in regional and rural areas. We begin by briefly canvassing the current context of field education in Victoria, Australia. Secondly, we document and reflect on the particular strategies we have implemented – focussing on the development of a website – to enhance support for key players including field educators, task supervisors, and university liaison staff. The aim of this paper is to share the learning gained from this experience.

It is established that social work placements are memorable and foundational for students as they transition from student to social worker (Zuchowski, 2014). It has also been shown that quality supervision is critical for students throughout this journey, as it enables them to be “confident, competent and empowered” (Smith, Cleak, & Vreugdenhil, 2014, p. 12). However, as Zuchowski (2013) has argued, achieving this outcome requires adequate preparation and support of all players and, in particular, those staff and students involved in a triadic relationship which may include an external supervisor, a task supervisor and liaison. Our experience is that, in rural areas, there are often additional players involved in the provision of field education, drawn from a wider range of organisations and professions, adding further complexity to the context in which support is being provided. It is essential that, as social work educators, we strive to generate innovative ways to meet their support and learning needs (Theobald, Gardner, & Long, forthcoming). This is particularly important in rural areas because quality placements assist with the retention of graduate social workers, and thereby the profession’s future educators (Mason, Bowles, Osburn, Mansell-Lees, & Gregory, 2012).

The capacity to provide quality field education continues to be constrained by a political and institutional context dominated by managerialist and neo-liberal ideologies that privilege efficiency above effectiveness (Baines, Charlesworth, Turner, & O’Neill, 2014; Zuchowski et al., 2014). In Australia, Commonwealth and state governments of all political orientation have increasingly transferred welfare provision to the non-government sector and pursued policies of privatising an increasing number of essential community services and public goods. These shifts have resulted in increased competition amongst services and the dismantling of some wider social welfare infrastructure. Such developments have been pursued with vigour in Australia since the federal election in 2013 of the Liberal–National Coalition government, as evidenced by the introduction of funding cuts to community service organisations and social welfare services, alongside the curtailment of a range of citizenship-based entitlements. In an environment characterised by scarce resources and funding uncertainty, the ability of organisations, and the social workers within them, to support field education programs is hampered (Maidment, 2006; Zuchowski, 2013).

Amid these changing circumstances, universities have also faced significant funding cuts and our experience is that resources directed to field education have been reduced accordingly. Simultaneously, there have been massive increases in numbers of social work enrolments in universities (Smith et al., 2014). This has generated the need for

more placements and supervisors, and reduced the capacity of social work academics on rural campuses such as ours to undertake the liaison role for the majority of student placements. Sourcing placements with 'onsite' social work supervision has also become increasingly challenging and, as a result, a growing proportion of placements require external social work field educators with task supervisors. This is intensified in rural locations because there are fewer social workers employed in human service organisations, and fewer academics on regional campuses. Taken together, these shifts have led to substantial increases in the number of casual staff performing these roles, and they require additional support. In light of this shifting context, we posed the question as colleagues: "What more can we reasonably do to support those involved in social work field education?"

We know anecdotally that face-to-face support is valued by the field in our region. However, we are limited in our capacity to provide this and it can be difficult for agency staff to attend information sessions in person because our placements cover a wide geographical area across the state. Whilst experiences of 'travel time' are complex for social workers in all locations (Hickson & Lehmann, 2014), more can be done to ensure that professional development, networking and peer support needs are met. In response to our question, we were specifically interested in exploring the opportunities and benefits of supporting social work placements with the use of online technology (Brown & Green, 2002; Maidment, 2006; Zuchowski et al., 2014).

## **OUR ACTIONS**

We wanted to look for new ways to prepare and support field educators, task supervisors and liaison people across the La Trobe Rural Health School, which has campuses in Bendigo, Mildura and Albury Wodonga. We aimed to improve the field placement experience for all players. We knew that social workers were engaging with technology for networking, peer support, reflection and fun (Hickson, 2012) but that they also valued ongoing in-person support.

In 2012 we explored the idea of developing a website for field educators and students that would provide information to assist with preparation for field placements as well as support during placements. The aim of the website was to develop and collect resources that field educators and students might need and locate them in one central portal.<sup>1</sup> In doing so we aimed to better support field educators and supervisors to manage the complex array of tasks and responsibilities involved in the provision and supervision of social work placements

To progress the development of the website we were successful in obtaining an internal university grant. We started by looking at the Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) requirements for social work supervision and conducted a scoping review of Australian university websites offering undergraduate or qualifying social work programs. We examined publicly available information about field education and, in particular, that designed to support social work field educators. This research informed the design of the website and a web developer was engaged to assist with this process. Six experienced social work supervisors and seven students were interviewed to develop material for inclusion on the website. This included short video clips containing example supervision sessions, information about student and supervisor expectations, and general information for

supervisors about planning for placements. Other key features of the website included links to information relating to the AASW's standards and documents; the university's field education manual; students' preparation for placement; the various field education roles, tasks and responsibilities; useful web-based resources and articles; and information and resources relating to supervision.

Another innovative aspect of the website was the inclusion of an interactive Placement Assessment Report (PAR). The interactive PAR was developed as an online tool to assist supervisors and students engage in its development. It provides sample learning tasks and methods of assessment that were designed to be suitable for students undertaking first or second placement in a variety of social work placement environments.

The website was promoted by email, and it was showcased at our annual university-based social work field education expo prior to placements commencing. Having developed and promoted the website to support those involved in social work field education, we were curious to know if the use of online technology had helped. We wanted to find out who was using the website, what they used it for and whether it addressed their needs. To find these answers, several evaluation methods were deployed including a click-counter and feedback section on the web page, an online survey (during 2014), and a focus group (during 2015). There were 15 responses to the online survey, two participants in a focus group while four social workers who were unable to attend the focus group provided written comments. We had hoped for closer to 100 participants given the large number of players involved in placements. We were disappointed with the limited number of responses, which were far below what we expected, and our ability to make claims about the usefulness or otherwise of the website is thus constrained. However, the limited feedback we did receive indicated participants used the website for professional development, networking and peer support. Participants also revealed that they felt constrained by agency demands and the challenges of rurality; however, the resources provided were described as useful and helpful. Overall, however, the process led us to think further about the idea of supporting those involved in social work education.

## **OUR REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS**

The process of developing and evaluating the website and related resources provided a unique opportunity for us as colleagues to find the space to reflect and discuss social work student placements. Key questions that arose for us included: How do we support key players involved in social work placements? Is the website really about supervisors and students or is it about us – is it driven by the resource demands on us as academics? Why are people not participating in the evaluation? These and other questions flavoured our meetings as we developed and attempted to evaluate the website.

We felt a genuine desire to support placement supervisors and liaison people better in order to ensure the ongoing capacity of the field to provide positive student experiences of placement. Ultimately we wanted to improve the field education experience for social work students. However, at times the process was quite challenging as we attempted to evaluate our process. The evaluation of the website did not provide us with sufficient information to really know

if the website itself was the right medium to provide support to the key players involved in social work placements: supervisors, students and liaison people. We seemed to be missing the mark in terms of being able to successfully engage our intended audience. So we wondered why people did not engage with evaluation.

There are significant pressures on social workers in the field and these pressures may make finding time to participate in evaluations difficult. We are also aware that, for rural social workers, it is sometimes difficult and impractical to attend the university campus for meetings, as the travel time adds a significant burden to the cost of being away from the workplace and that there is a general sense of people being too busy. However, we wondered what this sense of being too busy really means, and is it a good enough reason not to engage in evaluations relevant to the profession. Surely, if improving student placement outcomes is seen as important within the profession, then engaging in available support and ongoing evaluation would be a priority for the field? Either way we are left with questions.

## CONCLUSION

We appreciate that there are some limitations in our project. We have presented a nuanced perspective and recognise that we did not ask social workers what they needed, but assumed that we knew what they wanted. This raises questions about how to engage those involved in providing social work student placements in support and ongoing professional development, particularly given the current context in the human service sector and the associated time and resource constraints. We need to encourage conversations between the key players and make sure that different perspectives can be heard.

What we do know is that social workers in rural and regional areas are looking for opportunities for networking, professional development and peer support. The website we developed was an attempt to provide resources to support field educators, students and other key players in field education. We know that the resources were accessed and found helpful; however, our attempts at evaluation were limited and we are left with questions about what more we can do to ensure supervisors have the opportunity and the time to access such resources. The challenge for the profession and professional associations is to open up a dialogue about these issues and explore how to provide support in accessible ways for those geographically isolated workers. This is made even more challenging in the neo-liberal context of favouring outputs. Perhaps moving away from static resources to interactive communication platforms, such as real-time discussion forums and online help functions would offer new opportunities to address support gaps. This could also provide opportunities for greater networking and peer support. The next step is to figure out how to engage in meaningful conversations with those involved in supporting social work student placements about what they *need* and would *use*...the challenge will be how to do this.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> See website here: <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/health/socialwork/fielded.html>

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