Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education

ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK & WELFARE EDUCATION

What's the Problem with Gender-Neutral Regulation of Australian Social Work Education?

Editor's Choice

Norah Hosken[1] and Sarah Epstein[1]

[1] Health & Social Development, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia

Corresponding author: Norah Hosken
norah.hosken@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

This article examines the question of the gender-neutral accreditation regulations of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), and of the Special Consideration policy of Australian universities where social work education happens. The focus is on the AASW's 20 days' mandated on-campus attendance and the requirement for off-campus social work students to apply for special consideration for an alternate task from the university if they cannot attend. Carol Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) framework is used to provide a feminist policy analysis. The WPR analysis identifies an unstated assumption that the campus mode of delivery is superior to on-line modes. Further, equity problems are identified due to the lack of a gender analysis informing both the AASW regulations and university Special Consideration policies. Off-campus social work students are represented in the identified AASW compulsory attendance and Special Consideration policies as a particular kind of problem – one that is predicated on outdated stereotypes of the genderless university student and the privileging of traditional face-to-face education. The argument is made that WPR can be used by social work academics, and others, to reveal, resist and improve oppressive regulatory requirements of social work professional associations and universities.

Keywords: *Feminist social work education; Regulatory requirements; Gender; Bacchi; WPR; Advocacy; Compulsory attendance; Special Consideration*

Introduction

The global definition of social work emphasises the dual role of social work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline committed to the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) et al., 2014). In line with the IFSW, the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW, 2020a, p. 9) requires social workers to engage in promoting "justice and social fairness, by acting to reduce barriers and to expand choice and potential for all persons, with special regard for those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, oppressed or have exceptional needs."

In light of the above-stated emphasis on justice, fairness and commitment to reducing barriers, the focus of this article is on the dissonance between the underlying assumptions and inflexibility of some of the face-to-face social work education regulations of the AASW in conjunction with an amalgamation of university Special Consideration policies, and the needs of a diverse, but predominantly mature-aged, female-identifying, social work student cohort (Crisp, 2018). Carol Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to Be" (WPR) framework is used to critically analyse these issues. Drawing on Foucault, Bacchi's (2009) WPR is a feminist approach ***using*** a set of six questions:

1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?

2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

4. What is left unproblematic in this 'problem' representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?

5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?

6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended. How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi, 2009, p. xii).

A question need not be applied if it is not relevant to the analysis, and the six questions can be applied either methodically, or in a way that is more combined (Bacchi, 2009).

In this article, the WPR is applied to two key, related texts. First is the section of the AASW (2020a) Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) that require (among other things), all students to attend on-campus for 20 full days throughout their four-year undergraduate or two-year postgraduate program. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the other AASW (2020a) compulsory requirement that social work students complete 1000 hours of unpaid field placements. However, there is a growing body of literature highlighting the adverse financial and psychological impacts of unpaid block field placements (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Brough, et al., 2015; Hodge et al., 2020) on Australian

social work students. The second text chosen for WPR analysis is an amalgamation of Australian university Special Consideration policies. The ASWEAS stipulates that students who cannot meet all, or part, of the 20 days' on-campus requirement must apply to their university for Special Consideration. A scan of the websites of Australian public universities revealed each had a Special Consideration policy, and these were largely similar. Special Consideration refers to "the adaptation of a grading process because of circum¬stances beyond a student's control that negatively affect [their] academic performance" (Zimmermann et al., 2015, p. 262). If students are assessed as meeting the criteria (discussed later) and Special Consideration is granted, students are still assessed, but the task may be modified such as in delays of the due date, or provision of an alternate task in which a student can demonstrate the required skills/knowledge. Special Consideration can be sought by social work students who cannot complete hurdle requirements such as compulsory face-to-face attendance at campus classes.

Before presenting the WPR analysis, it is important to note that in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the AASW responded to submissions from the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW) and revised parameters for program variations across accredited social work programs (Morley & Clarke, 2020). The variations approved regarding face-to face and attendance requirements were as follows:

> For distance education providers [most Australian universities provide at least some distance education], the AASW understands and approves that some residential schools will be cancelled and delivered online. We will also expect that on-campus programs will now deliver their programs online. HEPs will be required to report any modification and variations in their 2020 and 2021 AASW Annual Reports as relevant. (AASW, 2020b, on-line)

The AASW has, however, specified that these variations are only applicable during 2020 until 30 June 2021 while COVID-19 restrictions are in place. The purpose of this article in drawing attention to the impacts of the intersection of sections of the de-gendered ASWEAS and Special Consideration policies, therefore, remains relevant. The analysis and discussion are presented arguing the ASWEAS and Special Consideration are feminist and social justice issues within social work education.

Disadvantaging non-traditional students

The norm in Australia and similar countries was that students typically entered university directly from secondary school, studied full time on campus, and were from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Bradley et al., 2008). The term non-traditional students is commonly used in education and policy research to refer to those with socio-demographic characteristics that differ from traditional students in higher education (Chung et al., 2014). Despite claims to commitments to social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity, a growing number of Australian studies (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Brough et al., 2015; Gair & Baglow, 2018a, 2018b; Hodge et al., 2020; Hosken, 2017;

Hosken, 2018a; Hosken, 2018b; Morley et al., 2017) have found many of the AASW's regulatory requirements disadvantage non-traditional students. These studies identify social justice concerns around accreditation regulations regarding the content of social work courses, the requirements for student attendance on-campus and the structure of field placements. Further, these studies found that the regulations and requirements cause hardship, additional work or exclusion for those social work students with limited income, with caring responsibilities and/or for whom English is an additional language and culture. This article builds on this body of work with a critical policy analysis that focuses on the equity impact of gender-neutral regulation and administration, by both the AASW and the university, on social work education and off-campus social work students.

The "problem" of off-campus students and online education

There is a small body of literature exploring campus and on-line learning in Australian social work education (e.g., Crisp, 2018; Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). To this end, the authors found no literature about the relevance of the intersecting policies of the ASWEAS compulsory attendance requirements and the universities' Special Consideration policy to the work of social work academics, nor the combined impacts of these policies on social work students, or of these being a feminist issue.

Social work and gender

The question of gender, in social work education, is intriguing in its contradictions. On the one hand, much emphasis is placed on the diversity of feminism influencing social work and social work education (e.g., Dominelli, 2002; Gray & Boddy, 2010; Morley, 2009; Orme, 2003; Shepard & Dziengel, 2016; Wendt & Moulding, 2016). Gender is the key unit of analysis in feminism, and gender justice a central goal of feminist social work education and practice (Epstein et al, in press). On the other hand, in this study, analysis reveals the ASWEAS as a predominantly a gender-neutral text. This is at odds with social work education given the numeric dominance of women in social work, as students, educators, practitioners and service users (Crisp, 2018; Healy & Lonne, 2010; Maidment & Crisp, 2011; Payne, 2014; Wendt & Moulding, 2016). This invites the question of how and why the ASWEAS and the university Special Consideration policy are developed as if gender has no relevance.

What's the problem of off-campus students and on-line education?

This article will contribute to social work literature by employing a WPR analysis to the problematization of off-campus social work students and on-line education. Problematization refers to the products of governing practices, that is, how issues are (constructed as problems) problematized (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). The analytic task of problematization is explained as:

> [T]easing out the conceptual premises underpinning problem representations, tracing their genealogy, reflecting on the practices that sustain them and considering their effects. (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 17)

Bacchi (2009, p. xvi) explains that the purpose of a WPR approach to policy is to "problematise (interrogate) the problematisations in selected policies, through scrutinising the premises and effects of the problem representation these problematisations contain."

WPR questions the common view that the role of people and services developing policies or regulations is to "solve problems that sit outside them, waiting to be 'addressed'" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 14). Rather, WPR considers how the governing practices, in this case of the AASW and of universities, "produce 'problems' as particular kind of problems" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 14). Bacchi (2009) argued that social problems are created within, rather than outside, the process of making policy or regulation. As such, WPR involves reading policy in certain ways to clarify how it constitutes problems, thus creating room to critically assess these constructions for their assumptions and oversights, and for how they represent the causes of the problems (Bacchi, 2009). The term *problem representation* refers to the "understanding of the 'problem' implied in any policy or rule" (Bacchi, 2009, p. xii). According to Bacchi (2000, p. 48), problems "are 'created' or 'given shape' in the very policy proposals that are offered as 'responses.'"

Methodology

This paper engages with Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach to investigate the intersecting policies of the AASW (2020) ASWEAS Section 6.3 regarding program delivery that requires compulsory attendance and university Special Consideration in Australian social work education. This includes exploration of the extent to which off-campus social work students, the majority of whom identify as mature-aged women (Crisp, 2018; Healy & Lonne, 2010), are conceptualised in these types of policymaking. Given the WPR analysis was applied to existing relevant public domain policy documents, ethics approval was not required. Bacchi's (2009) method is based on the idea that policies and regulations actually create those problems that they are seemingly supposed to fix.

Foucauldian ideas of governmentality, discourse and power underpin Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach to policy analysis. The term *governmentality* is used by Foucault to describe the combination of large-scale, and localised, ways that governing takes place in contemporary society. The creation and promotion of dominant discourses has been identified as a core method used by political and economic institutions to rule since the 19th century (Foucault, 1980). Discourses are defined by Foucault as "practices that systematically form the objects in which they speak; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (1972, p. 49). Through this process of meaning-formation, discourses are afforded *truth* status limiting what it is possible to think about certain social objects or practices (Foucault, 1972).

In creating and circulating discourses, governments (and other powerful organisations, such as the AASW and universities) can "structure the possible field of action of others" (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). In this way, Foucault (1980) argued that discourses are a form of power exercised by governments (and other organisations) over people. This understanding

provides a lens to recognise the power effects of discourse. "Dividing practices," one important power effect identified by Foucault (1982, p. 777), refers to the process where one group in society is positioned in contrast to another, for example, the *responsible student* and the *irresponsible student*. As this example illustrates, there is a power imbalance inherent in binaries, with one group positioned as more valid or powerful than another.

Analysis

In this article, the first four questions of the WPR framework are used to focus on the examination of policy representations, assumptions and silences in the AASW (2020a) ASWEAS and the university Special Consideration policy. Although all the questions could, of course, be used to illuminate the policy documents under examination. The benefit of this overview, however, is that it enables the identification of what might be termed *silences*: that is, what is *not* said or what is *missing*, in the regulation of social work education discourses in Australia. In addressing these questions, and because gender neutrality has the tendency to reproduce hierarchy and rely on men as the normative reference, the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995) provides a key lens to examine the policies. Connell (1995, p. 77) explains that:

> At any time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

The authors developed a WPR template to draw on our theoretical frameworks (including hegemonic masculinity) and assist in the collaborative analysis of the two chosen texts and the literature. This template and process adapts and merges Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis and Bacchi's (2009) WPR six questions. A summary version of the template and process is provided next. Although presented in a linear fashion for simplicity, the process was, in fact, recursive, reflexive, iterative and involved much discussion between the authors:

CrEW WPR analysis template and process

1. Initial individual coding for key words and phrases (line by line from the texts).
2. Initial coding for potential links to four of Bacchi's (2009) questions:
    a. Problem representations
    b. Presuppositions or assumptions underlying these problem representations
    c. How these problem representations came about? (more so in literature review than the two texts)
    d. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?

3. Code for particular language, assumptions, silences, gaps, assumptions of independence/control, recurrent ideas and expressions, emphases, narratives.
4. Identify potential codes.
5. Generate potential themes.
6. Revise codes.
7. Identify implicit social and cultural norms, dominant narratives, discourses, ideologies, social norms, power relations (i.e., gender, gender norms, stereotypes, patriarchy, masculinity, binaries, dividing practices).
8. Generate final themes.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis to assist in the WPR analysis involved, firstly, reading and familiarising ourselves with the data (the two chosen texts and literature). We then individually read the two key policy texts line by line to do initial coding and discussed, compared and combined our coding. The codes were then collated to generate potential themes, the themes discussed and reviewed, and then the themes were defined and named.

These policies were interrogated for how they: (a) construct off-campus students and on-line education as a particular type of problem, within a patriarchal, neoliberal agenda; (b) limit how current problem representations of off-campus social work students (who in the main are mature-age females) are thought about; (c) are saturated with assumptions of independence and control that remain unproblematised; and (d) how they do not interrogate the ways that hegemonic masculinist assumptions shape social work regulatory and university policies. Control is identified as a key element of hegemonic masculinity involving the expectation that men exercise control over themselves, over others, and over their environment (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Representations of on-line and off-campus modes of delivery

The WPR approach highlights the importance of critically analysing binaries, categories, and deep-seated cultural values that underpin problem representations (Bacchi, 2009). The first of Bacchi's questions aims to make visible the implicit problem representation in a policy or regulation, to unearth the deeper ideational and explanatory politics present in the textual discourse.

Section 6.3 of the AASW (2020a) ASWEAS sets out the program delivery requirements for Australian social work courses. There is initial acknowledgement of varied teaching modalities in the following excerpt: the "benefits of student-centred learning strategies, including blended learning through e-learning, online and simulated approaches" (AASW, 2020a, p. 16). However, this is followed by requirements for 20 days' face-to-face, classroom delivery which is to focus on *professional practice skills*, as follows:

> All students, in all programs are required to complete a minimum of 140 hours (20 days) face-to-face classroom-based learning, the focus of which is professional practice skills. The required 140 hours (20 days) may be spread over four years for BSW programs and two years for MSW (Q) programs. At least 35 hours (5 days) of face-to-face professional practice skills teaching must occur prior to the first placement. (AASW, 2020a, p. 16)

There is no justification provided for the requirement (and privileging of) face-to-face, classroom-based attendance, or for this to focus on professional practice skills. The privileging of face-to-face, classroom teaching instead of on-line teaching creates a binary. This binary serves to elevate face-to-face as a teaching modality over on-line and in doing so simultaneously creates the 'problem' of on-line teaching.

There is evidence to suggest a range of pedagogies, including online education, can be very effective in many areas of the curriculum (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021; Crisp, 2018, 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Goldingay et al., 2018; Goldingay et al., 2020; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). The AASW's priority focus on face-to face teaching is also out of step (and potentially conflicts) with many areas of the human services sector that provide social work to service users on-line via telephone and tele-health, zoom and other modes (Bryant et al., 2018; Coman et al., 2001; Humphries & Camilleri, 2002; Morley & Clarke, 2020).

Homogenising student cohorts

In the following excerpt from the ASWEAS, reference is made to "all students" as a homogenous, genderless group, as bolded.

> **All students**, in all programs are required to complete a minimum of 140 hours (20 days) face-to-face classroom-based learning... (AASW, 2020a, p. 16)

There is no evidence in the ASWEAS of a gender analysis of the masculinist norms that require female-identifying students, in a female numerically dominated education course, to participate in 20 days of on-campus social work education, even when they specifically chose to study on-line. This demonstrates an explanatory politics that disregards gendered barriers around caring responsibilities for female-identifying social work students and does not account for considerations around income to afford childcare or to travel to attend on-campus. There is an implied assumption that students should adapt their circumstances to a gender-neutral construction of students' lived experiences.

Assumptions about control

Bacchi's second question aims to uncover the ideational logics informing a particular problematization. This encourages interpretation aimed at revealing what lies beneath surface-level assumptions about social work and university education.

Students who cannot meet all or part of the ASWEAS 20 day's on-campus requirement must apply to the university for Special Consideration approval for the granting of an alternate

task to this hurdle requirement. The policy requires its provisions only be made available to students where there are "circumstances outside his or her control", as shown below:

> Special consideration is available to students who have had their studies significantly impacted by exceptional or extenuating circumstances **outside their control** [author bolding]. (Deakin University, 2021)

The problematization of the requirement to attend on campus, as outlined in the discussion of ASWEAS above and to have control, as outlined in the Special Consideration policy excerpt above, is underpinned by the view that students are (or should be) autonomous, invulnerable and financially independent while studying. This involves an unstated belief that the *ordinary or typical* student has capacity to successfully complete a course of study that is contingent on this control, invulnerability and financial capacity. There is no evidence of a gender analysis of the masculinist norms that permeate the assumption inherent in this policy of individual capacity to control one's life circumstances. It is important to emphasise that, due to caring responsibilities and gender role expectations, mature-age, female-identifying students are more likely to be connected in their daily responsibilities with others, and less able or wanting to exercise individual decision making and control (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2020; Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2018; Grummell et al., 2009; Smith, 1979).

The lack of gender analysis is further evident in the following definition of what constitutes exceptional or extenuating circumstances outside a student's control in the Special Consideration policy:

> [A]n acute medical condition; compassionate reasons (such as: the recent death of a close family member; family breakdown; military, jury or emergency service obligations; or hardship/ trauma (such as severe disruption to domestic arrangements or impact of crime). (Deakin University, 2021)

The policy states that, "circumstances within a student's control... will not be accepted as grounds for special consideration." Examples are provided in the policy text of circumstances considered to be within a student's control such as:

> [M]isreading timetables, exam stress, holidays or family occasions and minor ailments such as colds, sleeplessness or gastric upsets...Religious or faith-based issues are also not in themselves grounds for special consideration. (Deakin University, 2021)

The emphasis on *control* in this policy is an example of how many of the founding values and practices of the individualist, western, Christian, bourgeoisie, masculinist academic tradition (Ferree & Zippel, 2015) remain reflected in, imposed and regulated by, the policies of many Australian universities. 'Self-control' and 'self-management' valued in western, Enlightenment-informed *objective* knowledge standards (Arbon, 2008), shape western academia in epistemology and policy. For example, many female-identifying students with

caring responsibilities are not easily able to activate the individualised, control of the self, due to both their lived realities and the socialised nature of gender where women are discouraged from operating without regard for others or as if they are not in relationship to others (ABS, 2020; AHRC, 2018).

Not being informed by a gender analysis reveals the unstated "mythical norm" on which the ASWEAS and the Special Consideration policy are based. Lorde (1999, p. 362), assists in understanding more about the work of standardised, dominant norms in her description of a "mythical norm" as "a stereotype that is perpetuated by society, against which everyone else is measured." The social processes that shape the majoritively mature-aged, female-identifying social work student cohort, in which they are more likely to carry the gendered burden of caring and housework (ABS, 2020; AHRC, 2018; Craig & Mullan, 2011; Ferrant et al., 2014; Wilkins, 2015), and of poverty (ACOSS, 2018), go unacknowledged or addressed in the ASWEAS and in the Special Consideration policy.

This perhaps, inadvertently reifies the view that a successful social work student excludes connection with, and responsibility for, others, and success is best suited to a student with sufficient income enabling campus access. We argue the presumption of the superiority of campus over online attendance, and of preference for on-campus students in the ASWEAS and the use of Special Consideration, reflects the normative, inbuilt "patriarchal support system" (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001, p. 161) of unearned advantage that many male-identifying students benefit from. Men do not have to make deliberate efforts to be helped by the patriarchal support system, thus preserving the myth of meritocratic individualism. This support system primarily benefits men, as they are more highly represented among those without caring responsibilities and with higher, and more stable incomes (reflecting broader Australian statistics about gender and caring, and gender and poverty) (ABS, 2020; Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), 2018; AHRC, 2018).

How have these representations come about?

The third question in the WPR method aims to unpack the genealogy of the inferred problems outlining the key stakeholders who produced the policies and considers the power relationships at play.

AASW's requirement for on-campus attendance

It is tempting to assume the problem of off-campus students and on-line education simply emerged as an ahistorical rational policy and that recognition of the problem then requires fixing with a policy of compulsory face-to-face, classroom-based attendance for all social work students. However, this representation is a result of attitudes towards social work education that have long been shaped by, among other things, the gendered history of both higher education and of social work education (Bennett, 2015; Dahle, 2012; El-Khoury Antonios, 2019; Hosken, 2016; Huppatz, 2010; Mendes, 2005; Peel, 2011).

The history of Australian social work education, and earlier iterations of the AASW, have largely been dominated by men (Crawford & Leitmann, 2001) reflected in their small numbers but higher employment status than women (Martin, 1990). For example, reporting on the development of social work in Western Australia, Crawford and Leitmann (2001) evidence that the marriage bar prevented married female social workers being offered permanent employment in universities, and that similar gendered shaping of staffing occurred in other Australian schools of social work. From the end of the 1960s, heads were, in nearly every case, male many from overseas and few were experienced social workers (Browne, 1988 cited in Crawford & Leitmann, 2001, p. 47). Masculinist norms, for example compulsory attendance as per this study, permeate the policies and regulations of many organisations. This is reflective of Acker's (2006, p. 443) findings that "all organisations have inequality regimes, defined as loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organisations."

Special Consideration

In a key study, Lambert and William (2006) found special academic consideration to be a nearly worldwide policy detailed in institutional regulations. However, despite being a common international academic practice, Lambert and William concluded there was no generally argued justification for Special Consideration policies, and little written about it. The need for additional scholarship regarding Special Consideration was later confirmed by Canadian scholars, Zimmermann et al. (2015). Similar to the international situation (Lambert & Williams, 2006), Special Consideration is a common policy provided by most public universities in Australia. The stated aim of the policy is to enable eligible students to continue to progress successfully without compromising the integrity of assessment. Although not explicitly stated on most Australian university websites, we suggest Special Consideration policy is, in essence, constructed as an equity measure.

With little written about the area, it has not been possible to identify when, and specifically why, Special Consideration originated as a policy. To begin locating this in its context, a brief examination is provided of the movement of higher education from its male-dominated, elite origins to the current status of mass education. This is followed by exploration of a key theme in the literature relevant to social work education, the myth of meritocracy.

The original model of the university developed from a "traditional male sanctum" (McCarthy, 2011, p. 36) that catered for an elite, white, minority of men. For example, in 1955, the Australian higher education sector consisted of 30,000 students; however, the vast majority were white males, and from relatively privileged backgrounds (Naylor & James, 2015). This gendered, classed and racialised history parallels the well documented dominance of western, masculine, ruling versions of knowledge and cultural practices in universities (e.g., Acker, 2006; Arbon, 2008; Smith, 1974). This involves the high value placed on knowledge and achievement gained through formal education predicated on a perceived objective and removed rationality. The perception of objectivity, in fact, concealed the way that the knowledge and achievement that was valued relied on the privileging of the standpoint,

cultural practices and experience of western, heterosexual, able-bodied and middle-classed, males (e.g., Acker, 2006; Arbon, 2008; Smith, 1974). The concealment of masculine privilege was, in part, achieved through the myth of meritocracy, as discussed later.

Universities, and broader educational institutions, are understood as being a necessary part of the process for the establishment and maintenance of social justice in a supposedly meritocratic society (Autin et al., 2015). The assumption underpinning this construction of social justice is that education provides equal opportunity for people to achieve academic and social positions according to individual merit. This merit is seen as belonging to the individual, comprising their aptitude and motivation, rather than their family's wealth and status (Autin et al., 2015). Meritocracy is based on the idea that "individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities" (McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 2).

In contrast, critical scholars have argued education systems are responsible for the reproduction of social and economic inequalities (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Evans, 2010). From this perspective, educational institutions are seen to reproduce inequality by not validating, or not equally valuing, the experiences and knowledges of diverse student groups (Gale et al., 2017). The myth of meritocracy, and popular accounts of inequality, obscure the role education systems play in re/producing inequality, and how those who are dominant in society are seen as naturally having more merit and, therefore, being more deserving than others. This hides the role the "patriarchal support system" (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001, p. 161), discussed earlier, plays in providing those without caring responsibilities, predominantly men, with unearned advantages in education including social work education.

Special Consideration reflects a history of equity policy development where the Australian Federal Government (2009, p. 6) was clear that universities should expand their markets to capture those "non-traditional" students with the necessary "drive and aptitude" as defined in a merit-based system. The equity policy and discourse came out of the widening participation agenda that was one phase in the move from elite to mass education discussed earlier. Government policy and research documents (Bradley et al., 2008; Department of Emploment, Education and Training (DEET), 1990) labelled and separated some of those excluded from higher education into disadvantaged or equity groups needing special treatment to be included.

The AASW relies on universities to administer Special Consideration for those students seeking exemption from the AASW (2020a) ASWEAS requirement for all students to attend 20 days on campus. The genealogy presented in this section suggest this is problematic when Special Consideration is shown to assume masculinist, meritocratic norms concealing a patriarchal support system (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001) for those students without caring responsibilities and who are financially resourced.

Habituated and unconscious

The largely conservative and non-feminist historical development of the AASW reflects the history of broader Australian society and higher education. This history may explain how gender-neutral practices, such as those outlined in the analysis of the ASWEAS and Special Consideration policy discussed earlier, came about. It is not necessarily the case that gender-neutral practices are deliberately created. These practices can be understood as types of discriminatory practices within the relations and processes of oppression and privilege. Pease (2010, p. 12), draws on Harvey's term *civilised oppression* to convey how privilege and oppression are "normalised in everyday life...embedded in cultural norms and bureaucratic institutions, [where] many of these practices are habituated and unconscious."

What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?

The analysis in previous sections has already explored and identified what is left unsaid, possible gaps or limitations in the discourse and representation of the problem of off-campus social work students and compulsory attendance. In summary, a significant omission is the lack of a gender analysis of the masculinist norms that permeate the assumptions inherent in the AASW (2020a) ASWEAS and university Special Consideration policies of individual capacity and desire to control one's life circumstances. The analysis of the combined effects of the ASWEAS and Special Consideration policy identifies that what is left as unproblematic is the privileging of the mythical norm of the student without caring responsibilities, and with the financial and practical ability to attend campus and, to exercise individual control over one's life. In the preferences for students who are financially resourced, non-carers, these masculinist, neoliberal assumptions can be seen as silences (Pease, 2010).

Implications for social work

Analysis in this study demonstrates that compulsory face-to-face classroom attendance requirements of the ASWEAS, and the AASW's reliance on the university to administer Special Consideration for those students seeking exemption to not attend, perpetuates practices that are exclusionary. The texts are based on outdated stereotypes of the mythical norm student being unencumbered (without caring responsibilities), and financially resourced. These are masculinist stereotypes concealed within the ASWEAS and Special Consideration policy. It is important to consider that because the majority cohort of social work courses identify as female, and are of mature age, many may not be as able to easily comply with the gender-neutral metrics of the ASWEAS or to successfully meet gender neutral requirements when they seek Special Consideration. These are feminist and social justice issues within social work education that warrant social work advocacy to change them.

We are suggesting that, to move beyond the false gender neutrality that is evident in the regulation of Australian social work education, these debates need to be initiated. Discussion between the AASW, universities, social work students and graduates, researchers and other key stakeholders could formulate and drive an agenda for change.

Conclusion

The impetus for this article was to explore the construction of the *problem* of off-campus students and on-line education in the AASW (2020a) ASWEAS and in the university Special Consideration policy. The analysis in this paper has worked to highlight and interrupt taken-for-granted assumptions deeply embedded within the de-gendered narratives of these documents. The analysis presented here revealed the problem and identified the mechanisms that subjugate the lived experiences of mature-aged, female students with caring responsibilities. We argue that WPR can be used by feminist social work academics, and others, to contribute to resisting and improving oppressive AASW and university regulations and policy and practice.

References

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society, 20*(4), 441–464.

Afrouz, R., & Crisp, B. R. (2021). Online education in social work, effectiveness, benefits, and challenges: A scoping review. *Australian Social Work, 74*(1), 55–67.

Arbon, V. (2008). Knowing from where? In A. Gunstone (Ed.), *History, politics and knowledge: Essays in Australian Indigenous studies* (pp. 134–146). Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2020a). *Australian social work education and accreditation standards*. AASW https://www.aasw.asn.au/careers-study/education-standards-accreditation

Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2020b). *COVID-19 social work study FAQs: COVID-19 pandemic response to the Australian social work education and accreditation standards (ASWEAS)*. https://www.aasw.asn.au/careers-study/covid-19-social-work-study-faqs

Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2020). *Gender indicators, Australia, 2020*. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/latest-release#key-statistics.

Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). (2018). *Poverty in Australia 2018*. https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ACOSS_Poverty-in-Australia-Report_Web-Final.pdf

Australian Government. (2009). *Transforming Australia's higher education system*. Commonwealth of Australia. http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/131634

Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). (2018). *Face the facts: Gender equality 2018*. https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-gender-equality-2018

Autin, F., Batruch, A., & Butera, F. (2015). Social justice in education: How the function of selection in educational institutions predicts support for (non)egalitarian assessment practices. *Frontiers in Psychology, 6*(707). https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00707/full

Bacchi, C. (2000). Policy as discourse: What does it mean? Where does it get us? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 21*(1), 45-57.

Bacchi, C. (2009). A*nalysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Pearson Education.

Bacchi, C., & Goodwin, S. (2016). Making politics visible: The WPR approach. In C. Bacchi & S. Goodwin (Eds.), *Poststructural policy analysis* (pp. 13–26). Springer.

Bagilhole, B., & Goode, J. (2001). The contradiction of the myth of individual merit, and the reality of a patriarchal support system in academic careers. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 8*(2), 161–180.

Baglow, L., & Gair, S. (2019). Mature-aged social work students: Challenges, study realities, and experiences of poverty. *Australian Social Work, 72*(1), 91–104.

Bennett, B. (2015). "Stop deploying your white privilege on me!" Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement with the Australian Association of Social Workers. *Australian Social Work, 68*(1), 19–31.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Sage.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of higher education in Australia, final report*. Commonwealth of Australia.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589-597.

Brough, M., Correa-Velez, I., Crane, P. R., Johnstone, E., & Marston, G. (2015). *Balancing the books: An assessment of financial stress associated with social work and human service student placements.* http://eprints.qut.edu.au/82024/3/82024.pdf

Bryant, L., Garnham, B., Tedmanson, D., & Diamandi, S. (2018). Tele-social work and mental health in rural and remote communities in Australia. *International Social Work, 61*(1), 143–155.

Chung, E., Turnbull, D., & Chur-Hansen, A. (2014). Who are "non-traditional students"? A systematic review of published definitions in research on mental health of tertiary students. *Educational Research and Reviews, 9*, 1224–1238. doi:10.5897/ERR2014.1944

Coman, G. J., Burrows, G. D., & Evans, B. J. (2001). Telephone counselling in Australia: Applications and considerations for use. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 29*(2), 247–258.

Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities.* University of California Press.

Connell, R., & Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Rethinking hegemonic masculinity. *Gender and Society, 19*(6), 829–859.

Craig, L., & Mullan, K. (2011). How mothers and fathers share childcare: A cross-national time-use comparison. *American Sociological Review, 76*(6), 834–861.

Crawford, F., & Leitmann, S. (2001). The midwifery of power: Reflections of the development of professional social work in Western Australia. *Australian Social Work, 54*, 43–54.

Crisp, B. R. (2018). From distance to online education: Two decades of remaining responsive by one university social work programme. *Social Work Education, 37*(6), 718–730.

Crisp, B. R. (2019). Social work education: Moving the profession into the future. *Australian Social Work, 72*(1), 3–7.

Dahle, R. (2012). Social work: A history of gender and class in the profession. *Ephemera, 12*(3), 309–326.

Davis, C., Greenaway, R., Moore, M., & Cooper, L. (2019). Online teaching in social work education: Understanding the challenges. *Australian Social Work, 72*(1), 34–46.

Deakin University (2021) Special conisderation policy, https://www.deakin.edu.au/students/studying/assessment-and-results/special-consideration

Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET). (1990). *A fair chance for all: Higher education that's within everyone's reach*. AGPS.

Dominelli, L. (2002). *Feminist social work theory and practice.* Palgrave.

El-Khoury Antonios, E. (2019). *The placement experience of Western Sydney University social work students with physical disabilities* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Western Sydney University.

Epstein, S.B., Hosken, N., & Vassos, S. (In press). A pedagogy of our own: Feminist

social work in the academy in Cocker, C., & T., Hafford-Letchfield (Eds.), *Rethinking Feminist Theories for Social Work Practice*, Palgrave.

Evans, S. (2010). Becoming "somebody": Examining class and gender through higher education. In Y. Taylor (Ed.), *Classed intersections: Spaces, selves, knowledges* (pp. 53–72). Ashgate Publishing.

Ferrant, G., Pesando, L. M., & Nowacka, K. (2014). Unpaid care work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes. *Centro de Desarrollo de la OCDE, 5*. https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf

Ferree, M. M., & Zippel, K. (2015). Gender equality in the age of academic capitalism: Cassandra and Pollyanna interpret university restructuring. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*. doi:10.1093/sp/jxv039

Foucault, M. (1972). *The discourse on language in the archaeology of knowledge.* (R. Sawyer, Trans.). Pantheon.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Vintage.

Gair, S., & Baglow, L. (2018a). Australian social work students balancing study, work, and field placement: Seeing it like it is. *Australian Social Work, 71*(1), 46–57.

Gair, S., & Baglow, L. (2018b). "We barely survived": Social work students' mental health vulnerabilities and implications for educators, universities and the workforce. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 30*(1), 32–44.

Gale, T., Molla, T., & Parker, S. (2017). The illusion of meritocracy and the audacity of elitism: Expanding the evaluative space in education. In S. Parker, K. Gulson, & T. Gale (Eds.), *Policy and inequality in education.policy and inequality in education* (pp. 7–21). Springer.

Goldingay, S., & Boddy, J. (2017). Preparing social work graduates for digital practice: Ethical pedagogies for effective learning. *Australian Social Work, 70*(2), 209–220.

Goldingay, S., Epstein, S., & Taylor, D. (2018). Simulating social work practice online with digital storytelling: Challenges and opportunities. *Social Work Education, 37*(6), 790–803.

Goldingay, S., Hodgson, D., Boddy, J., Nipperess, S., & Watts, L. (2020). Online and blended social work education: Outcomes, successes and risks. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education, 21*(2), 5–7.

Gray, M., & Boddy, J. (2010). Making sense of the waves: Wipeout or still riding high? *Affilia, 25*(4), 368–389.

Grummell, B., Devine, D., & Lynch, K. (2009). The care-less manager: Gender, care and new managerialism in higher education. *Gender and Education, 21*(2), 191–208.

Healy, K., & Lonne, B. (2010). *The social work and human services workforce: Report from a national study of education, training and workforce needs*. Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Hodge, L., Oke, N., McIntyre, H., & Turner, S. (2020). Lengthy unpaid placements in social work: Exploring the impacts on student wellbeing. *Social Work Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1736542

Hosken, N. (2016). Social work, class and the structural violence of poverty. In B. Pease, S. Goldingay, N. Hosken, & S. Nipperess (Eds.), *Doing Critical Social Work: Transformative Practices for Social Justice* (pp. 104-119). Allen & Unwin.

Hosken, N. (2017). *Exploring the organisation of social injustice in Australian social work education*. University of Tasmania.

Hosken, N. (2018a). Practices of exclusion and injustices within social work education. *Social Work Education, 37*(7), 825–837.

Hosken, N. (2018b). Classism, poverty and the regulation of Australian social work education. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education, 20*(2), 8.

Humphries, P., & Camilleri, P. (2002). Social work and technology: Challenges for social workers in practice: A case study. *Australian Social Work, 55*(4), 251–259.

Huppatz, K. (2010). Class and career choice: Motivations, aspirations, identity and mobility for women in paid caring work. *Journal of Sociology, 46*(2), 115–132.

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), & International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW). (2014). *The global agenda for social work and social development: Commitment to action*. http://ifsw.org/get-involved/agenda-for-social-work/

Lambert, K. d., & Williams, T. (2006). In sickness and in need: The how and why of special consideration for students. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 31*(1), 55–69.

Lorde, A. (1999). A*ge, race, class, and sex: Women redefining difference*. [Paper presentation]. Copeland Colloquium, Amherst College, April 1980. In A. Kesselman, L. McNair, & N. Schniedewind (Eds.), *Women: Images and realities, a multicultural anthology* (pp. 361–366). Mayfield.

Maidment, J., & Crisp, B. R. (2011). The impact of emotions on practicum learning. *Social Work Education, 30*(04), 408–421.

Martin, E. (1990). *Gender, demand and domain: The social work profession in South Australia, 1935-80* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Melbourne.

McCarthy, M. (2011). We were at the beginning of everything. *Crossroads, V(2)*, 35–44.

McNamee, S. J., & Miller, R. K. (2009). *The meritocracy myth*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Mendes, P. (2005). The history of social work in Australia: A critical literature review. *Australian Social Work (58)*, 121–131.

Morley, C. (2009). Using critical reflection to improve feminist practice. In J. Allen, L. Briskman, & B. Pease (Eds.), *Critical social work: Theories and practices for a socially just world* (pp. 149–159). Allen & Unwin.

Morley, C., & Clarke, J. (2020). From crisis to opportunity? Innovations in Australian social work field education during the COVID-19 global pandemic. *Social Work Education, 39*(8), 1048–1057.

Morley, C., Macfarlane, S., & Ablett, P. (2017). The neoliberal colonisation of social work education: A critical analysis and practices for resistance. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education, 19*(2), 25–40.

Naylor, R., & James, R. (2015). Systemic equity challenges: An overview of the role of Australian universities in student equity and social inclusion. In M. Shah, A. Bennett, & E. Southgate (Eds.), *Widening higher education participation: A global perspective* (pp. 1–12). Elsevier.

Oliaro, L., & Trotter, C. (2010). A comparison of on-campus and off-campus (or distance) social work education. *Australian Social Work, 63*(3), 329–344.

Orme, J. (2003). "It's feminist because I say so!" Feminism, social work and critical practice in the UK. *Qualitative Social Work, 2*(2), 131–153.

Payne, M. (2014). *Modern social work theory* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Pease, B. (2010). *Undoing privilege: Unearned advantage in a divided world*. Zed Books.

Peel, M. (2011). Charity, casework and the dramas of class in Melbourne, 1920–1940: "Feeling your position." *History Australia, 2*(3), 83.81–83.15.

Shepard, M., & Dziengel, L. (2016). Feminist social work practice: Implications for the twenty-first century. In S. Wendt & N. Moulding (Eds.), *Contemporary feminisms in social work practice* (pp. 24–39). Routledge.

Smith, D. E. (1974). Women's perspective as a radical critique of sociology. *Sociological Inquiry, 44*(1), 7–13.

Smith, D. E. (1979). A sociology for women. In J. Sherman & E. Torten Beck (Eds.), *The prism of sex: Essays in the sociology of knowledge* (pp. 135-87). University of Wisconsin Press.

Wendt, S., & Moulding, N. (Eds.). (2016). *Contemporary feminisms in social work practice*. Routledge.

Wilkins, R. (2015). *The household, income and labour dynamics in Australia survey: Selected findings from waves 1 to 12.* Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne.

Zimmermann, J., Kamenetsky, S. B., & Pongracic, S. (2015). Special consideration in post-secondary institutions: Trends at a Canadian university. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 45*(4), 261–282.