

# A Student's Reflection on Participating in a Non-Traditional Social Work Field Placement During the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Reflective Narrative

Jaimie Barry

Master of Social Work Student, Australian Catholic University, Canberra

---

**Corresponding author: Jaimie Barry**

jaimie.barry@myacu.edu.au

---

## Abstract

This article outlines just some of the barriers student social workers face in accessing field placement due to the rigid requirements set by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). This article reflects on how these barriers are further exacerbated due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With field placements affected by the pandemic, many placements were altered or delayed due to office closures and social distancing requirements. This article details my experience as a student of a non-traditional field placement that was created in response to the pandemic and explores the potential for the introduction of similar placements in response to a rapidly changing world and advancing technologies. This approach has the potential to reduce barriers and increase accessibility to placement for students whilst still meeting the essential requirements outlined by Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS).

**Keywords:** *Field placement; Covid-19 pandemic; Distance education; Social work education; Barriers to education*

## Introduction

Students completing either the Bachelor or Master of Social Work degrees in Australia are required to complete a total of 1,000 hours of field placement to successfully graduate. This is generally completed over two, and no more than three, field placements (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2021). Field placement is considered to integrate students' theoretical learning with real life professional practice, enabling the student to develop their professional identity and practice frameworks (AASW, 2021). Due to increasing student numbers (Cleak & Smith, 2012), suitable placements are becoming limited, and particularly more challenging during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jefferies et al., 2021). Social work courses in Australia often attract mature-aged students, many of whom identify as low income and who have barriers to accessing higher education including having paid employment and family responsibilities (Goldingay et al., 2018), issues with attending university and language barriers (Cleak & Smith, 2012). These barriers have been exacerbated by the impacts of Covid-19 – with international border closures leaving many international students unable to enter Australia, school closures leaving parents responsible for home-schooling their children (Hjalmsdottir & Bjarnadottir, 2020) and loss of income, particularly for university students who are often employed on a casual basis (Saxton, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic also meant that many students experienced cancellations, delays, or modifications to their field placement (Mirick & Davis, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has predominantly affected those students who already faced barriers to accessing education, and it is these groups who require further assistance to gaining equity and access to higher education (Saxton, 2021).

## Reflections on barriers to placement

Speaking from my own experience of being a mother to three small children and working in casual employment, the rigid requirements of field placement required for the Master of Social Work acted as a deterrent to pursue a career in a field that I am very passionate about. For me to complete two, 500-hour placements would not only mean I would need to give up my paid employment, which creates a significant financial stress for myself and my family, but I would then need to have my children attend full-time childcare, resulting in further financial strain. The Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated this issue, resulting in school and childcare closures, with caring and domestic responsibilities largely falling on women and further exacerbating gender inequality (Nash & Churchill, 2020). This, in addition to feelings of 'mother-guilt', results in emotional and economic stress. The difficulties for mothers to organise their studies around caring for their families has been well documented, with research showing an unequal division of domestic duties and childcare, as well as feelings of guilt about not living up to expectations of motherhood, and time pressures affecting women much more than men (Hjalmsdottir & Bjarnadottir, 2020; Webber & Dismore, 2021). Whilst universities must provide flexible placements for students in extenuating circumstances, this does not include issues such as family responsibilities, existing paid employment, poverty, or health issues (Newcombe, 2019). Due to this inflexibility, many students face significant financial and emotional burdens, with field placement requirements contributing to hardships – incongruent with the human rights and social justice frameworks that social work aims to uphold – including challenging policies that create disadvantages and barriers to social, economic, and educational participation (Saxton et al., 2021).

### **Reflections on my virtual placement**

In my reflection, I highlight the unique experience of working collaboratively, yet virtually, with a diverse range of social work students from across the world to complete a variety of projects that allowed us to meet the learning requirements of placement, as well as the importance of a positive student/supervisor relationship.

In response to the pandemic, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to participate in a pilot virtual field placement called the S.P.A.C.E. Project. S.P.A.C.E. stands for Supporting Placement through online Access and Community Engagement. The S.P.A.C.E. Project consisted of 10 Master of Social Work students from four different Australian universities. The team was made up of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, with some based in Australia and others participating from China, Hong Kong, and South Korea due to the international border closures. The S.P.A.C.E. Project was led by a leading social work lecturer and researcher who facilitated an online virtual community where we had access to both group and individual supervision. We met regularly using online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Throughout the project, we were able to participate in and complete, a range of projects including community engagement, research, and group work projects. The team created online platforms to promote social work to prospective social work students throughout the world, including an online webinar that had 79 prospective students attend. We had the privilege of speaking at an online AASW conference to share our experience of the project. We also each had the opportunity to facilitate unsupervised communities of practice where we came together as a group to discuss, critically analyse, and critically reflect on various social work issues, particularly around social justice, and human rights. Having these open discussions with a group of people with such diverse backgrounds offered a rare experience to really reflect on what social work is, and how that looks in practice in different countries and cultures. This experience was incredibly valuable in reminding me of the Euro-centric lens we tend to naturally view social work through, and to continually reflect on my own white positionality and privilege. I was also fortunate enough to be able to mentor an international Bachelor of Social Work student who was still in India due to the border closures. This student had found some topics challenging as she had little to no exposure to many social work issues in an Australian university context, such as cultural responsiveness or feminist perspectives in social work. This was an eye-opening experience for me as I realised how I again had automatically viewed social work from a white, western perspective. Through these varied projects and experiences, I was able to demonstrate all learning outcomes for placement such as ‘culturally responsive and inclusive practice’ and ‘developing knowledge of practice’.

When the opportunity arose to participate in a virtual placement, I quickly jumped at the chance, purely because of my current circumstances and the flexibility the placement would offer. With my family commitments and having my children home with me during the lockdown, the flexibility to complete my work around my family responsibilities was invaluable and empowering, providing me with the opportunity to not have to choose between motherhood and advancing my career. However, I admittedly assumed that I would not gain enough “real life” social work experience from this placement. Due to concerns about how practice skills

can be gained through online learning, distance education modes in social work are often viewed as controversial (Bay et al., 2021). However, with advances in technology and platforms such as Zoom, Bay et al. (2021) found there was little difference in performance of clinical skills in social work students who participated in Zoom classes than those who were on campus.

Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of my field placement came from the mentoring role of my supervisor. My supervisor was available to meet regularly, and, in that time, we were able to have open discussions where I not only felt supported but was also encouraged to critically analyse and reflect upon my experiences, using multiple social work theories and perspectives to gain a further understanding of various social work issues. It was also through my supervisor that I was exposed to social work research, with my supervisor encouraging and supporting me through my first research project, which was something I soon realised I had a passion for. It was due to this mentoring relationship that I gained the most valuable experiences of field placement. Mentoring relationships have proven beneficial by supporting students to challenge themselves and critique inequalities, consistent with the aims of human rights (Saxton et al., 2021). This experience has helped further guide me as to the type of social worker I aspire to be, providing me with multiple opportunities to view social work through a critical lens and to continue to identify and challenge social structures that infringe on human rights.

## Conclusion

In my experience, the virtual placement made me feel connected with my colleagues and supervisor during a time that would otherwise be extremely isolating. I was able to speak with, and share an enriching experience with, other students all over Australia and other countries, with all of us able to learn from one another. A virtual placement such as the S.P.A.C.E. Project offers great learning and exposure to real world social work skills. The Covid-19 pandemic required many services to move to online platforms including social work services offered via telehealth (Bay et al., 2021). Being able to communicate and work with clients through a variety of different platforms is imperative in a world that is changing rapidly. Whilst this was a pilot program and further research is needed in relation to virtual placements, due to the development of online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, perhaps the definition of *face-to-face* needs to be altered (Bay et al., 2021). Covid-19 has had detrimental effects on many students accessing higher education and field placements, especially those who already faced barriers. Whilst not taking away from the importance of traditional face-to-face placements, a call for further investigations into creating well-structured virtual placements that allow for greater flexibility and unique learning opportunities, may be beneficial for many students. “It is at the point where education fails to reach certain groups or populations that it is no longer just a human rights issue, but indeed a social justice issue” (Saxton, 2021, p. 20). Barriers to accessing field placement can be greatly reduced with the flexibility virtual placements can offer, and I believe this could be the start of an exciting new era in social work education.

## References

- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2021). *The Australian social work education and accreditation standards (ASWEAS)*. <https://www.aasw.asn/document/item13565> (aasw.asn.au)
- Bay, U., Maghidman, M., Waugh, J., & Shlonsky, A. (2021). Guidelines for using simulation for online teaching and learning of clinical social work practice in the time of COVID. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 49(1), 128–135.
- Cleak, H., & Smith, D. (2012). Student satisfaction with models of field placement supervision. *Australian Social Work*, 65(2), 243–258.
- 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.
- Hjalmsdottir, A., & Bjarnadottir, V. S. (2020). “I have turned into a foreman here at home”: Families and work-life balance in times of Covid-19 in a gender equality paradise. *Gender Work Organ*, 28, 268–283.
- Jefferies, G., Davis, C., & Mason, J. (2021). Simulation and skills development: Preparing Australian social work education for a post-COVID Reality. *Australian Social Work*, 75(4), 433–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2021.1951312>
- Mirick, R. G., & Davis, A. (2021). Supporting social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 41(5), 484–504.
- Nash, M., & Churchill, B. (2020). Caring during Covid-19: A gendered analysis of Australian university responses to managing remote working and caring responsibilities. *Gender Work Organ*, 27, 833–846.
- Newcomb, M. (2019). When teacher becomes student: Unveiling contradictions within Australian social work education. *Social Sciences*, 8, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8060174>.
- Saxton, K. (2021). Whose responsibility is equity and social justice within the higher education system? Reflections on the Australian university sector during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Social Alternatives*, 40(4), 15–24.
- Saxton, K., Rowbotham, R., & Read, J. (2021). Managing or mentoring? Reflections on the role modelling of human rights within Australian social work field education. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-021-00194-w>
- Webber, L., & Dismore, H. (2021). Mothers and higher education: balancing time, study and space. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(6), 803–817.