

Field Education Organisational Roles and Responsibilities: A Snapshot of Australian Social Work Providers

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Abstract

Considerable research has been conducted on the changing context of Australian social work field education including availability and types of placements and supervision models. The purpose of this study is to contribute to this research by exploring how social work education providers are structuring their organisational processes and practices in response to these contextual changes. All Australian social work education providers were invited to participate in an online survey aimed at producing a snapshot of contemporary social work field education roles and responsibilities and contextual issues. The study findings identify 22 different roles and responsibilities performed by a large number of staff including social work academics, Work Integrated Learning teams and other professional and administrative staff teams. Often these roles and responsibilities overlap or are shared. This highlights the need for close collaboration, given that many of these staff do not report to the Head of the Social Work Academic Organisation Unit. Key contextual issues are also explored.

Keywords: *Social work field education; Roles and responsibilities; Context*

Australian social work has witnessed unprecedented growth in educational programs and student numbers in recent years alongside a decline in the number and capacity of human services agencies available to provide social work field education placements (Egan et al., 2021). Social worker academics in Australia (Ledger et al., 2017), New Zealand (Hay, 2018), Canada (Ayala et al., 2018) and the United States (Srikanthan, 2019) have declared a crisis in social work field education due to placement shortages and saturation of the market. In Australia, the National Field Educators Network (NFEN) was established as a national collaborative response for a collective voice to inform national policy development and structural change to address this crisis in social work field education. A key aspect of this collaboration include critical dialogue and difficult conversations to identify and respond collectively to contextual challenges (Rollins et al., 2017). Our study was conceptualised in an attempt to gain a snapshot of Australian social work field education roles and responsibilities and contextual issues. The main research question was: What are current roles and responsibilities, and contextual issues for Australian social work field education providers? First, the context of social work field education is considered followed by a description of the study design. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of the study findings. Current roles and responsibilities of social work field education staff are presented with reference to contextual issues for Australian social work providers.

Background

Considerable research has been undertaken on social work field education. In particular, this study builds upon previous Australian studies of social work field education. These studies are focused on the availability of social work placements, staff-student ratios and social work supervision arrangements (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020), as well as innovative placement models for the changing Australian social work context (Zuchowski et al., 2019). The focus of this study is on how social work education provider organisations structure organisational roles and responsibilities to meet contemporary placement requirements.

Social work field education requires strategic community partnerships, transformative scholarly learning and teaching, and research leadership (Hill, 2017). Collaborative partnerships and ongoing mutually supportive relationships between providers and human services agencies are central to social work field education programs (Stevens et al., 2021). The consistency of learning expectations and roles and responsibilities is an important part of pre-placement preparation for both students and placement organisations.

The suitability and viability of social work field education models, based on good will and individual agency-based supervision models, has been questioned as the human services context becomes more marketised (Hosken et al., 2016). Competition for placements with other social work education providers, and increasingly students from other disciplines, has heightened as more human services training programs incorporate field education into their curricula. Social work academics are adapting to these pressures and have been called upon to resist and challenge the negative impacts of neoliberalism on social work field education (Morley et al., 2017). In spite of these difficulties, some social work providers have reported that they continue to achieve high success rates in securing student placements (Ayala et al., 2018).

Over the past decade, social work has seen the diversification and expansion of placements into non-traditional areas of practice. Non-traditional placements have the potential to create new connections and partnerships, innovative learning opportunities and new areas of employment (Short et al., 2021; Zuchowski et al., 2019). However, the quality of some non-traditional placements has been questioned against a paucity of research on how these placements align with social work field education pedagogical requirements (Lucas & Vassos, 2019). Non-traditional social work placements include partnership models between social work providers, communities and businesses, often using a reciprocal co-design approach that is place responsive (Crane et al., 2018; Harms, 2017). Examples of non-traditional social work placements include social work studios (Johnson et al., 2018), community gardens (Heerink et al., 2021), telehealth (Davis & Mirick, 2021) and research pods (Appleton et al., 2016). The inclusion of research training partnerships with agencies in social work field education provides knowledge and skill development while also sharpening students' abilities to address social issues at the micro, mezzo and macro levels (Drolet, 2020).

In addition to increased placement diversity, different models of student supervision have been introduced including off-site and group supervision (Egan et al., 2021). The use of technology-enabled simulations in social work field education is also being used to support, and prepare, students for placement by providing opportunities to practise skills in a realistic but controlled environment (Bragg et al., 2021). Against this background, the following study design was developed to understand how education providers have organised their field education roles and responsibilities in response to such contextual changes.

Method

Research Design, Aim and Questions

The *research design* was exploratory with both quantitative and qualitative data collected using a narrative approach. This approach suited the aim of the research to produce a snapshot of the current context of social work field education from the perspective of academics responsible for social work field education.

The main *research question* was: What are current roles and responsibilities, and contextual issues for Australian social work field education academics?

Quantitative questions focused on: numbers of students requiring placement each year, field education staffing numbers, the location and types of placements offered, and roles and responsibilities of staff and students. Respondents were provided with listings of roles and responsibilities to select from, with the opportunity to add to this list in a comments box. Qualitative data focused on on-campus placement experiences, views on successful models for the delivery of field education placements, and recommended changes for the future delivery of social work field education.

Online Survey

An invitation to participate in an online survey, and a Qualtrics survey link, were distributed to all Heads of Schools of Social Work in Australia ($n = 32$). Three providers were not eligible to participate due to not having operational social work programs. The provider where the authors are employed in field education roles was also excluded, reducing the number of potential respondents to 28. The survey response rate was 13 (46.43%). The online survey was conducted over an eight-week period from October 18, 2021 to December 13, 2021. Participation in the survey was anonymous and voluntary with no identifying information collected.

Data analysis and reporting

Quantitative data were collated based on the number of respondents for each item scored. Data on roles and responsibilities were reported in a ranked order that showed who predominantly performed specific roles or undertook specific fieldwork responsibilities.

Responses to open-ended questions were analysed using descriptive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Numbers only (not percentages), are used to report the data due to the small sample size. Direct quotes from respondents are presented and coded R1 to R13 to indicate respondent number.

Ethics Approval

The study was approved by the Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee (ref: A21-127).

Limitations

Survey fatigue during COVID lockdowns and restrictions, could have affected the response rate. The study only included key social work education provider roles and responsibilities. Data were not collected on numbers of staff employed in social work field education.

Results

Student Placement Numbers and Types of Placements

All of the respondents place 200 or more students in field education placements each year with two respondents placing between 700 and 800 students each year as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of Students in Field Education Placements Each Year ($n = 13$)

No. of students	No. of providers
700-799	2
600-699	1
500-599	1
400-499	2
300-399	2
200-299	5
199 or less	0
Total	13

Nine respondents provided placements located within the provider with the number of placements on average per year presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Number of Placements Provided by Provider Each Year (n = 9)

No. of students	No. of providers
46-50	1
41-45	0
36-40	0
31-35	0
26-30	1
21-25	1
16-20	0
11-15	1
6-10	2
1-5	3
Total	9

Internal placements are both indirect practice ($n = 9$) and direct practice ($n = 5$).

Field education experiences offered on-campus include telehealth, student wellbeing, student services, research, evaluations, literature reviews, policy submission, resource compilation, and the development of service models. Research projects are co-designed in collaborations with consumers, workers and academics to address local issues.

Roles and responsibilities for social work field education

The number of staff employed in social work field education ranges from 1 to 5 as seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Number of Social Work Field Education Staff Employed by Education Provider (n = 13)

Staff	Education provider
5	6
4	2
3	4
2	0
1	1
Total	13

Roles and responsibilities pre-, during and on completion of placement are presented in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

Pre-placement

Table 4

Roles and Responsibilities Pre-Placement (Multiple Responses Allowed) (n = 13)

Roles and Responsibilities Pre-placement stage	Field Education Coordinator	Field Education Academic	Admin/ Prof Staff	Program Coordinator	Discipline Lead	Student
Field Education course coordination	8	8	1	2	2	0
Source placements	9	6	6	1	0	2
Student briefings	8	7	3	5	3	0
Field Education curriculum development	8	10	1	5	6	0
Assess Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)	7	9	1	4	1	0
Manage RPL placements	11	9	5	1	0	0
International placements	5	9	4	2	0	0
Complete placement description forms	4	3	11	0	0	3
Student induction sessions	9	11	2	1	0	0
Advertise placements	3	1	9	1	0	0
Match placements	8	6	8	1	0	0
Immunisations	0	2	13	0	0	2
Police checks	0	1	13	0	0	2
Working with Children Checks	0	1	13	0	0	2
Assess work-based placements	10	8	4	2	1	2
On-site SW supervisor	10	7	7	1	0	0
Direct/indirect placements	9	6	6	2	0	0
Notify students of placements	5	2	9	0	0	0
Prepare Agreements	4	2	13	0	0	0
Prepare Contracts for sessional staff	3	4	8	2	2	0
Approve Contracts for sessional staff	3	2	2	3	10	0
Relationship management with agencies	10	11	8	2	1	0
Support students with complex needs	9	10	4	4	2	0
Accessibility Plan check	8	7	6	1	0	1

Roles and Responsibilities Pre-placement stage	Field Education Coordinator	Field Education Academic	Admin/ Prof Staff	Program Coordinator	Discipline Lead	Student
Developing new placements	11	9	4	3	1	1
Develop placement clusters	8	7	2	2	0	0
Allocate supervisors and Field Education Liaison Officers (FELOs)	5	9	5	1	0	0
Total	175	183	177	46	29	15

Field education academics ranked highest for the overall number of roles and responsibilities in preparation for placement ($n = 183$), followed by professional staff ($n = 177$); field education coordinators ($n = 175$); program coordinators ($n = 46$); discipline leads ($n = 29$); and students ($n = 15$).

Field education academics' primary roles and responsibilities were fieldwork induction sessions for students and relationship management with agencies ($n = 11$). This was in addition to field education curriculum development and management and support of students with complex placement needs ($n = 10$). This was closely followed by assessment of applications for RPL; management of subsequent placements for students granted RPL; management of international placements; development of new placement opportunities and allocation of social work supervisor; and FELO to placements ($n = 9$). Other main roles and responsibilities were: field education course coordination and assessment of suitability of work-place based placements ($n = 8$); Open Day/Orientation Day student briefings; ensuring one placement has an on-site social work supervisor; checking Accessibility Plans are in place; and developing clusters of placements ($n = 7$).

Professional staff were responsible for preparing agreements with placement agencies; immunisation; working with children; and police checks ($n = 13$). Other main roles and responsibilities were: completing placement description forms ($n = 11$); advertising placements and notifying students of placements ($n = 9$); preparing contracts for sessional staff; relationship management with agencies ($n = 8$); and ensuring one placement has an on-site social work supervisor ($n = 7$).

Field education coordinator main roles and responsibilities were developing new placement opportunities and management of subsequent placements for students granted RPL ($n = 11$). This was closely followed by assessment of suitability of work-place based placements; ensuring one placement has an on-site social work supervisor; and relationship management with agencies ($n = 10$). Most were also responsible for sourcing placements; fieldwork induction sessions for students; and ensuring one placement is direct practice and one is indirect practice ($n = 9$). Further main responsibilities included field education course coordination; Open Day/Orientation Day student briefings; field education curriculum development; matching of students to placements; checking if Accessibility Plan is in place; development of clusters of placements ($n = 8$); and assessment that a direct practice placement has been provided to all students ($n = 7$).

The main role of *discipline leads* was approval of contracts for sessional staff ($n = 10$); field education curriculum development ($n = 6$); Open Day/Orientation Day student briefings ($n = 3$); field education course coordination ($n = 2$); preparing contracts for sessional staff ($n = 2$); and management and support of students with complex placement needs ($n = 2$). *Students* had minimal involvement in pre-placement preparations. The main responsibility was completing and submitting required forms and documents ($n = 3$).

During Placement

Table 5

Roles and Responsibilities During Placement (Multiple Responses Allowed) (n = 13)

Roles and Responsibilities	Field Education Coordinator	Field Education Academic	Admin/ Prof Staff	Program Coordinator	Discipline Lead	Student
Manage placement clusters	9	10	3	1	0	0
Co-ordinate on-campus placements	6	7	2	1	0	0
Deliver on-campus placements	5	5	1	1	1	0
Provide placement simulations	2	5	0	2	0	0
Place students in a timely manner	10	7	9	3	0	1
Respond to student queries	8	11	9	5	2	0
Respond to agency queries	9	8	9	3	0	0
Respond to Field Educator and Field Education Liaison Officers(FELOs) queries	7	11	6	3	0	0
Record compliance	6	9	10	2	0	1
Assess COVID reduced hours	7	10	0	3	2	1
Provide external individual supervision	9	7	2	2	1	0
Provide external group supervision	8	6	2	2	1	0
Conduct FELO	8	10	2	4	2	0
Recruit FELOs and Field Educators	8	8	3	6	4	0
Induction training for new FE staff	9	10	3	3	0	0
Manage FELOs and Field Educators	6	7	5	2	2	0

Roles and Responsibilities	Field Education Coordinator	Field Education Academic	Admin/Prof Staff	Program Coordinator	Discipline Lead	Student
Agency induction	9	6	4	3	0	1
Integrative seminars	4	10	0	1	0	0
Feedback on student learning plans	3	10	1	1	0	0
Manage placement breakdowns	5	12	2	1	0	0
Manage appeals	5	7	0	8	4	0
Manage complaints	6	7	0	8	4	0
Member of Field Educators Network	6	8	2	1	1	0
AASW compliance records	6	9	6	7	8	1
Total	161	200	81	73	32	5

Field education academics ranked highest for the overall number of roles and responsibilities during placement ($n = 200$), followed by field education coordinators ($n = 161$); professional staff ($n = 81$); program coordinators ($n = 73$); discipline leads ($n = 32$) and students ($n = 5$).

Field education academics were mostly responsible for the management of placement breakdowns ($n = 12$); responding to student, Field Educator/Task supervisor and FELO queries ($n = 11$). This was followed by managing clusters of placements; assessment of reduced hours under AASW COVID provisions; field education liaison; induction training programs for new social work and task supervisors and field education liaison officers (FELO); conducting integrative seminars; and providing feedback on student learning plans ($n = 10$). Further main roles and responsibilities were recording of required provider and Australian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) compliance documents; and teaching in other areas of the curriculum (not field work courses) ($n = 9$); recruiting social work FELOs and social work supervisors and membership of relevant state or territory Field Educators Network ($n = 8$). Just over half were responsible for: the co-ordination of provider on-campus placements; the placement of students in a timely manner; providing external individual social work supervision; the management of FELOs and supervisors; and the management of appeals and complaints ($n = 7$).

The main responsibility of *field education coordinators* was the placement of students in a timely manner ($n = 10$), closely followed by managing clusters of placements; responding to agency queries; providing external individual social work supervision; induction training programs for new social work and task supervisors and FELOs; and agency specific field education induction ($n = 9$).

Main roles and responsibilities included responding to student queries; providing external group social work supervision; providing field education liaison; and recruiting FELOs and supervisors ($n = 8$). Primary responsibilities also included responding to field educator/task supervisor and FELO queries and assessment of reduced hours under AASW COVID provisions in operation at the time ($n = 7$).

The main activity of *professional staff* during placement were recording areas of required compliance ($n = 10$); responding to student and agency queries and placement of students in a timely manner ($n = 9$); maintaining ASWEAS compliance records and responding to field educator/task supervisor and FELO queries ($n = 6$); and management of FELOs and supervisors ($n = 5$). Professional staff also conducted agency specific field education induction ($n = 4$); managed clusters of placements; recruited FELOs and supervisors; and conducted induction training programs for new social work and task supervisors and FELOs ($n = 3$).

The main roles and responsibilities of *program coordinators* were the management of appeals and complaints ($n = 8$); maintenance of ASWEAS compliance records ($n = 7$); and recruitment of FELOs and supervisors ($n = 6$).

The social work *discipline lead* main responsibility was maintaining AASW compliance records ($n = 8$), followed by recruitment of FELOs and supervisors and managing appeals and complaints ($n = 4$).

Student roles and responsibilities were minimal with only one response recorded for placement of students in a timely manner; assessment of reduced hours under AASW COVID provisions; agency-specific field education induction; and maintaining ASWEAS compliance records ($n = 1$).

Respondents were also asked to identify roles and responsibilities for these staff at the end of placement.

End of Placement

Table 6

Roles and Responsibilities at End of Placement (Multiple Responses Allowed) (n = 13)

Roles and Responsibilities End Placement	Field Education Coordinator	Field Education Academic	Admin/ Prof Staff	Program Coordinator	Discipline Lead	Student
Grade assignments	2	10	0	1	0	0
Assess Course Learning Outcomes are met	3	10	1	1	0	1
Special Consideration	6	8	2	5	1	0
AASW reporting	3	3	0	8	10	0
Total	14	31	3	15	11	1

Field education academics ranked highest for the overall number of roles and responsibilities at the end of placement ($n = 41$), followed by program coordinators ($n = 15$); field education coordinators ($n = 14$); discipline leads ($n = 11$); professional staff ($n = 3$); and students ($n = 1$).

Most responsibilities were with field education academics for the grading of field education student assignments and assessing that all learning outcomes are met ($n = 10$) and assessment of special consideration applications ($n = 8$).

The main role performed by the discipline lead was annual reporting to the AASW ($n = 10$). Program coordinators also had a main role of annual reporting to the AASW ($n = 8$). Field education coordinators mostly assessed applications for special consideration ($n = 6$). A few professional staff were responsible for assessing special consideration applications ($n = 2$) and assessing all learning outcomes were met ($n = 1$). Students were also responsible for assessing that all learning outcomes had been met ($n = 1$). Respondents mentioned a number of other roles and responsibilities in addition to those listed.

Respondents noted the important role of sessional staff:

Sessional staff are an important part of every large program. You cannot run field placements without sessional staff once student numbers exceed a minimal amount. The AASW needs to acknowledge this and revise the rules. (R1)

Other staff positions identified as not listed included manager of placement partnerships, Head of School and other social work academics:

Professional staff at our university includes manager for placement partnerships. (R10)

At one provider, professional staff included a qualified social worker:

The Field Ed Coordinator [$n=1$] in our institution is a professional staff member with extensive social work practice experience. The admin/professional staff [$n = 2$] listed here in our program are extensively experienced social workers. We share 2 further admin staff with other disciplines offering placements. (R7)

For others the professional staff were not social work qualified:

More SW assessment skills required in placement co-ordination; [this] is being shifted to the administration staff. Soon there will be no social workers involved in any aspect of SW field education matching. (R4)

Professional staff and academic field education staff were located in different teams:

Although there are 4 field education positions, the total FTE is 1.8 academic staff; admin is provided by another team, probably an FTE of 1.5 looking after social work ...They are using more people than we ever had as an academic team with more roles ... still we are behind in timely placement finding. (R12)

Key Aspects of a Successful Model of Field Education

All of the respondents to this question (n = 11) mentioned the importance of effective relationships and partnerships with agencies and a collaborative approach that is inclusive of casual staff and students:

A collaborative approach to Field Ed and a cooperative approach between the Field Ed Team, agencies and casual staff. (R9)

This included paid group placements and broader input into the curriculum:

Strong leadership, partnership model where providers take on groups of students, partners giving input into curriculum, simulation at the front end BEFORE going to placement, hurdle requirement of an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) before going to placement. (R1)

Partnership model where the university pays for an agency to host 12-15 students each semester. (R4)

Reciprocity in relationships was important and required adequate time and resource allocation:

Relationships with the field – offering of reciprocity and having sufficient staff with sufficient time to offer this (currently insufficient within this institution). (R7)

Effective development and management of ongoing relationships was necessary for continuity:

Developing ongoing, effective relationships with field partners (agencies/organisations) to ensure continuity of placements being offered each semester. (R2)

The development and communication of clear and consistent expectations and requirements of students and field educators was also as a key aspect of effective relationships:

Providing well-developed and structured pre-placement seminars and workshops to students to clarify expectations and requirements of field placement courses and to create greater consistency for student experiences, across placement settings. Providing workshops to field educators and agencies regarding university and field placement course requirements and to clarify teaching and learning strategies as well as assessment requirements. (R2)

Key aspects are clear communication processes between field education staff and supervisor teams, and between the student and supervisory teams. Placements work best when the agency is aware of the required outcomes of the placement – direct practice or research etc. (R5)

This included provision of training and feedback processes:

Ongoing relationships development and management. Feedback processes for students, agencies and FE/FELO. Clear manuals. Student preparation and integrative workshops. Training for FE/FELO. (R6)

Effective partnerships included digital literacy:

Building the digital literacy of students and organisations; collaborative partnerships with organisations; use of digital space to scaffold placements. (R3)

Participants noted the importance of field education being recognised as an academic topic that is supported with meaningful learning opportunities:

Recognition that Field Education is an ACADEMIC topic; ensuring that students have meaningful learning opportunities on placement (therefore we don't support on-campus or work-from-home options); academic coordination of FE assessment; partnerships and relationships with sector; adequate preparation of students for placement; admission policies and procedures (ensuring suitability of students); competent social work placement supervision; student engagement in learning opportunities; support and resources for students to manage challenges on placement; adequate support of international students regarding Australian context and dealing with ethno-centrism, racism and xenophobia. (R8)

Recommended changes for the future delivery of social work field education

Recommended changes for the future delivery of social work field education were in relation to funding models, appropriate staff–student ratios, and clearer expectations in the ASWEAS standards. Respondents wanted increased flexibility for: type and location of placements; recognition of sessional staff; and granting of RPL. They also wanted increased involvement of academic staff in field education, and availability of placements in government agencies ($n = 12$).

The neo-liberal context of education provider funding models was considered to be at odds with quality social work education:

The current neo-liberal economic context and gaps in university funding do not support a competent model of social work education, as the emphasis is on the money students bring in rather than their suitability for social work. I would like to see significant caps on student numbers, much more stringent entry requirements and a system that supports failure of students who do not demonstrate their ability to meet the required learning outcomes (fail grades are almost always overturned at our university). (R8)

For our university, we need more staff to cope with the growing student numbers. Inductions for new supervisory teams would be good as I am only managing 'piece-meal' inductions and training. (R5)

Clearer ASWEAS standards are also required to assist with pressures for cost savings on social work academic staff from within their universities:

Clearer ASWEAS guidelines as the pressure from the university is too big to make savings, thus vague guidelines will just mean cut to liaison and supervisor hours in workload and in appointments. (R12)

Participants would like to see more flexibility with face-to-face contact beyond in-person contact:

More flexibility to use remote face-to-face communication. (R1)

Respondents want greater flexibility from the AASW with field education staffing requirements to acknowledge the important role performed by sessional staff who are often highly skilled practitioners:

AASW out of university hiring procedures – requiring levels and contract types across the board are non-starters for most universities with large programs. Often, the most experienced and best practitioners are...practitioners. They are only with us part-time and would therefore not qualify for a typical university contract. They prefer sessional pay. (R1)

Respondents want increased flexibility beyond the current direct and indirect placement requirements of the AASW:

Ongoing flexibility regarding types of placements. (R6)

One respondent would like increased flexibility with recognition of prior learning but does not stipulate what this might look like:

We would like there to be greater flexibility with RPL than currently offered in ASWEAS requirements. (R7)

Developmental work was considered necessary to vary the type of placements and to increase placements offered by government agencies:

Developmental work will be a requirement of the future. The sector is overwhelmed and not able to support as many student placements that they traditionally were. Non-traditional placements are the order of the day. (R3)

Less focus on direct placements and more on social activism, social change, advocacy, research and digital platform used as scaffolding. Placements in remote areas could work using a blended model. (R3)

A substantial increase in government-based agencies providing social work field placements. (R2)

Increased involvement of social work academic staff in field education was desired:

Greater involvement of all SW academic staff in Field Education placements and integrative seminars. (R4)

Discussion

The study findings provide a snapshot of current roles and responsibilities, and contextual issues facing Australian social work field education providers.

Roles and Responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities identified were performed across 22 different designated roles both internal and external to the education provider with actual numbers of people involved in field education processes proving to be much higher than originally anticipated. Respondents noted the reliance on sessional staff for external social work supervision and field education liaison and the practice knowledge and the expertise they bring to this role, which does not always receive the recognition it deserves. This resonates with findings of a study at an Australian university that found students reported good to excellent experiences of off-site supervision provided by sessional staff (Egan et al., 2021).

Most responsibilities at all stages of placement were conducted by field education academic staff. In the pre-placement and during-placement stages, professional/administrative staff ranked second for number of roles and responsibilities with program coordinators ranking second for responsibilities at end of placement. The study findings highlight the large numbers of people involved in field education and the importance of close collaborative processes for students to be placed in a timely manner (Hay, 2020). The findings also raise the question of the potential to simplify processes with multiple staff areas responsible for the same role. It is unclear whether this is complementary or duplication. Added complexity arises from different reporting lines of staff in professional/administrative teams and academic staff groups.

Contextual Issues

Respondents view the neo-liberal context of social work education providers and human services organisations as not supportive of quality social work field education due to the focus on income generation from students. This view resonates with previous studies of social work education in Australia (see for example, Hosken et al., 2016; Morley et al., 2017). Increases in student enrolments are not always matched with additional staffing. Some respondents called for assistance from the AASW to provide clearer standards to assist with resistance to cost savings.

The study found that a priority for social work field education is the effective development and management of reciprocal, collaborative partnerships and relationships with placement agencies. The recognition of field education as an academic topic with the provision of appropriate and meaningful placement experiences that are adequately resourced is also essential. This includes recognition of the important contribution of sessional staff who are generally highly skilled social work practitioners (Buck et al., 2015; Hill, 2017; Hay, 2020; Stevens et al., 2021). Consistent communication of clear expectations and requirements of students for placement learning outcomes across placements and feedback processes for students, supervisors and liaison staff were identified as highly important.

Adequate resourcing of placement preparation and briefing sessions including use of technology was necessary for students, agency-based field educators, sessional supervisors and liaison staff, with some respondents not receiving adequate resourcing to do this.

Developmental work was considered necessary for increased flexibility to vary the type of placements offered to students. Support for students and provision of quality placements for all students was important, recognising that some students may require additional support and in particular students with accessibility issues and international students adjusting to the Australian context (Srikanthan, 2019).

The study findings provide new insights into the extent of the expansion of some social work programs. This increase in numbers is potentially another source of placement shortages. One way of ensuring students were placed was through the provision of placements by providers. Most respondents did so, with three respondents providing 21 to 50 on-site placements per year. A respondent was not supportive of placements being provided internally or field education students working from home due to quality concerns (Lucas & Vassos, 2019).

Conclusion

The snapshot provided in the study findings contributes to increased knowledge and understanding of contemporary social work field education roles and responsibilities and organisational structures. Large numbers of ongoing and sessional staff are involved in social work field education who often have shared responsibilities and different lines of reporting and management. This requires effective organisational processes and communications for the timely placement of students with recognition of the important contribution made by sessional staff as Field Educators and Field Education Liaison Officers. A main challenge is to maintain social work field education as a central pedagogical component within social work academic organisational units, particularly when key staff involved may not report to the Head of Social Work.

Key to the success of social work field education programs is ongoing reciprocal relationships and partnerships with agencies that provide meaningful social work placements and collaboration between social work providers. The study findings highlight the need for further research on social work field education organisational structures, processes and resource allocation.

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