

# Field Education and Covid-19: Collaboration and Opportunity

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a stark light on the pre-existing crisis in social work field education, and deepened it, resulting in many programs globally having to cancel and/or postpone placements. This article describes the experience of a university field education team in Melbourne, Australia, and the strategies they employed to provide students with a meaningful field education experience, despite being located in one of the most locked-down cities in the world. Key reflections include that it was collaborative industry partnerships, as well as added flexibility in the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) field education standards, that were instrumental in weathering the storm of Covid-19. The authors also suggest temporary changes do not go far enough in responding to the crisis in field education, and that a major re-structure of current requirements is needed at a national level to meet the needs of students and the social work sector.

**Keywords:** *Social work; Field education; Covid-19*

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to highlight the experiences and learnings of the RMIT social work field education team in providing a field education program in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. While there has been social work field education literature published in recent years on the impact of Covid-19, this has been focused on social work academic leadership responses to maintaining social work programs during the pandemic (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Crisp et al., 2021) the role of alternative placements such as e-placements, simulations, and university-led projects (Morley & Clarke, 2020; Tortorelli et al., 2021; Zuchowski, Cleak et al 2021), and student experiences (Zuchowski, Collingwood et al., 2021). What is missing from the literature is a deep reflection of the factors that led to sustaining a field education program through the challenges of the pandemic. This is particularly important in the Melbourne context – which is not represented in the literature. This locality-based context is important; the strategies used by the RMIT social work field education team to provide all students with a quality field education placement, in one of the most locked-down cities in the world, can be used to inform industry-based student placements in times of crisis and beyond.

This article also contributes to discussions regarding the ongoing crisis in social work field education in Australia (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Gair & Baglow, 2018a; Morley et al., 2019), by using lessons learnt from the pandemic to recommend changes to Australian Social Work and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) field education guidelines, with the goal of creating fair, equitable and sustainable field education programs throughout Australia.

This article has been informed by ongoing, deep and critical reflections of the RMIT social work field education team since the onset of the pandemic – all authors have contributed to these reflections. While this is not an empirical piece of research, at times we use internal team documents and data to support our discussions. This article is both a reflection on experience and an analysis of key social work education and workforce issues impacting currently on the social work sector.

The article begins with a description of the Melbourne Covid-19 context, a summary of the current field education crisis, the impact of Covid-19 and responses from the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW), academic institutions, and industry partners. The article then describes the RMIT field education program's experiences of 2020/21 when at the height of the pandemic, including the key enablers sustaining the program through this period. This article concludes with a discussion on lessons learnt from our experience and relates this to the need for structural national reform of field education.

## Melbourne

Geographical location is a critical factor when assessing the impact Covid-19 has had on social work field education programs. It is important to consider not only the country the program is based in, but also the region (Windisch & Cunningham, 2022). In Australia, during 2020/21, the state of Victoria accounted for 58% of the total Covid-19 cases in the country, and 66% of total deaths (Australian Government, Department of Health, 2021).

Victoria's capital city of Melbourne experienced six lockdowns in this period for a combined total of 267 days throughout 2020-21, becoming one of the most locked-down cities in the world (Boaz et al, 2021).

**Table 1**

*Melbourne Covid-19 Lockdowns 2020-2021*

Lockdown	Dates	Total Days
Lockdown 1	March 30 – May 12, 2020.	43
Lockdown 2	July 8 – October 27, 2020.	111
Lockdown 3	February 12 – February 17, 2021.	5
Lockdown 4	May 27 – June 10, 2021.	14
Lockdown 5	July 15 – July 27, 2021.	12
Lockdown 6	August 5 – October 22, 2021.	77 (262 days in all)

Source: Windisch & Cunningham (2022).

Lockdown rules included strict stay-at-home orders with only limited exceptions allowed for leaving home (food, exercise, care-giving, and authorised work), mobility restrictions (5km from home), and night-time curfews (Macreadie, 2022). The impact of lockdowns has been traumatic, creating financial hardship, and negatively impacting on community members' mental health and wellbeing (Raynor et al., 2022). People from disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds, including many university students, continue to be most at risk of experiencing hardship due to employment and housing precarity (Raynor et al., 2022, O'Keefe et al., 2022).

### **AASW, Covid-19 and the development of new placement practices**

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, social work literature was critical of field education within Australia. Decades-long neoliberal government policy created both the neglect of the welfare sector, and a competitive university marketplace that has created a dramatic rise in social work university enrolments (more than 130,000 students across 30 universities) (Morley & Clarke, 2020), resulting in unsustainable pressure on the sector and academic institutions to provide quality field education placements (Hodge et al., 2021, Morley & Clarke, 2020). Criticism was also aimed at the financial and wellbeing impacts of unpaid placements on students, and the lack of evidence-base informing the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) requirements of 1000 hours across two placements (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Gair & Baglow, 2018b; Morley et al., 2019).

The AASW is both the professional association and accrediting body for social work education in Australia. The current Australian Social Work and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) field education guidelines have been criticised for not being reflective of the needs of students, particularly those from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, who are unable to complete 1000 hours of unpaid placements, exacerbating existing poverty created through unemployment, under-employment, insecure and precarious paid work (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Gair & Baglow, 2018a; Hodge et al., 2021; Johnstone et al., 2016, Morley et al., 2023).

Unpaid placements have become an economic barrier to studying social work, particularly for young people, women, international students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, which is in direct contrast to the social justice principles the social work profession advocates (Hodge et al., 2021). Morley et al. (2023) surveyed 372 social work students and found that due to placement hours, they experienced financial hardship because of their need to reduce paid work. Morley et al. (2023) also found students' health and wellbeing was negatively impacted by excessive placement hours, combined with paid work, study commitments and other personal and family commitments. Similarly, Hodge et al. (2021) identified students' finances and mental health deteriorated due to lengthy unpaid placements, as well as negatively impacting on personal relationships and study performance.

The criticism of ASWEAS field education requirements has become louder since the Covid-19 pandemic with social work academics calling for adjustments be made to adapt to student needs (Hodge et al., 2021; Morley & Clarke, 2020). Crisp et al. (2021) described ASWEAS field education requirements as highly prescriptive, inflexible and inadequate for a social work sector working in challenging and dynamic contexts. The Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW) advocated for change to the ASWEAS at the beginning of the pandemic (Crisp et al., 2021). This resulted in the AASW's 'Covid-19 Parameters', introducing significant variations including a reduction of up to 100 hours per placement (reduced from 1000 hours to 800 hours), more remote and project-based placements, and more flexibility with supervision and supervised simulations (AASW, 2020b). Supervision flexibility included the students being able to have an External Field Educator (EFE) for more than one placement (AASW, 2020), this decision was critical during the Covid-19 pandemic as industry partners were under immense workload pressure to maintain their service provision, as well as provide supervision (Windisch & Cunningham, 2021). Social work field education Covid-19 literature has demonstrated students can successfully complete their placements and meet the AASW practice standards with these variations in place, including the reduction of placement hours (Crisp et al., 2021; Morley & Clarke, 2020; Zuchowski, Collingwood et al, 2021).

While the AASW Covid-19 parameters were necessary to maintain social work field education programs during the pandemic, social work field education academics are calling for more action, including a major revision of current requirements, and action on reducing placement hours, increased financial support for students, as well as more flexibility in recognised prior learning and work-based placement criteria (Gair & Baglow, 2018; Morley et al., 2023).

### *Academic-led projects*

The AASW's 'Covid-19 Parameter' response mirrored other international accreditation bodies including the USA (CSWE), Canada (CASWE) and England (Social Work England) providing the conditions necessary for some field education programs in Australia and internationally to develop university led placement opportunities, supervised by academic staff (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Crocetto, 2021; Zuchowski, Collingwood et al 2021).

This was to allow for continuation of field education opportunities in times of lockdown, where agencies were closed and operating remotely. For example, Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020), in their Canadian field education program provided a “self-directed field practicum”, including on-line learning and volunteering at various community agencies – supervised by faculty staff. Crocetto (2021), a field education coordinator in the United States of America (USA), provided a range of activities that counted as placement hours, including synchronous skill labs where students learned and demonstrated social work skills, virtual presentations, role-play events, and on-line learning modules. In Australia, Zuchowski et al. (2021a) as well as Morley and Clarke (2020), provide examples of “group-work, project focused, university-based placements”, based in Queensland universities where the impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns were minimal in comparison to Victoria. Zuchowski et al. (2021), provide the example of a Community Connector Project involving 20 students supervised by the field education team and contributing to research projects.

Field education programs have also trialed opportunities for students to engage in simulation of key social work skills, developed and facilitated by university staff (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Jefferies et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021; Tortorelli et al., 2021). For example, Mitchell et al. (2021) in the USA incorporated simulated clinical interactions following the cessation of student placements at a major cancer centre. Other field education providers included a combination of simulated clinical practice, on-line modules, and some direct practice experience (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Crisp et al., 2021). Clinical-skill-based simulations are outlined by Jefferies et al. (2021) in a literature review of virtual simulations, which suggests simulated skill-based activities may have great potential as part of, or in preparation for, field education placements.

### *Innovation with industry*

While some field education programs were able to demonstrate success with adapted placement models through academic-led placements, others collaborated with industry partners (Jaquiere et al., 2021; De Fries et al., 2021; O’Rourke et al., 2020, Windisch & Cunningham, 2022). Social work field education programs building reciprocal and enduring relationships with industry partners has long been viewed as essential in providing quality field experiences for students (Egan et al., 2018). The Covid-19 pandemic has further illustrated the importance of university–industry partnerships, specifically in times of crisis. Recent social work field education literature has detailed how collaborative university-industry relationships allowed for innovation to occur resulting in the sustainability of placements throughout the pandemic (De Fries et al., 2021; Beesley & Devonald, 2020; Drolet et al, 2020;; Jaquiere et al., 2020, Sarbu & Unwin, 2021).

Reflecting on their work as field education academics, Jaquiere et al. (2021), provided an example of the importance of university–industry partnerships. The authors stated their industry partners were integral to their capacity to offer a field education program throughout the pandemic. The authors noted it was the long-standing relationships with their partners that laid the foundation for collaboration, and the willingness to be solution-focused and to trial different ways of working.

As Jaquier et al. (2021) stated, “I learnt during this time of crisis, that our social work community partners ‘come through’” (p. 66). The authors explained it is the reciprocal nature of these partnerships that help to sustain placements in a crisis, students obtaining transformational learning experiences while having a positive impact on agencies and local communities (Jaquier et al., 2021).

Another example of an innovative university–industry placement models during Covid-19 pandemic was the partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Australian Red Cross (Crisp et al., 2021). Responding to a gap in professional staff’s capacity to undertake wellbeing checks with community members impacted by Covid-19 and bushfires, student placements were created resulting in over 6000 calls to vulnerable community members, connecting them with medical and food supplies and providing psychosocial support.

The following section reports on the experience of our field education team, based at RMIT in Melbourne, Victoria, during the first two years of the pandemic.

## **Our field education team’s experience**

### *Phase One, 2020*

The field education team started 2020 with a placement surplus, which was reflective of our well-established industry links. Overall, we had 117 students on placement by mid-March 2020 when the Victorian state government declared a state of emergency in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. State-mandated restrictions including stay-at-home orders which severely impacted industry partners’ capacity to offer onsite services and therefore on-site student placements. Both the university and our industry partners had to quickly navigate the adaption of services, processes and programs, as well as placements, in a crisis context not experienced previously. For our industry partners, the priority was on maintaining an alternative service delivery to the community’s most vulnerable members. For our university social work field education team, the priority was to ensure student safety and wellbeing, navigate the university’s internal decision-making processes, and to provide frequent communication with all key stakeholders including our industry partners. In semester one (February to June 2020), onsite placements ceased as per university directives and transferred to remote placements focusing on online client work, projects and research. Semester two (July to December) placements were provided entirely online. Overall, 305 students were placed in 2020 and completed their placements successfully. Table 2 provides an overview of the 2020 student numbers, program, supervision and placement types.

**Table 2***2020 Social Work Placements at the University*

Placement Program, Supervision and Mode	Number of Students
Total Number of Placements in 2020	305
Master of Social Work	117
Bachelor of Social Work	188
Field Education 1 (1st Placement)	156
Field Education 2 (2nd Placement)	149
Onsite Supervision	156
Offsite Supervision/Liaison	151
Face-to-face placement	17
Remote, home-based placement	247
Hybrid – combination of face-to-face and remote placement	18
Internal University Projects.	10

Source: Windisch & Cunningham (2022).

*Phase Two: 2021*

Melbourne in 2021 again experienced the highest level of COVID cases and lockdown days in Australia (see Table 1). The experience gained in 2020 through providing field education during the pandemic was instrumental in rapid and targeted ways to the frequent changes in state-mandated restrictions that continued to impact on student placements.

**Table 3***2021 University Field Education Placements*

Placement Program, Supervision and Mode	Number of Students
Total Number of Placements in 2021	400
Master of Social Work	207
Bachelor of Social Work	193
Field Education 1 (1st Placement)	216
Field Education 2 (2nd Placement)	184
Onsite Supervision	206
Offsite Supervision/Liaison	199
Face-to-face placement	197
Remote, home-based placement	33
Hybrid – combination of face-to-face and remote placement.	197
Internal University Projects.	6

Source: Windisch & Cunningham (2022).

The year 2021 saw some shifts, with a 23% increase in the number of placements required and over 90% students returning to some onsite experience.

### **Facilitators to success**

There were key elements that allowed the continuation of placements over the two years reported in this article. These were our established partnerships with industry; our embedded External Field Educator/ Field Education Liaison Officer model of supervision and the generous commitment of students and staff during his period. Each element will be examined.

#### *1. Partnerships with industry*

The relationships with our industry partners are based on reciprocal respect and goodwill, which was critically important in enabling a collaborative approach to transitioning to changed placement models including online work (Egan et al., 2018; Egan et al., 2021). Some illustrations of these are detailed below:

Afri-Aus Care is a community organisation based in the south-east of Melbourne and providing a range of support services to African-Australian young people and their families. Afri-Aus Care and the field education team worked together to create an online case work service to the community; this was a complex task given the culturally diverse client group. However, with the support of Afri-Aus Care staff and external social work supervision provided by the university, a culturally and trauma-informed online case work model was implemented and provided much needed support to community members (Gondoza-Luka 2022).

Australian Filipino Community Services (AFCS) is a community organisation based in Melbourne providing welfare services and community care to disadvantaged members of the Filipino and other diverse communities. AFCS were also required to adapt their face-to-face services to the online environment, including student placements. Students on placement with AFCS undertook a number of tasks including wellbeing calls to clients who were isolated from supports through extended lockdowns, updated organisation procedures and Covid-safe plans, utilised Facebook messenger for senior community members to connect and support each other, delivered essential goods to seniors, assisted in developing and facilitating online physical exercise, art, singing and story-telling programs. This alternative placement model had significant reciprocal benefits for both students (who were provided with rich learning experiences), and AFCS who greatly benefited from students online technical skills and would not have been able to adapt their services online without the support of students (Forteza, 2022).

Thirdly, the university collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission (SHM), a community-based organisation in Melbourne dedicated to alleviating homelessness, poverty and social inclusion is another example of success. SHM and the university developed an alternative placement model that focused on organisational projects that had not been able to be completed due to time constraints. These student project-based tasks were chosen because they were rich learning experiences and held excellent value for SHM.



The projects included:

- developing a resource pack for working with people experiencing hoarding;
- developing a proposal and prototype for a home-based client file;
- reviewing and re-developing a trauma informed care training model;
- contributing to the implementation of a family violence training package in line with legislative requirements;
- developing a position paper on the need for Rainbow Tick accreditation;
- researching the links between homelessness, death and dying; and
- reviewing SHM's Quality Framework (Skerry & Bakos, 2022).

Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate that the field education team was reliant on strong pre-existing relationships with industry partners throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, indicating that out of the 705 placements undertaken in in 2020/21, 689 were hosted by industry partners. There were only 16 internal university placements, which contrasts with other Australian field education programs that were heavily reliant on university-based and academic-led placements for large numbers of their respective student cohorts (Morley & Clarke, 2020; Zuchowski, Collingwood et al, 2021).

## *2. External field educator/field education liaison officer staff*

As described earlier in this paper, the changed ASWEAS enabled students to have an external field educator for more than one placement (AASW, 2020), the field education team found this flexibility critical in sustaining placements as industry partners were under immense workload pressure to maintain their service provision, as well as to provide supervision.

The social work field education team uses an external field educator (EFE)/field education liaison officer (FELO) supervision model when an agency does not have a qualified social work practitioner to undertake this role (Egan et al., 2021). The field education team has a long-standing team of dedicated and experienced permanent and casual staff providing this supervision. This model often involves the dual role of EFE and FELO. Students have suggested this dual role provides excellent peer network opportunities through embedded group supervision activities, as well as quality debriefing and critical reflection opportunities (Egan et al., 2021).

In discussions with the field education team, industry partners reported they had less capacity to provide onsite supervision during the pandemic and required greater provision of the EFE/FELO model of supervision; 151 of the 304 placements in 2020 (Table 2), and 199 of the 400 placements in 2021 (Table 3) required the use of the EFE/FELO model. This is a considerable change to pre-Covid-19, with fewer EFEs being used in 2018 (77 out of 270 placements), and 2019 (124 out of 316 placements). The work of our experienced EFE/FELO team meant the added workload of student placements was shared and supported, undertaking many hours of social work supervision that would have been the responsibility of industry partners.

The group supervision facilitated by the EFE/FELO team was significant, filling some of the gaps in incidental learning that occur in on-site placements and providing connection during isolation and stay-at-home mandates.

### *3. Commitment from students and field education staff*

Without the goodwill and commitment demonstrated by our student cohorts of 2020/21, the provision of field education would not have been possible. It is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on students who were heavily reliant on casualised forms of employment. Financial hardship and health and wellbeing concerns have been key themes for our students. The immediate shift to online learning, social isolation and lack of connectedness compounded inequality and disadvantage (O’Keeffe, Johnson et al., 2022; Morley et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, students rose to the challenge, demonstrating resilience in adapting to placement settings and complexities (Windisch & Cunningham 2022). Students’ technological, social media, and digital literacy were all put to use at agencies that lacked (and needed) these skills to navigate remote and online service delivery (Windisch & Cunningham, 2022). Students’ work with agencies during the pandemic was a reciprocal relationship, both supporting the other in a chaotic and challenging environment (Windisch & Cunningham 2022).

The field education team of this university demonstrated flexibility and resilience that helped to maintain the program during this period. However, the workload as a result of the pandemic has been immense. Ensuring the continuation of student placements, working with industry partners to adapt placements, increased compliance and risk-management processes by the university and government, and providing emotional support and care to students; all took an emotional and physical toll on the field education team (Windisch & Cunningham, 2022). The impacts on the field education team are important to acknowledge, a focus on the wellbeing of university staff in times of crisis is often neglected and should be a priority for academic institutions now and into the future.

## **Discussion**

Our experience of field education during the pandemic highlighted the importance of our relationships with industry and the spirit of reciprocity. It enhanced the quality of our partnerships and, most importantly, allowed for the continuation of placements and contributed to agency and community needs over this period. This experience was different to other universities’ experiences. Crisp et al. (2021) described their universities’ approach to field education in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic: “Nevertheless, each University realised that if we were to mitigate these risks, we needed to reduce our reliance on external partners to provide placements, which led us to question what was possible and under what conditions” (p.1848). Our experience was different – instead we were able to leverage off our strong existing industry partnerships to maintain placements within the field.

Debates about academic-led placements and industry-based placements have been influenced by not only the Covid-19 pandemic, but also a highly competitive field education market (Morley & Clark 2020; O’Keeffe, Haralambous et al., 2022). Prior to the pandemic, sourcing adequate numbers of student placements presented enormous challenges for social work field education providers in Australia, influenced by increasing numbers of social work students and education providers (Egan, Hill & Rollins, 2021). The impact of decades of neoliberalism and structural neglect of social work, health and welfare sectors has also decreased the capacity of education provider organisations to provide adequate resourcing for the provision of student placements (Egan, Hill & Rollins 2021; Morley & Clarke, 2020; Windisch & Cunningham, 2022; Zuchowski et al., 2019; Zuchowski, Cleak et al., 2021).

As a response, various social work field education academics have called for a fundamental rethink of the provision of field education (Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Zuchowski et al, 2019; Morley & Clarke, 2020). Some advocating for an increased focus on simulation, role-plays, self-directed and student-led placements, and academic research placements (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Jefferies et al., 2021; Morley & Clarke, 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Tortorelli et al., 2021; Zuchowski, Collingwood et al., 2021, p. 374, 2021b). For example, Crisp and Hosken (2016), suggested opportunities such as student action-learning projects supervised by university academics could result in collaborative learning spaces, and a focus on the key fundamentals of practising social work. Crisp and Hosken (2016) also suggested field education settings that provide students with confidence and skills for future practice is not about the location – it is the opportunity to learn about social work practice with an emphasis on social change.

Academic-led placements have been invaluable in supporting some field education programs ‘weather the storm’ of Covid-19. Simulations, role plays and student and academic-led projects without industry engagement also offer great potential as pre-placement or complementary placement tasks. However, our position aligns with O’Keeffe, Haralambous et al. (2022), which questions field education without students working within the ‘field’. Our experience mirrors the experiences of other field education academics who illustrated the critical importance of partnerships between university and industry partners to sustain our programs throughout the pandemic (Beesley & Devonald, 2020; De Fries et al., 2021; Jaquierey et al., 2021; Sarbu and Unwin, 2021). It is important to note that we view research, policy and project-based placements as necessary in providing students with a comprehensive suite of placement opportunities that matches the breadth and diversity of social work. However, we also believe these placement types in a practice-based profession such as social work, should be completed in collaboration with, or have direct implications for, industry partners and the communities they work alongside.

Our experience of providing a social work field education program in the midst of a global pandemic has strengthened our resolve to advocate for a reimagining of social work. We agree with Crisp et al. (2021), that the AASW ASWEAS are highly prescriptive and do not match the complex nature of working and undertaking placements within the sector. They also do not adequately reflect the reality of field education providers capacity to provide quality learning experiences to all field education students while attempting to meet outdated accreditation requirements.

Our view is supported by other field education academics who have also called for fundamental changes to AASW requirements (Crisp et al., 2021, Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Morley & Clarke, 2020, Zuchowski et al., 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated what is possible. As described earlier in the paper, the AASW in response to the pandemic approved a raft of changes to field education requirements through the AASW's 'Covid-19 Parameters'. Without these parameters, field education in Australia could not have continued throughout the pandemic. Consideration needs to be given to the 1000 hours of placement time field education students are required to meet – there is no evidence base to suggest this is the optimum time for student learning on placement, and the reduction of up to 100 hours per placement does not appear to have impacted learning outcomes during the pandemic (Morley & Clarke, 2020). The impact on students undertaking 1000 hours of unpaid placements is significant, resulting in financial hardship, increased anxiety and mental health concerns across the student population, and further negatively influences the participation of social work students from disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds (Gair & Baglow, 2018a, 2018b; Hodge et al., 2019; Morley et al., 2023). Consideration also needs to be given to making external field education supervision an option for more than one placement. As detailed in this article, external supervision positively influenced the capacity of our industry partners to provide placements under extreme stress and workload pressures. Our students were provided with quality supervision and support from social workers with decades of industry experience, feedback from students highlighted the quality of supervision, including debriefing and critical reflection opportunities (Egan, David & Williams 2021). The provision of external supervision for more than one placement also provides resource support to industry partners experiencing staff shortages while attempting to manage increasing service provision workloads.

We also agree with our social work academic colleagues that while the AASW 'Covid-19 Parameters' provided necessary flexibility throughout Covid-19, they do not go far enough – instead structural national reform that ensures social work field education does not exacerbate student poverty is essential (Hodge et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2023). Consideration needs to be given to supporting students financially to undertake placement, lobbying for government funding, establishing internships and paid placements need to be a priority, as does making recognised prior learning and work-based placements more accessible via more flexible eligibility criteria (Gair & Baglow, 2018b; Hodge et al., 2021; Johnstone et al., 2016; Morley et al., 2023).

To achieve these changes requires a high level of cross-sectoral advocacy. The social work sector including universities, industry, and students will need to work cohesively and strategically. Our field education team commits to working alongside our social work colleagues to influence this reform.

## Conclusion

This article was a reflection of the RMIT social work field education team, and the strategies we employed to adapt to the challenges of Covid-19 by providing all students with quality placement experiences throughout the pandemic. We were able to do this by leaning on collaborative industry partnerships to develop new placement models that met the changing needs of students and agencies. We argue for the modifications to the ASWEAS which allowed for new models of field education, throughout the crisis of Covid-19, to be maintained. Finally, we suggest that social work field education within Australia needs national reform to respond to the current field education crisis, making placements – and therefore social work degrees – accessible to all students.

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