Developing a Multi-placement Opportunity in a Human Service Agency

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Abstract

The human services sector is under increasing pressure to deliver services to clients, improve social justice outcomes, and host social work students on field placements – all within the limited human, financial, and organisational resources of the agency. This article outlines how a community housing organisation and a university in Queensland collaborated to support social justice outcomes while concurrently meeting the learning needs of social work students on placement. This article, jointly authored by the agency and university, discusses the organic development and goodwill between the field education team and the housing agency to support and shape practice. This collaboration has used Kolb's (1984) learning cycle as a framework to guide the project team reflection and knowledge creation. The team adopted this process of reflection to illustrate the importance of relationship and collaboration in working together to develop goals and meet challenges in field placement and agency demands. The use of collaborative inquiry has also been included to illustrate the development of the working relationship.

Keywords: *Social work; Social work placements; Field education; Supervision*

Introduction

Field education is a core component of social work education. Learning opportunities in the field provide the main avenue for students to develop understanding and experience of how they integrate knowledge and theories in practice. Bogo (2015) stated that the ability of social work students to graduate as ethical and effective social workers is highly dependent on the quality of their field experience. In Australia, students who are enrolled in entry-level professional social work education are required to successfully complete a minimum of 1,000 hours in at least two field education placements (AASW, 2019).

As field education staff, our experience is that universities are facing unprecedented demand for social work placements due to increased student enrolments in entry-level social work programs. The deregulation and marketisation of tertiary education in Australia are key factors contributing to higher student numbers (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Lucas & Vassos, 2019). Included with the challenge of significantly higher numbers is the expectation for increased flexibility in program structures and placement opportunities to support the greater diversity of the student cohort, with a variety of learning needs and personal circumstances such as family and work commitments (Hemy, Boddy, Chee, & Sauvage, 2016), including access and equity issues (Spencer & McDonald, 1998). As the tertiary sector deals with these changes, many human service agencies are simultaneously facing significant fiscal and managerial pressures (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2018) and social workers employed in these agencies must navigate these organisational factors in their professional practice (Hughes & Wearing, 2017). Human service agencies are being asked to offer placement opportunities for students and for social workers employed within agencies to be involved in supervising social work students on placement. Our experience has been that agencies are increasingly faced with having to respond to universities' requests for more placements while, at the same time, meeting service delivery commitments in a climate of funding constraints and limited resources. Together, we have noted that these pressures have reduced the capacity of some agencies to continue to provide field placements because they have fewer resources to commit to hosting and supervising placement students. Equally, the competing demands on social work field educators with high workloads impact on their ability to support a social work placement (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2018).

The capacity to find ways to work together that are mutually beneficial for agencies and universities is paramount in responding to the challenges presented. Emmens (2016) discusses the notion of conscious collaboration to work together for good "that includes both the good of those involved in the conscious process of collaborating as well as the sustained good of those who will be touched by the outcome of the collaboration" (p. 198). Universities' commitment of field education resources can integrate the support of agency practice and the advancement of its cause through student placements. Studies undertaken in New Zealand have also shown how the presence of placement students impact on the agency in positive ways. The most significant positive impacts are: the contribution of enthusiasm and new perspectives; the process of social workers intentionally reflecting on their approaches and processes; assistance with managing workloads; and personal satisfaction (Hay & Brown,

2015; Hay, Dale, & Yeung, 2016). Successful placement models are based on collaboration with industry partners (agencies) to provide targeted field education resources to support the outcomes of an agency while concurrently meeting learning outcomes for social work students on placement (Grise-Owens et al., 2016).

This article discusses one such partnership between a university and a community housing agency in Brisbane to build on the capacity of the agency to host a small group of placement students. The article provides the context for the project, how the project was conceptualised as well as the construction of the project team. It further discusses project outcomes, key learnings and implications for both university and industry partnerships in future collaborations.

The project context

Community housing is a form of social housing where community housing providers (CHPs) are funded to deliver social and affordable housing to households receiving low-to-moderate incomes, at a subsidised rate (Queensland Shelter, 2018). The Institute of Health and Welfare (2018b) data show that, as at June 2017, CHPs managed 16,744 of the 71,331 social housing dwellings in Queensland. Data from June 2019 show that there were 21,242 households, comprising 39,513 people on the Queensland Social Housing Register (Department of Housing and Public Works [DHPW], 2019). Long waitlists are the result of Australia's social housing stock not increasing at the necessary rate to keep up with the need for social housing assistance (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018). The extensive waitlist for social housing in Queensland and the shortage of social housing means properties are allocated to eligible housing applicants with the highest needs (Powell et al., 2019). In most instances, properties are allocated to vulnerable households with multiple and complex needs (Flanagan et al., 2020). In order to successfully maintain these tenancies, appropriate person-centred support is necessary (Flanagan et al., 2020). This is a change to the way housing services in Australia have historically been driven by a focus on capital, property, and tenancy management (DHPW, 2016). The previous role within community housing organisations of a tenancy and property manager has been superseded by a new, broader role that requires skills for working effectively with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in the community.

The Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA Victoria, 2019) developed the Community Housing Workforce Capability Framework to support the community housing sector in future-proofing the sector's workforce. The framework recognises the challenges created by the need for workers within the sector to: source and coordinate support for clients who often have multiple complex needs; keep up with evolving responses to reforms such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme and My Aged Care; and sensitively contending with scrutiny from the broader community around how community housing "should be managed" (CHIA Victoria, 2019). Furthermore, community housing workers need to be adaptable and responsive. The housing needs assessment that is used in Queensland to assess and prioritise applicants on the social housing waitlist is not always sufficient to predict an individual's

support needs prior to an individual being allocated a property (Department of Housing and Public Works [DHPW], 2016).

The university–agency collaboration described in this article comes at a time when the human services sector in Queensland has been impacted with the restructure of Social and Community Services (SACS) Award under the Fair Work Agreement (2011) that legislated wage increases of between 19% and 41% between 2012 and 2020 without any commensurate increase in program funding. For the community housing agency partner involved in this collaboration providing fair pay meant reduced staffing numbers because government funding was insufficient to cover the full cost of the award wage increase. As well, there was an impact on clients – barriers to service delivery due to limiting the scope of practice being delivered. Lucas and Vassos (2019) acknowledged fiscal pressures on the health and human services organisations has impacted on the provision of student field placements.

The project

This collaborative project aimed to develop an approach for a university and a community-based agency to work together to provide placement opportunities to a small group of students, where the agency had previously only ever hosted one social work student during a placement period. The continuing presence of multiple students on placement enabled the agency to integrate social work students to undertake core functions in planning and service delivery.

The organisation is a medium-sized community housing agency based in the outer suburbs of Brisbane. This service was established in 1993 with the aim of making positive difference in the lives of clients and the community by providing quality housing and support services. The beginning discussions for this collaboration started in Trimester 1 of 2019 for student placements to commence in Trimester 2, 2019. Both the university and agency agreed that, with the university's commitment of resources to provide student supervision and university liaison, the agency would offer a cluster of placements, rather than a single placement as per prior arrangements. The result was four student placements being offered to commence the new initiative. As part of this approach, the university and agency were committed to build and sustain this partnership and develop a model that is mutually beneficial to the university and the agency to support student placements and the work of the agency. This commitment and collaboration ensured that a subsequent second cohort of students was provided with placements and they were able to be sustained throughout the vicissitudes of the Covid-19 pandemic; with a third group commencing placement in Trimester 2, 2020.

The arrangement has been successful with grouping up to four students to work together and develop projects consistent with a particular service's goals. As required in accordance with the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (AWEAS) Guidelines (AASW, 2019) the university provides an external supervisor who meets with the students weekly, engaging in alternate weeks with one-on-one supervision and group supervision. The liaison visitor is also a university staff member who provides two meetings with the students and supervisors as well as ongoing support to both supervisors throughout the duration of

the placement. The agency team leader, who is a social worker, also plans, contributes to, and participates in the fortnightly group supervision. The reason for appointing an external social work supervisor was to support the existing workload of the onsite social worker and share the supervision arrangement and responsibility for the students. The final group supervision session is a collaborative approach, with an onsite social work supervisor, external social work supervisor, university liaison visitor, and students coming together to review the placement experience and make suggestions for future placements.

Project team reflection

This article reviews the project team's reflections on the beginning process of setting up the project and the experience of facilitating the first group of four placement students who undertook their placement at the agency. The project team consisted of three university field education staff and one agency staff member. The agency staff was the on-site supervisor for the placement students, while one of the university staff was the external field supervisor; the second was the university liaison staff and the third was a member of the university social work field education team.

The team conducted two face-to-face sessions. The first session took place at the university campus amongst the university project team members. The second session took place at the agency where both the agency and university staff participated in the team reflection. These reflection processes included agency and external field supervisors' experiences of facilitating students learning and students' feedback during their weekly supervision meetings.

The project team made use of a collaborative inquiry process. Hall and Wallace (1993) define collaboration as close mutually supportive working relationships where participants "value this way of working highly enough to commit themselves to it: they choose to engage in joint work to achieve joint goals" (p. 105). The project team was guided by the following principles of collaboration: fostering interdependence, creating new activities in field sites, promoting flexibility in education and field, fostering collective ownership of goals and joint reflection on processes (Bronstein, 2003).

Besides the two face-to-face reflection sessions, the team maintained ongoing discussions and documentation of the project and project outcomes from the conception of this project to the completion of the first group of student placements. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle provided a useful framework to guide the project team reflection and knowledge creation. The team used this process of reflection: reviewing our concrete experience (having the experience); reflective observation (reviewing and reflecting on the experience); abstract conceptualisation (learning from the experience); and active experimentation (experimenting with what has been learned). The first phase of concrete experience involved developing and implementing the multi-student placement approach. The second phase of reflective observation occurred as the placement commenced and progressed and we noted what seemed different about the placement experience compared to single-placement arrangements that we had previously been engaged with. The third phase of abstract conceptualisation occurred as the placement neared

its conclusion and the team began to discuss, review, and develop new ideas for the placement. In the final phase of active experimentation, the multi-student placement has continued with a new group of students and existing onsite and external supervisors introducing the improvements conceptualised in phase three (abstract conceptualisation). The content and key learnings are reported below.

Engaging in a team reflection process, the project team was aware of the respective roles each partner played. The need to be considerate of the views and experiences each brings but, at the same time, to be open to reflecting on challenges and critiquing aspects of the project that could be improved. Students' learning and confidentiality were foremost in the project team's mind.

This article reports on the team's reflection and review of the process and outcomes of this project. The findings and discussion are based on the project team inquiry. While the project team (from their roles as supervisors and university liaison) had good knowledge of students' experience and learning outcomes, the findings nevertheless did not include a similar reflection process with students about their experience of being part of this placement initiative. The findings and outcomes are not meant to be transferable. They were intended to describe the team's process of working together in conceptualising and evaluating this project and to document key learnings that could be helpful to other field educators and field education programs.

Summary of key findings

There were multiple key outcomes of this placement hub. The following section presents key outcomes for the agency, students and the university's field education team. Key outcomes for the agency included the contributions students made to service delivery and the effect that placement students had on agency staff and processes. Key outcomes for students included the opportunity to role model after good practice and engage in inter-professional learning and the integration of students into the agency's operation due to greater presence. Finally, key outcomes for university field education team included developing a clearly defined supervision model, documenting a process of engagement with the agency to develop sustainable field placement opportunities for students.

Outcomes for the agency

The agency benefitted from the students' ability to support the delivery of services and projects the agency was otherwise not able to deliver. The presence of students contributed to agency practice including its services, people, and processes by assisting to expand the services offered, supporting project implementation, providing fresh ideas to the team, and creating the opportunity for staff to have more time to work directly with clients.

Service delivery contributions

Students were able to contribute to service delivery in two key approaches including delivering multiple tenant engagement events and implementing an emergency food pantry. These key agency deliverables would not have been able to be achieved without the students. Due to the number of students, they were able to achieve more, and their impact was amplified, which injected enthusiasm into the agency. The students' contributions to service delivery resulted in a greater respect for the students by staff and management because the students were resourcing the agency, as well as creating a level of confidence within the students' professional development. For example, during placement, the students provided a presentation of the emergency pantry project work to all staff. An outcome of the presentation was a shift in some staff attitudes towards the students to recognise the benefits of the students' work and how the students supported the agency to meet some of its funding performance indicators. The ability to understand the ways that students support the agency also led to linking an honours student to an agency project that was too complex for entry-level placement students. This contribution to resources by students resulted in placement being perceived as a reciprocal and mutually beneficial experience.

People and process contributions

The presence of students in the agency with all their professional enquiry had the added benefit of assisting to raise the knowledge, reflection, and skills of all staff, and increased informal supervision of students by staff (Cleak & Wilson, 2019). Social work students commonly explored the theories, methods, skills, knowledge and frameworks with staff (social work or non-social-work) in the agency, with a subsequent result of staff more clearly articulating their own practice framework. The opportunity to articulate one's practice with students provided staff with the opportunity to consolidate their knowledge, values, and beliefs, thereby making the implicit more explicit, or moving from informal to formal knowledge (Osmond, 2004). As students progressed in their learning, they were able to recognise and articulate the theoretical aspects of the worker's practice (e.g., social justice, equity, or person-centred approaches), which reinforced the meaningfulness of the work that the agency staff, and students were undertaking. Observations by staff members working closely with the students throughout the placement assisted staff to not become desensitised to situations, clients, and systemic issues. For other staff members, seeing students studying and the knowledge, skills, theories and approaches they bring to their practice and the agency, acted as encouragement to the staff's own engagement with professional development.

This development of staff practice was also reflected in the learnings and validation in social work practice for the onsite social worker, who sometimes had felt that social work approaches were not acknowledged in the multi-disciplinary team setting because the social work practice framework (theory, knowledge, and skills) had not always been reflected to the onsite social work supervisor by (non-social-work) staff. This highlighted that some social-work-qualified staff in a multi-disciplinary team may need to be especially mindful of their social work identity and how to engage as social workers in a multidisciplinary practice space. Hosting social work students in the agency raised the level of thinking of the onsite social worker's

professional identity and affirmed their social work practice. Students on placement in an agency can therefore provide a helpful impetus to maintain the connection between theory and practice and can become a form of professional development for the supervisor: as the supervisor supports the students in their practice, this extends the supervisor's own social work practice (Cano, 2020).

Outcomes for students

All students have learning goals and associated activities while on their social work field placement. Key areas for learning include the social work role, ethics and values, organisational processes, social work processes, and student learning and professional development. However, this placement partnership had some unplanned outcomes, which included role modelling and interprofessional learning from students' integration into the agency.

Role modelling and inter-professional learning

The agency employs staff with varying qualifications who perform largely similar roles, providing an opportunity for the students to understand and differentiate the diversity of practitioners' approaches to achieve social justice outcomes. Demonstrating to students the ability that social work and human services is not a "one size fits all" approach, but, rather, is complex and requires inter-professional learning and respect is integral to multidisciplinary teamwork (Bronstein, 2003). The agency acknowledges that its practitioner diversity is an asset and assists students to acknowledge individual practitioner expertise and understands that practitioners from different disciplines can offer valuable input to their learning about practice, and that any one practitioner or discipline can never be expert in every area of practice.

Students' integration into the agency

An unexpected outcome of this multi-student placement approach was how well the students integrated into the agency. Integration was measured by: increase in staff availability to mentor students; the development of a student position description; and success of the combined onsite and external supervision model.

Students were integrated into the agency with an early orientation including the onsite and external social work supervisors and informal team-building activities that provided an outline of goals and projects. Students were encouraged to identify and develop projects in areas that they were most interested in, which encouraged the students to be active learners at the commencement of the placement. This process suggests that engagement by both onsite and the external social work supervisors at the early stages of the placement greatly assisted in creating a collaborative model for the students to witness and experience.

The number of staff members within the agency who naturally took on a mentoring and support role when this was not an agency requirement expectation was far higher than had been expected. Students were appointed an onsite supervisor (a social worker) and a university-appointed external social work supervisor to meet the formal supervision needs

of the students (under the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards; AASW, 2019).

As the placement progressed and students further connected with different staff members who had no formal role in the supervision of their placement, this resulted in more staff taking on mentoring and support roles for the students. A student placement position description was identified as potentially useful by the supervision team and was developed consultatively between the agency staff and the university team as well as the students on placement. This position description is now used to guide the agency in the selection of students, but also to guide the students' learning and understanding of placement-related tasks and the organisational values and goals. It was also a significant step the agency took towards integrating student placements into the operation of the agency by ensuring there were always clear roles, responsibilities, and tasks assigned for current and future students.

Outcomes for the field education team

Clearly defined supervision model

The co-supervision model was useful in this arrangement because it assisted both students and the external supervisor to integrate into the agency and made problem resolution and planning for future placements and supervision easier and more streamlined. The onsite and external supervisors developed clearly defined responsibilities for the duration of the placement which, in our experience, is not always as easy to achieve as it may seem. For example, onsite and external supervisors collaborated and developed a standardised program of group supervision where students identified, developed, and articulated their practice framework. As a component of this collaboration, both supervisors presented their practice frameworks to students, which provided concrete examples of the application of the practice framework. Likewise, students presented their practice frameworks towards the end of placement, which was a useful peer learning process, particularly for first-placement students as they have had limited exposure to practice frameworks due to university program structures. This approach reinforced the importance, relevance and centrality of the practice framework to students' learning, making the assessment of students on placement easier for both supervisors.

Developing sustainable field placement opportunities for students

One of the aims for the field education staff involved in this project was to develop sustainable placement learning opportunities for social work students. The multi-student placement initiative has been a positive experience for both the agency and the university. It provided ongoing placement opportunities from the beginning of the project. Building and maintaining trusting relationships with field partners are essential in providing valuable learning opportunities for students. Supporting our model was the existing relationship with the onsite supervisor and the university. Our approach incorporated elements such as sharing information, demonstrating professionalism, being authentic, rapport building, and co-operation which was identified by Zuchowski (2014) as key to a successful placement and partnerships.

Discussion and implications for university and industry partnerships

A number of themes emerge as important. The first relates to the importance of relationships and collaboration, the second concerns resourcing for university and agency and the third highlights the need for compatibility within the student-agency-supervisor triad.

Building relationships and collaboration

A key learning of this project was the experience of building of a collaborative and supportive relationship between the university and the community housing agency. Collaborative partnerships require that the needs and circumstances of partners are taken into consideration and a commitment by partners to work on common and mutually benefitting goals. Bronstein (2003) indicates that collaboration needs to foster collective ownership of goals. This means partnerships in the field education space need to look at ways where the needs of the university for more placement opportunities and agency's need to meet desired program outcomes can be jointly supported. Good collaboration extends towards developing a genuine interest in supporting the causes and purpose of partners for the greater good (Emmens, 2016) – where the university is committed to supporting the agency's practice and where the agency is committed to supporting the professional learning of placement students.

The findings also show that the culture and leadership of the agency are important contributing factors to successful collaboration. The community housing agency in this project has a culture of promoting a willingness to trial new and untested approaches – in this case, by establishing a student unit and being open to the possibility that this approach could work in providing positive outcomes for the agency and the students. The agency's approach to the partnership was to do what they could to make things happen. Equally, the onsite social work supervisor was willing to "give it a go" and support the process by implementing a co-supervision model. The experience in this project was that the agency was able to identify service delivery needs that they thought could be met by students and, in consultation with the university, explore how this could translate into placement opportunities for a group of students. It is evident that collaboration involves a process of university and agency coming together to create and scope practice possibilities that support the work of the agency as well as meet student learning requirements.

Resourcing field education

The approach to the multi-student placement arrangement has resource implications for both universities and agencies. Appointing an external social work supervisor represents a direct financial cost for universities and may not be logistically possible in all external supervision or hub-style placement arrangements; however, it does reduce the "cost" on agency staff workload which increases the potential for placement prospects (Barton et al., 2005). Because of the increase in students entering the human services sector, there is a need to consider more multi-student placements to rationalise the allocation of resources to placements. An example of managing the allocation of these resources is appointing the same external supervisor to the same agency for each placement block reducing supervisor time for preparation, learning

about the agency, and building relationships with the agency, which is the approach we have taken with our project. Providing alternate weeks of group or individual supervision also reduces time commitments and involving the onsite supervisor in group supervision provides a regular method for maintaining the relationship and engagement between the onsite and external supervisors. Zuchowski (2015) affirms that, through collaborative relationships and clear communication, external supervision arrangements can promote student learning.

Agencies hosting multiple placement students also need to consider if they have enough resources to have a group of social work students undertaking placements with them over the length of a 500-hour placement. In our project experience, the agency assessed staff availability and which staff would work best for which students. The agency also needed to ensure there had adequate space to accommodate a group of students. There was confidence in the following: that the agency could manage the challenges of the students and that the university would support them to manage those challenges; knowledge that students could support one another; the ability to negotiate the projects based on students' capabilities; and knowledge of how the students would be able to contribute to the agency's practice. This latter point is perhaps the most instrumental factor in the agency's willingness to work with the university to host multiple students because the agency was able to envisage the synergy between meeting service delivery goals and providing field placement opportunities. The consideration of the model was assisted by the university's commitment of resources to student supervision and contribution to the agency's practice via its field education program.

A significant learning is that the contribution that students can make to agency service delivery can be quantified, particularly if they deliver specific projects. This is supported by Barton, Bell, and Bowles's (2005) work discussing that the benefits outweigh the costs in placements when students are involved in projects to meet service need. It is helpful if agencies and universities jointly develop a clear plan of the tasks and projects that students can be engaged in so that it is clear what resourcing benefits students offer the agency. This can either be a specific student planning process or be opened to strategic and operational planning processes that may occur annually within organisations. Universities can commit to the allocation of placement students to the agencies and staff resources to supporting the placements in these agencies. This also opens other opportunities to develop more complex projects for students that could be suitable to honours or higher degrees by research students.

Student-agency-supervisor compatibility

Some challenges that arose in the placement environment indicated a need to ensure that students and supervisors are compatible for the multi-student placement arrangement. Bogo, Regehr, Power, and Regehr (2007) explained that field placement is often the context in which issues with students become most obvious. It is therefore vital that the university ensures appropriate structures are in place to support both the agency and the students. To preserve student confidentiality, the issues experienced are not outlined here; however, key factors that were identified as critical to agency-student-supervisor compatibility include:

1. Students to be open and adaptable to alternative placement experiences.

2. Students commence the placement together as one group.

3. The focus of placement is on learning, rather than students having their preferred field of practice accommodated.

4. The development of a student position description in partnership by agency, university, and students provided clear guidance for roles and responsibilities.

5. Clear co-supervision arrangements to build safety for students with both the onsite and external supervisors.

7. Agency staff need to identify issues and intervene early and give positive and critical feedback to students and supervisors and the university support team can offer insight to the agency and student on how to manage challenges.

Addressing some initial challenges provided an opportunity for university–agency reflection and any necessary adjustments to working together. The opportunity to reflect at the point of these initial challenges highlighted the importance for the university and agency to: understand the value of, and engage in, open and honest conversations; value the relationship; and to jointly understand the need to protect and maintain the relationship. Bronstein (2003) stated that attention to the process of working together includes "collaborators thinking and talking about their working relationship and process and incorporating feedback to strengthen collaborative relationships and effectiveness" (p. 302).

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the importance of field education and the ongoing relationships within the human service sector to host student placements. Some of the challenges faced by both the university and the agency have been discussed that highlight the need for collaboration and partnerships to create a supportive relationship that is mutually beneficial. Although, at times, there are competing demands, these relationships have been highlighted as central to meeting the needs of social work education and practice as well as supporting the work of human service agencies. In conclusion, we emphasise the importance of documenting, reviewing, and reflecting as a way of contributing to the growth of a newly developed social work placement hub and more broadly contributing to the knowledge of building stronger collaborative partnerships that support the needs of both tertiary learning and client service provision.

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