

Social Work Practicum Education and the Opportunities and Challenges of External Supervision of Students

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Abstract

Social work education, social work as a profession, social work practitioners and organisations are under strain global, economic, social and political changes and workplace pressures. Globally, the importance place practicum has in preparing social work students for professional practice is acknowledged. Practicum in social work education facilitates the development of practice skills, professional identity and a professional practice framework. As external and internal pressures are increasingly impacting on social work practitioners, organisations and social work education, social work practicums with off-site supervision is becoming more prevalent. At times, practicum with external supervision is considered less desirable than practice learning with 'in house' supervision.

This paper reports on research that explored the experiences of key stakeholders in social work practicums with external supervision and in order to develop practice in this area. A qualitative approach guided in-depth interviews with Australian students, field educators/ practice assessors, task supervisors and university liaison persons about their experiences in practicums with external supervision. A range of themes have emerged, including learning about practicing social work, student focused learning, importance of the learning environment and relationships are key to support learning. The discussion highlights that practicums with external supervision like other social work practice learning opportunities are focused on learning about practicing social work, and that a large part of the discussions of the participants was centered on student focused learning rather than whether the supervision was provided internally or externally. While learning about social work practice is not generally missing from practicums with external supervision, participants recognized that practicums with external supervision impact this learning through the relationships, the learning about social work practice and the learning environment.