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Zuchowski, Ines, Cleak, Helen, Nickson, Amanda, and Spencer, Anna (2019) *A national survey of Australian social work field education programs: innovation with limited capacity*. Australian Social Work, 72 (1) pp. 75-90.

Access to this file is available from:

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Please refer to the original source for the final version of this work:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2018.1511740>

Innovation With Limited Capacities: A National Survey Of Australian Field Education
Programs

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Abstract

Social work field education programs globally are struggling to meet the demands of providing placements and need to consider innovative placement models to meet professional accreditation requirements, and delivering quality field education opportunities for social work students. This paper reports on the qualitative responses of a national survey of Australian social work field education programs, exploring current challenges, innovative responses, recommendations for the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards [ASWEAS] review, hopes for the future, as well as capacity to undertake research. The findings suggest that field education programs use incremental innovation in field education, including collaboration, partnerships and new ways of responding to the changing student body. It is suggested that structural change and resources are needed for innovation to be more than incremental.

Implication Statement

- Social work field education as a distinct pedagogy needs to be supported through evidence based research in order to respond to current pressures
- Collaboration in field education practice and research is valuable, but may be challenged by program competition
- Structural innovation and accepting diversity in models could offer opportunities for social work education

Key Words

Field education; placement models; innovation; collaboration; field education programs

Introduction

Social work field education is an important component of the professional social work program, a distinctive pedagogy (AASW, 2017b) that facilitates students' active engagement in social work practice and promotes the connection between academic and practice learning (Bellinger, 2010). Field education is a critical transition point towards professional social work practice (Patford, 2000; Robbins, Regan, Williams, J.Smyth, & Bogo, 2016), and needs to provide a learning environment that facilitates the acquisition of skills, knowledge and values in preparation for competent practice in the social work profession (Cleak, Roulston, & Vreugdenhil, 2016). In the US it is recognised as the signature pedagogy of social work education (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010).

However, emerging research and anecdotal evidence suggest that field education programs globally and in Australia are finding it progressively more difficult to provide the required number of placements, with increasing student numbers and human service organisations and practitioners becoming more pressurised and less able to provide placements (Kalliath, Hughes, & Newcombe, 2012; Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett, & Diamandi, 2014). As a result, field education programs need to become more creative and consider innovative placement models while meeting the requirements of the professional accreditation body, and delivering quality field education opportunities for social work students. This paper presents finding from a national field education survey that the authors conducted in 2015-2016 in Australia. The particular focus of this paper is the qualitative responses of the field education programs about challenges experienced, innovative responses applied, hopes for the future, recommendations to the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards [ASWEAS] review and ideas as well as capacity for research. The discussion examines the challenges, innovation in placement creation and supervision models and research capacities identified by the field education programs.

Background

Field education is a collaborative effort between the profession, the agency, the university and the student (AASW, 2017b). Traditionally field education has developed as an apprenticeship model, with the student shadowing and learning from the experienced social worker who takes on the role of the field educator (Barretti, 2007). The professional accreditation body in Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], highlights the important role of the social work field educator in guiding the learning of the social work student and their growth into the profession (AASW, 2012, 2017b). Their role is complex and includes various functions, such as coaching, supervising, educating, role-modelling and assessing (Hay, Dale, & Yeung, 2016). However, current neoliberal contexts create many challenges for the field educator to undertake these tasks (Zuchowski et al., 2014). These include increased workloads, complex caseloads and accountability requirements (Kalliath et al., 2012). Other policy trends result in less funding for non-Government organisations (Chenoweth, 2012). These contexts and pressures limit the availability of social workers to supervise and support students and could compromise good supervision and the development of work-ready graduates (Kalliath et al., 2012). Furthermore, pressures on the workforce and challenging contexts for students, organisations and tertiary education institutions make the support of student placements difficult (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Hay et al., 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2014).

Higher education Australia is a valuable commodity, and the Grattan Report on Higher Education highlights a significant increase in domestic and international students (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). Social work field education programs face competition from an increasing number of social work education providers, but also from a growing number of allied professions who are competing for placements and practice in similar settings (Noble & Sullivan, 2009). Current contexts such as ‘...a sea of competition for placements...’

(Hanlen, 2011, p. 234) can mean a late start of placement or a ‘last minute rush’ for field education opportunities (Torry, Furness, & Wilkinson, 2005, p. 33).

Consequently, many field education programs struggle to place social work students in placements, particularly within settings where there are social workers on site (Hosken et al., 2016; Jones-Mutton, Short, Bidgood, & Jones, 2015). At times emerging placement models that vary from the traditional model of one on one supervision with a qualified social worker in the organisation can be viewed as less desirable or last resort (Cleak, Hawkins, & Hess, 2000; Zuchowski, 2011). Yet, changes in social work practice and employment opportunities, and the potential for growth of the profession and student support can call for further flexibility and innovation in the provision of field education opportunities (Cleak et al., 2000; Zuchowski, 2011). Key components of innovation in field education include a commitment to creatively, active construction and maintenance of connections between key players, egalitarian adult learning relationships, and providing learning experiences steeped in organisational and professional contexts (Cleak et al., 2000)

The lack of available placements can be exacerbated in regional and remote settings (Jones-Mutton et al., 2015). Other pressures are added when policies, practices or procedures change, such as introduction of paying supervisors for placements (Hosken et al., 2016) or an increase in the intake of international students (Zuchowski et al., 2014). International students can often be difficult to place, with agencies keen to take on work-ready students (Hanlen, 2011) and feeling ill-prepared to supervise international students (Harrison & Ip, 2013).

To meet these challenges, field education programs across Australia are developing strategies to establish new placement models and collaborate with various partners in providing field education. It is not surprising that social work educators are open to and facilitating practical collaboration to ensure quality placement experiences for students, as

cooperative endeavours are core to social work practice (Carnwell & Carson, 2009).

Collaboration in social work is about working collectively, including collaborative decision making, advocacy and sharing information, facilitating a capacity for responsiveness to current issues and sustainable change (Weeks, 2003).

Alternative placement (or supervision) models that have been developed to respond to these challenges have attracted increasing research interest. Recent research to assess their ability to replace the traditional models of teaching and learning in field education include the advantages and problems of placements with external supervision (Cleak et al., 2016; Cleak & Smith, 2012; Jones-Mutton et al., 2015; Maynard, Mertz, & Fortune, 2015; Zuchowski, 2015), inter-professional placements (Gallagher & Lewis, 2016), rotational based placement models (Gough & Wilks, 2012; Hosken et al., 2016; Vassos & Connolly, 2014) and group or shared supervision arrangements (Bogo, Globerman, & Sussman, 2004; Cleak et al., 2016; Cleak & Smith, 2012). Additionally, there is research interest in exploring the design of placement experiences, pre-placement preparation and supervision models for specific groups of students that could benefit from tailored placement and or extra support. Research, for examples, about better placement models to suit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Gair, Miles, Savage, & Zuchowski, 2015) and international students (Harrison & Ip, 2013; Zuchowski et al., 2014) is emerging. The AASW provides some guidelines for supporting alternative placement models in field education; however, to ensure quality educational standards are maintained also places limitations around the use of placements with external supervision, work-based placements or the provision of credit for recognition of prior learning (AASW, 2012, 2017b).

Collaboration between field based supervisors and universities is a key component in setting up alternative placements models successfully, such as placements with external supervision (Jones-Mutton et al., 2015; Zuchowski, 2014). Stronger collaboration is also

emerging between groups of universities and universities and agencies. For instance, the two universities in South Australia work jointly with the State Education department to build capacity in the number of placements with external supervision in school settings (Drake, Pillay, & Diamandi, 2016). These universities collaborate to provide field educator training, placement orientation, preparation and support and employment of field educators with relevant work experiences (Drake et al., 2016). In Queensland, at least one university provides placements collaboratively with other disciplines, such as pharmacy and allied health, within a University Health Clinic (Gallagher & Lewis, 2016). Responding to shortages of placements and the health workforce in regional Australia, Hosken et al. (2016) describe a rotational placement model provided through a collaborative partnership between a Victorian university and public health social workers. In Victoria, long-term collaboration of social work field education programs through the Combined School of Social Work has led to the development of the Common Assessment Tool for assessing students' learning in field education (Cleak, Hawkins, Laughton, & Williams, 2014).

Innovation is high on the Australian Government agenda and the National Innovation and Science Agenda calls for innovation in every sector in the economy (Australian Government, 2016). What does this mean for social work education? Innovation can be incremental, break-through or radical (Davila, Epstein, & Shelton, 2013). Incremental innovation is making small, but valuable improvements to systems, breakthrough innovation is making substantial change, often requiring change in more than one system, and radical innovation is making fundamental change to systems and their environments (Davila et al., 2013). Innovation can thus be about substantially or even radically changing what is being done, but it can also be about the application of existing concepts and ideas to changing or different contexts (Stringfellow, 2016). This can fit with the idea of developing creative

placement models that are responsive to the changing field education paradigms (Cleak et al., 2000).

The literature highlights that field education is under strain, and that it can be difficult to find sufficient placements for social work students that are well supported for the growth of the students into the profession. To date, however, there is no coherent overview of the state of field education in Australia. Therefore, the authors collaborated to undertake a National Field education Survey. The overall research question posed was: how is field education delivered in Australia and what do field education social work programs across Australia identify as challenges in field education and what are the innovative responses that have emerged? This paper reports on the qualitative responses of the survey, exploring current challenges, innovative responses, recommendations for the ASWEAS review, hopes for the future, and ideas for as well as their capacity to undertake research.

Methodology

In 2016 the authors undertook a survey with the field education programs of the 30 Australian universities that offer multiple undergraduate and post-graduate social work degrees accredited by the AASW. Some of these field education programs were also supporting placements for Human Services type degrees. The aim of this National Field Education Survey was to provide a snapshot of Australian Field Education programs provided by accredited social work courses. An online survey using Qualtrics, a mixed method instrument for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data was conducted. Human ethics was granted by [name of university] for this research.

A survey link was sent to the field education coordinators or managers of the then 30 programs. 24 of the 30 field education coordinators completed the survey. Some commented

that this was a done in a collaborative process with other field education staff. The respondent universities included one or more universities in each state.

This paper reports the qualitative responses to the survey in order to explore the field education programs' responses to identified issues and the future developments they are hoping for. The qualitative questions explored changes in field education, challenges of, innovative responses to and hopes for field education, and ideas and capacity for further research. The format for the qualitative questions was open ended, thus included questions such as "What is your capacity and/ or interest in undertaking research. Data were analysed according to the methodology described by Creswell (2009). Firstly, the open-ended answers were read through by the researchers independently and coded line by line and then grouped into categories. Researchers then met to compare and refine codes and discuss the emerging higher level themes (selective coding). Inconsistencies were resolved through team discussion.

Limitation

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, while there was a strong response rate with at least one program participating from each state, six of the 30 universities who offer accredited social work program in Australia did not complete the survey. Second, common to all surveys, while the survey tool was carefully crafted around the aims of the study and the literature review, matters raised in the survey could not be explored in depth or clarified by the researchers.

Findings

The findings outline four main themes extrapolated from the data analysis: 'challenges identified in field education', 'responsive accreditation standards in current contexts', 'innovation for emerging issues', and 'research keen, but limited capacity'. The

overall findings highlight a lack of capacity and resources, yet desires and attempts to innovate.

Challenges Identified In Field Education

Identified challenges included the availability of qualified supervisors, the changing nature of the student cohort as well as high workloads and inadequate resourcing. Of the 18 respondents to the question ‘What challenges is your field education unit currently facing in regards to placement and student support?’ 50% commented on issues related to placement and supervisor availability. Respondents, for example, highlighted the lack of available supervisors and placements in the following manner:

‘Decline in agencies with social work supervisors’ FEU 18

‘Finding enough placements for students especially in southern cities’ FEU 19

‘Competing against other universities with greater resources and MOU arrangements with agencies that effectively ‘lock out’ other universities and students, particularly in the area of paid clinical placements’ FEU 11

Eight of the respondents outlined challenges in field education relating to the student cohort. They raised a number of issues relating to health, mental health and disability, students’ academic literacy and students’ expectations. Five field education programs particularly referred to the extra support needs of international students when outlining challenges in field education; one field education program, for instance, outlined:

‘International students require a lot more support than we are able to give them and so we rely on field educators. This can cause a number of problems on placement. It is not only our international students but also students from a CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] background (refugees). The biggest hurdle is language,

followed by lack of understanding of welfare state and confidence of the students.'

FEU 24

Workload and resourcing issues included lack of administrative resources and systems, competition for resources, and limited budgets. Five of field education programs pointed to high workloads, including linking workload issues and student capacity:

'Excessive workload and capacity to manage increased number of students at risk'

FEU 4

Responsive Accreditation Standards In Current Contexts

Respondents were asked what they thought should be changed or maintained in the AASW (2012) Australian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards [ASWEAS]. These standards are a key guiding document for field education programs. 18 respondents completed this question. Five of the responses suggested more clarity about current requirements was needed:

'Clearer ASWEAS guidelines that will assist social work programs to argue for better resourcing to meet accreditation standards and greater flexibility in supervision guidelines - an evidence-base for the guidelines (e.g. why 1,000 hours?)' FEU11

However, equally there were responses that suggested that the current ASWEAS were too prescriptive, that there should be greater flexibility in the provision of field education and the current placement models that are not sustainable. One university field education program, for example, highlighted that the:

'Supervision model is too restrictive in terms of being 1:1 and should include group and other mechanisms for practice learning (eg, reflective practice forums)' FEU10

Comments suggested that the AASW needed to recognise the current crisis in field education. One university field education program suggested that the ASWEAS need to be informed by an

*'Awareness of the resourcing and staffing required to adequately run field education
Awareness of the need to fund external supervision'* FEU18

Innovative Responses To Emerging Issues

A third of the respondents outlined a range of innovative responses to emerging issues in field education. Various field education programs increased placement options through different models of supervision, such as co-supervision and group supervision, and diversifying the range of placements, including investigating private practice as sites for placements, research and program placements and rural placements. Respondents referred to innovative ways of sourcing new placement opportunities, but also ways of better supporting emerging alternative field education models, such as placements with no social workers onsite.

Seven field education programs outlined innovative responses their university was using to respond to field. Collaboration, partnerships and supporting students better were highlighted repeatedly as strategies to increase placement options and diversifying the range of placement models.

Collaboration emerged as a key strategy to respond to current issues in field education. Responses outlined included *'joint planning work with other programs'* (FEU2), establishing placements hubs, strong practice relationships and collaboration via a newly established national field education network. Five field education programs outlined collaborations with other universities.

Four field education programs highlighted innovative responses in working with industry partners. The importance of this is summarised by the following comment:

'Development of strong working relationships with social workers and other human service providers that will translate into strong field education interest and placement

offers. We are in a reasonably strong position to do so but we are a very small program.' (FEU6)

Some of the approaches outlined were targeted specifically at supporting specific groups of students better. Strategies included panels for sharing decisions about complex student placements, exploring student withdrawals, contracting social work staff that have relevant culture backgrounds or relevant experience to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and establishing networks for MSW (Qualifying) students.

However, one field education program responded to the question 'Are you able to identify innovative responses your university is using to respond to field education matters?' by stating

'yes but not disclosing' (FEU4) which is likely a reflection of the competitive nature of finding placements.

Research Keen, But Limited Capacity

Research is key to exploring solutions for challenges, providing explanation or seeking evidence. Seventeen of the respondents outlined ideas for further research in the survey, showing an interest in advancing field education with evidence. A range of topics for research were presented, including assessment and readiness for placement, sourcing placements, international students, student learning and placement models. Overall, however, field education programs indicated they had limited capacity to undertake the research themselves.

The most prominent topic identified for research was research on assessment and competence and student's readiness to practice. Field education programs were keen to explore

‘Greater clarity about what is being assessed in FE placements, what is the desired level of competence for a 1st year, final year etc.’ FEU8

and

‘Fitness to practice issues’ FEU 16

Field education programs were also interested in exploring how to source placements against a backdrop of increased student numbers, placements in new or innovative areas and the requirements of placements. Placement and supervision models were also seen as useful topics for exploration and a number of specific ideas were presented, such as student placements in residential aged care and the experience of students in placements with external supervision.

Some research ideas proposed considered student learning and needs. Four field education programs wanted more research on placements for international students, including international students and field education best practice. Some suggested explorations of working with students from diverse backgrounds.

Respondents to the research question were asked about their capacity to undertake research; 2 of the 17 respondents indicated they had capacity, 2 indicated that they had some, 9 indicated that they had limited capacity and 4 responded that they had no capacity at all. Thus the great majority of respondents indicated that they had no or limited capacity to undertake research.

‘in some respect limited as FE staff have been directed not to lead any research. We can contribute to research of academic staff but unless FE is a key area of research this is unlikely to happen.’ FEU 20

“limited but we are keen to continue and work in this space” FEU 15

Discussion

The findings from this survey as well as emerging research (Drake et al., 2016; Gallagher & Lewis, 2016; Hosken et al., 2016) show social work field education programs are using collaboration with universities and organisations as innovation to respond to current pressures. The type of activities suggest that field education programs use incremental innovation, including collaboration, partnerships and new ways of responding to the changing student body. It is quite possible that this will be further supported by the recent formation of the National Field Education Network (NFEN) whose guiding principles are transparency, collaboration and inclusivity (Rollins et al., 2017). However, it cannot be ignored that field education programs can also sit in the space of competition and ensuring continued collaboration may need to be a proactive and conscious endeavour. How can field education programs collaborate when every placement becomes precious? Hall and Wallace's (1993) early work on collaboration in the eye of competition suggests strategies to bring about collaboration. Some of their ideas included: accessing levels of existing collaborations; establishing the purpose and feasibility of the collaboration; establishing priorities, common goals and resources needed; identifying partners, procedures and ground rules; identifying the powerful and those willing to make the commitment to collaboration; putting safe guards in place and keeping in touch throughout (Hall & Wallace, 1993). However, it is suggested that structural change and resources are needed for innovation to be more than incremental.

For example, the respondents' suggestion for the review to the ASWEAS included reconsidering and exploring some of the prescribed requirements, questioning the 1000 hours requirements and restrictions to modes of supervision. New ASWEAS were launched in August 2017, after a 18months consultation and review process with multiple stakeholders, including National Field Educators Network, (AASW, 2017a), but then withdrawn again to allow for further consultation with stake holders. This new consultation is an opportunity to

advocate for evidence to support any modification or the maintaining of prescribed requirements, such as the required 1000 placement hours.

However, we acknowledge that the review of the standards is influenced by more than the evidence of what might be good practice in field education. Social work as a profession needs to uphold “profile and sustainability of the discipline within the academy, research capacity and the building of the evidence and knowledge base of the discipline” (Connolly, 2017, p. 9) and faces pressures from government on the profession to demonstrate outputs and outcomes (Healy, 2017). It is possible that ground-breaking changes, such as investigation the pedagogical evidence for the required placement hours or trialling alternative placement models, just seemed too difficult or controversial. However, field education is under duress, not just in Australia (Hanlen, 2011; Hosken et al., 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2014), but elsewhere (Torry et al., 2005), and new ways of preparing social work students for practice need to be explored. Thus, while incremental changes are useful to alleviate and respond to pressure, we need to also examine new ideas.

The US and the UK are leading some of this exploration, such as the use of simulation to augment social work placement activities (Robbins et al., 2016), how ‘student to student’ learning and feedback could involve more group processes in field education to foster deeper critical thinking (Wayne et al., 2010) and apprentice-style field education programs (Think Ahead, 2018). The Think Ahead program is a fast track route into social work for graduates and provides accelerated learning and practice experience in mental health settings, supporting students with tax free training bursaries in the first year of study, and paid placements in the second year (Think Ahead, 2018). Collaborative scholarship and exploration between field education programs and the AASW could drive more than incremental developments in this area; trialling new models and gathering evidence about their implementation can lead to the development of radical or break-through innovation.

Innovation, experimentation and acceptance of diversities in social work curricula can create new opportunities and respond to changing global contexts (Napier & George, 2001).

While the majority of respondents identified areas for research that would be important and relevant to responding to current challenges in field education, very few saw that they had capacity to undertake or contribute in research. Many staff within field education programs had at best limited capacity, and some were clearly directed not to lead research. Field education is an important academic endeavour of social work education and involvement of field education staff in research would be important to provide the foundation for break-through or radical innovation and ensure there is no ‘... disconnect between the teaching-research nexus and field education’ (Zuchowski et al., 2014, p. 78). It is indeed unfortunate that field education programs overwhelmingly identify that they do not have the time or support to undertake the important research that needs to be undertaken in field education to test new models and practice for field education, and answer questions about good pedagogy to prepare social work students for professional practice. For example, the research interest in fitness for practice, competence and assessment in field education are essential topics that need to be explored further for the professional standing of social work. As the data shows, the majority of staff in field education programs are in academic positions. It would be important that they are encouraged and supported to undertake research that will support social work education and the profession. Some of this could be collaborative endeavours with other academic staff. However, overall, this might require a re-allocation of resources in universities to reward and encourage scholarship and grant writing in field education programs (Wayne et al., 2010).

Innovation in social work education is necessary in order to be part of advances in Australia and elsewhere (Chenoweth, 2016), but also to meet current challenges in field education. Looking at what field education program would like to achieve, develop and

research as relayed in this research, innovation needs to be about capacity building as well as quality. This research highlights that field education programs across Australia work to be innovative and responsive to current context, albeit likely to achieve innovation at an incremental level (Davila et al., 2013). The development of partnerships, new ways of providing field education opportunities through alternative placement models or partnerships are evidencing creative responses of field education programs to deal with shortages of placements. This is not necessarily a new development, though, similar strategies for innovative field education have been explored and implemented in the 1990's (Cleak et al., 2000). Yet, for each of the field education programs these were innovative responses, new approaches, models or strategies they were implementing in order to be innovative in challenging times. Structural change and resources are needed, if innovation is to be more than incremental. Structural changes could involve changes to ASWEAS requirements or a review of a cap on student enrolment numbers or institutional support for field education research. Motivation is a key factor in making innovation happen, and lack of resources, teamwork and knowledge can hinder innovation (Davila, 2007). While this research shows that field education programs are working to be innovative and are considering creative responses to difficult contexts in field education, they are limited to what they can actually achieve. Thus despite identifying many important areas of practice that need to be explored further through research, field education programs have little time or support to actually do this work.

Conclusion

Social work field education in Australia, and globally is under considerable strain to find enough suitable learning opportunities for the increasing number of students. Field education programs are responding to these emerging challenges through innovative strategies such as creative ideas such as collaboration, partnerships and new ways of

responding to the changing student body. For innovation in social work education to be more than incremental, structural change and resources are needed. Break-through or radical change requires collaborative explorations with the AASW and universities. Field education staff are interested in, and identify areas for research, but need institutional support and resources to develop this important academic endeavour further. Some of the topics that should be addressed through future field education research include: fitness for practice, competence and assessment in field education, and the pedagogical evidence base for prescribed field education practice standards.

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