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# **On a Wing and a Prayer! An exploration of students' experiences of external supervision**

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## **Abstract**

Field education is a core component of social work courses globally and has been recognized as providing significant learning opportunities to develop professional practice. Evidence highlights the strong correlation between student satisfaction with their supervisory relationship and their satisfaction with placement, but current practices have resulted in more reliance on placements with a variety of supervisory arrangements, which may be compromising a quality and supportive supervisory relationship.

This paper reports on an Australian online survey of 284 social work students about their experience of supervision, focusing on 119 students who received external supervision. Both quantitative ratings and qualitative comments showed that students generally described their

external supervision as valuable and offered space to reflect critically on practice.

Nevertheless, many felt disadvantaged without a social work presence onsite and not being observed or observing social work practice. Concerns were raised about task supervisors who offered supervision 'on the run' and had limited understanding of social work roles and values. Many students struggled on placement and felt that, once placement was confirmed, they received minimal support from University staff. Findings should alert field education programmes that students require consistent and ongoing involvement.

**Keywords:** student supervision, task supervision, external supervision, practice learning, field education

## **Introduction**

The ability of social work graduates to be prepared for practice relies, in large part, on the effectiveness of their learning experiences in their field placement, being exposed to a range of professional tasks and opportunities to practice and reflect under the supervision of a qualified social worker (Bogo, 2015; Brodie and Williams, 2013). Practice learning is distinguished by a framework of support, teaching and evaluation in the practice setting where students are challenged to develop their capacity for reflective and professional practice (Bogo, 2015; Cleak and Smith, 2012). There is strong evidence of the importance of supervision to provide this learning and support, but the exclusive nature of the relationship means that students from the same cohort can have different learning experiences on placement (Wilson and Flanagan, 2019), so it is important to find out what contributes to the success of placements and maximises learning.

In Australia, there is mounting concern that the delivery of this intensive model of learning is coming under strain, because of the rapidly changing higher education and

human services landscape (Cleak, Roulston and Vreugdenhil, 2016; Cleak and Zuchowski, 2018). These concerns include finding sufficient placements for increasing numbers of social work students, with diminishing resources to support placements and with organisations responding to changing accountabilities, as well as the influence of neoliberal contexts within placement settings (Crisp and Hosken, 2016). These changes are also reflected in field education programmes in other countries, such as Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States (Bellinger, 2010; Regehr, 2013; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014), with statutory organisations, in particular, suggesting that workload pressure limits their ability to provide effective supervision (Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011).

Field education programmes have been responding by using alternative ways to ensure that sufficient placements are available to students. As a result, different supervision models have emerged to replace the traditional one-on-one approach with more reliance on placements with different supervisory arrangements (Wilson, O'Connor, Walsh and Kirby, 2009; Cleak and Zuchowski, 2020). However, there is concern that these models may compromise the supervisory relationship and the quality of the learning tasks that are offered within these models.

This paper reports on a subset of a larger Australian study of social work students' experience of supervisory practices on placement. The data presented outlines students' experiences of their supervisory relationship within a placement model that used external supervisor and an internal task supervisor.

## **Review of the Literature**

The importance of supervision in field education.

The research is clear about the importance of supervision in student satisfaction with their placement experience, but there is less examination of what is it about the content and process of supervision that helps the student learn (Roulston, Cleak and Vreugdenhil, 2018; Brodie and Williams, 2013). Evidence to support the importance of supervisory practice includes a relationship between the use of constructive feedback and observing their field educator and student satisfaction with their placement (Fortune, McCarthy and Abramson, 2001; Fortune, Cavazos and Lee, 2005). Lefevre (2005) found that students valued their field educator's direct teaching and promotion of student's self-reflection, with some students expressing frustration when supervisors did not demonstrate adequate levels of these skills and abilities.

Research undertaken in Australia and Northern Ireland explored what learning activities contributed to social work students' sense of identity and confidence to undertake professional tasks (Smith, Cleak and Vreugdenhil, 2015; Cleak et al., 2016; Roulston et al., 2018). The results showed that students valued regular formal supervision, constructive feedback, observing social workers, and thinking critically about social work values and roles. Students felt disadvantaged in agencies where there were no clear social work presence.

Cleak and Zuchowski (2019) summarised the evidence of what factors contributed to quality learning in field education, using the five features outlined by Bogo (2015) and confirmed that supervision provided students with critical feedback, observing supervisors' practice, and linking theory with practice.

Wilson and Flanagan (2019) asked MSW students in the Republic of Ireland about their perceptions of the tools that assisted their learning as well as their satisfaction with their placement. The findings found that supervision and feedback from practice educators had the biggest impact on their learning and satisfaction with placement. Students agreed, almost

unanimously, that observing social workers was rated as very useful, or useful, and was among the more frequently used tools offered by the placement agency.

### Models of supervision

The changing landscape of the university and industry sectors has necessitated the increasing use of alternative models of providing student supervision in social work field placements. In Australia, external supervision has become the most common alternative model, and occurs when a student is located within an organisation with a task supervisor. The off-site supervision is provided by a qualified field educator located outside the organisation (Zuchowski, Cleak, Nickson and Spencer, 2019). The task supervisor is largely responsible for placement management and day-to-day supervision and the external supervisor is accountable for reflective learning, direct teaching and assessment (Cleak and Wilson, 2018). In most of these placements, there is no social worker employed inside the organisation and the task supervisor is usually from another discipline. A recent Australian survey of field education programmes reported that up to 50% of their students received external supervision or a combination of external and group supervision (Zuchowski et al., 2019). Similar supervision arrangements exist in the United Kingdom but the placement is most likely to have qualified social workers employed within the organisation and the external supervisor, or practice educator, would have completed extensive supervision training (Wilson et al, 2009). One study, undertaken in England in 2009, reported that 27.7 per cent of social work placements utilised off-site supervisors, although this figure has probably increased since then (Curtis, Moriarty and Netten, 2012).

There is growing evidence that external supervision can make a significant and relevant contribution to student learning such as increased objectivity, greater opportunities to link theory and practice, and opening up newer and more creative practice settings (Scholar,

McLaughlin, McCaughan and Coleman, 2014; Zuchowski, 2013). Research has also found that students valued the opportunity to take issues of concern outside the agency, as well as allowing the student time away from the workplace, so that their supervision is solely focused on their professional growth (Zuchowski, 2013).

However, the research of the effectiveness of the external supervision model notes a number of concerns that need to be taken into account. ‘Long-arm’ practice educators have a greater reliance on information provided by third parties and may experience problems in accessing information about students’ performance (Furness and Gilligan, 2004) and students in settings with no social work presence missed important opportunities to listen and observe the role of social work (Lee and Fortune, 2013; Cleak et al., 2016).

Research shows that the supervisory relationship and the model of supervision is pivotal to the students’ satisfaction with their placement, confidence in their skills, and their sense of professional identity. This article presents the findings of a cohort of students who had placements with external supervision and it was focused, in particular, on listening to students’ rating of the quality of supervision and the type and regularity of the supervision they received.

## **Methodology**

The primary aim of that study was to explore students experience with supervision in field education. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in 2019, via a web-based survey. Survey Monkey was used to create the survey tool, which asked both demographic questions and open-ended questions, multiple-choice items and Likert-scale items (Grazino and Raulin, 2013). The questions were developed collaboratively, within the research team,

and based on a careful examination of the research literature and anecdotal data, gathered at professional discussions and meetings (Grazino and Raulin, 2013).

The invitation to participate in the survey was distributed to field education students via the ten Universities that offered a social work degree in the state of Queensland. This included a number of students enrolled in interstate programmes but undertook their placement in Queensland. Both Bachelor of Social Work [BSW] and Masters of Social Work (Professionally Qualifying [MSWPQ]).

The quantitative data collected demographic information, where the placement was undertaken, how supervision was provided, how many supervision sessions were provided and how students rated the quality of supervision, as well as the supervisory relationship. The data from the surveys was summarised and analysed using SPSS (Version 22) to describe the numerical data and determine its significance (Grazino and Raulin, 2013).

The qualitative questions explored students' supervision experience and the relationship with both their external and task supervisors, plus any challenges they faced and in what ways supervision had added to their development as a beginning social worker. The answers to the qualitative questions were analysed thematically, initially by all authors who read the comments separately and then jointly (Grazino and Paulin, 2013). The data was explored to check for recurring patterns and concepts, and to synthesise common themes (Liamputtong, 2020). The suggested themes were explored collaboratively within the research team over a number of meetings and the lead author further refined the themes for further discussion and finalisation. This paper is based on a subsequent analysis of the data of only students who received external supervision during their placement. Data from the cohort of students with internal supervisor were revisited to consider differences between responses of students with external and students with onsite supervision.



The study was approved by the James Cook University's Human Ethics Committee, approval number H7847, and the University of Queensland, clearance number 2019002240, prior to commencement. A Minimisation of Duplication Ethics approval was sought from Southern Cross University and granted, approval number ECN-19-203, before the survey link was sent to students of that university.

The paper will start with a brief summary of some of the characteristics of the participants and some aspects of the supervision arrangements and how this cohort compared with students (n=165) who received on-site supervision from a qualified social worker.

## **Findings**

The findings are divided into three sections. The first section summarizes the main demographic profile of the students who reported that they received external supervision on placement. The findings from the overall data for students who received on-site supervision (n=165) is offered for comparison. The second section reports on students' rating of their experience of supervision, and the final section describes the five themes that emerged from the students' qualitative comments.

### Quantitative findings

In total, 284 (14%) of the 1,998 students completed the survey, of which 42% (n=119) had external supervision.

Eighty seven percent (n=103) of the participants who had external supervision identified as female, 13% (n=15) as male and 1% (n=1) as non-specific. Of the 119 respondents, 15% students (n=18) were international students and 3.4% identified as Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander students (n=4). Thirty eight percent of students (n=45) were 36 years or older, with more than half of students being enrolled in the MSW PQ degree (n=65). These students' characteristics reflect a similar profile to the group who received on-site supervision. The majority of students undertook their placements in major cities with only ten students placed in a rural setting.

Social work students in placements with external supervision were offered less casework and counselling activities and more community development and research, whereas students with on-site supervision had more learning opportunities in direct social work practice. The most common field of practice identified by students who were in placements with external supervision were youth services (18%, n= 22), mental health (10%, n=12), child protection (8%, n=10), homelessness (5%, n=6) and aged care services (5%, n=6). There was only one hospital or health care placement. Forty-two students recorded "Other" as the area of practice, including education (9%, n=11), community work (9%, n=11), refugees/ migrants (3%, n=4) and local council (1%, n=2). When compared with the group who received on-site supervision, more students had placements in child protection (18%, n=28); mental health (15%, n=23), hospitals and health services (15% n=23) and services for children and families (10%, n=15). Very few had placements in youth services (6%, n=9), schools (3%, n=3) community work (4%, n=5) and none had placements in aged care.

The most popular modes of practice during placement for students with external supervision were casework (30%, n=36), then community development (18%, n=22), group work (11%, n=13) counselling (7%, n=8) and research (7%, n=8). Differences with on-site supervision showed that almost half the students practised casework (49%, n=77), followed by counselling (14%, n=22), crisis intervention (9%, n=14), community development and research (4%, n=6).

Participants also reported that most placements (72%) were in the government sector, which is a surprising finding as it is a generally held view that non-traditional placements are situated in non-government settings.

Rating and comments on students' experience of supervision.

This section reports on rating of their experience of supervision, including the quality of their task supervision, external supervision and how often they were observed, or were able to observe social work practice. These findings have been amplified by some qualitative comments.

#### *The variable nature of task supervision*

The majority of students (84%, n= 99) who stated they had an external supervisor reported they were assigned a task supervisor during placement, yet 16% (n= 19) stated they did not have a task supervisor. Students identified that task supervisors had a wide range of qualifications, including human services or community welfare (n=14), psychology (n=10), teaching or guidance officer (n=10), counseling/ family therapy (n=5), occupational therapy/ exercise physiology (n=5), nursing (n=4) or youth work (n=3). Another eight task supervisors had social sciences, community development or childcare qualifications. Sixteen students identified that they were assigned qualified social workers as task supervisors because they did not have the required two years or did not have the time to supervise. Twenty-four of the 99 students who had a task supervisor did not know the professional background of that supervisor or described them with the position description, i.e. 'manager' rather than the profession.

When students were asked about the regularity and pattern of supervision, almost one half of them (n=48) selected that they had supervision 'on the run' with their task supervisor, rather

than scheduled formal supervision sessions and only 17 students reported that supervision only happened in scheduled meeting times.

#### *Experiences of external supervision*

The majority of students (82%, n=97) received supervision from their external supervisor in scheduled meeting times only, and just 3% (n=4) of the students only had supervision 'on the run' with their field educator rather than scheduled formal supervision sessions.

This differentiates this group of students from the overall student cohort, where just over half of students (53%, n=151) received supervision in scheduled meeting times only, and 9% (n=26) of the students had supervision 'on the run' with their field education rather than scheduled formal supervision sessions.

#### *Quality of supervision*

Students were asked to rate the quality of supervision with both their task supervisor and external field educator with a scale from awesome to horrible and numerical ratings in between. One third (33%, n=39) students rated their task supervision as awesome, 6 said horrible and the other third rated them somewhere in between. However, when the qualitative comments were analysed about their experience of supervision with their task supervisor, there were almost equal numbers of positive (n=21) and negative comments (n=22).

*She doesn't know what the role of social worker in an organisation, especially in aged care field. Although she looks friendly and supportive, I have the feeling that she doesn't know how to support students on placement.*

*High level of professional experience and discussions always professional.*

*Chaplain came from a very different knowledge and ethics base and it was often difficult to find common ground with social work practice*

The average rating for the quality of supervision for external supervision was more positive with 65% of students (n=77) of the 118 students rating the supervisor as awesome and only one (0.9%) as horrible. Similarly, when asked to rate the quality of the supervisory relationship, 66% of students (n=78) of the 118 students who answered that question, rated it as awesome and two (2%) as horrible.

### *Observing practice*

Students were asked if their external supervisor was able to observe their practice. Less than one quarter of the 119 students who responded to that question (16%, n=19) answered that they were observed by their field educator and it was largely in informal ways, such as attending the youth camp, or visiting the agency where the student was located. Similarly, only 25% (n=30) were able to observe the practice of their field educator.

For students who had an on-site field educator, 87% (n=136) of students were able to observe the practice of the field educator and 83% (n=129) were observed by their field educator.

*It was challenging not being able to observe a social worker in action, as I think it would have helped me really develop a stronger understanding of social work in-action. However, I had great examples set within the office and have a good understanding of social work.*

*External supervision was excellent and I found it valuable to have someone outside of the agency to talk to and reflect with, I felt we could discuss concerns that I might not have felt comfortable discussing with a supervisor inside the agency. However having an external supervisor made it difficult for him to observe my practice and provide feedback in that regard. He also had a limited knowledge of the agency, which also limited input sometimes.*

This was a recurring theme in this study-that although many students were generally satisfied with their placement, the lack of observation and being observed was seen as detrimental to learning and their social work identity.

### Qualitative Themes

Below are the five major themes that emerged from a summary of all the open-ended questions that asked about students' supervisory relationship, the quality of their supervision as well as their responses to a number of questions about challenges and other placement experiences.

#### *It's not who is providing the supervision but how well they do it*

Students' experience of their supervision with their external supervisor was generally described in positive terms: valuable, supportive and with an appreciation of a space away from the agency to critically reflect on practice. However, there were a number of negative comments which listed their lack of availability, the lack of a social work presence in the agency and the absence of their practice being observed, or observing social work practice. Some reported having no face-to face supervision at all.

There were also more positive than negative comments about the supervisory relationship with the task supervisor, including support and knowledge. However, there were a considerable number of students who reported negative supervision experiences. The most common issues related to task supervisors not being available or being too busy for supervision, not understanding the values and roles of social work and sometimes opposing values.

*I had "catch-ups" with my task-supervisor regularly, and it was mainly situation focused. It was mainly debriefing and analysing different situations. it was never structured or planned.*

These comments from students encapsulate the dilemma.

*The task supervisor assigned by the university did not want to supervise me. She avoided me, would not set up a scheduled supervision time, would not tell my what tasks I should do, or set up how I could receive tasks. My second task supervisor also rarely set up tasks; instead, it was me telling her what the other caseworkers had asked me to do for the week.*

*Yes. It was impossible to get the task supervisor to listen to my requests and then provide meaningful work. In one instance, my daily tasks were making sandwiches for clients, cleaning the kitchen, cleaning up after other sessions had snacks or meals and standing at reception to greet clients.*

Nevertheless, when the task supervisor was available and approachable, the combination of internal and external supervision worked well for students:

*I have learned to identify the theoretical nature of social work and how I am employing these concepts in my practice. I have identified aspects of myself and learned the processes of reflection- something I believe I have achieved mostly on my first prac. My offsite SW supervisor has made me contemplate things, see things in a new light and brought an ease to the whole process. My onsite (teacher) supervisor, has shown me how to juggle many things at once, how to create connections with young people and engage them in learning.*

*Opportunity to know areas I'm doing well and which need improvement. Task supervisor provided constant feedback on my practice. External supervisor assisted in big picture, macro-level concerns I had*

*The best of both worlds or the worst of both worlds*

When asked about how they would describe their supervision, many students reported that they received different things from each of their supervisors. External supervision facilitated the educational aspects of supervision, such as the facilitating a discussion of theories and their reflections about practice (n=34). The task supervisor was able to offer more practical support and informal mentoring.

*I had a fantastic field supervisor - knowledgeable, open and honest which allowed us to build a solid supervisory relationship. Having an external supervisor was beneficial as it allowed me space to explore some issues and topics. I may have been reluctant to otherwise. My task supervisor was also fantastic but had a whole team of staff needing her support so the supervision that I was able to obtain from her was less formal and unstructured but also incredibly valuable... I got the best of both worlds.*

*Task supervisor provided constant feedback on my practice. External supervisor assisted in big picture, macro-level concerns I had.*

*it is beneficial to have both types of supervisors for me, as one present the ways of practice directly in my current task, the other one can link you back to social work and helps me to have a deeper understanding of social work practice and have critical reflection on the incidents.*



However, while both the task supervision and the external supervision could be valuable, for some, there was also the danger that neither was helpful and this happened in a number of placements:

*I was alone for a lot of the time and became extremely depressed. The support available at the organisation was interpersonally connected with the other workers and the organisation itself, which made it difficult to voice concerns or issues. External supervision was impossible due to inability to contact external supervisor, their attitude towards conversation and events, and their dismissal of issues. Further external supervision (via email/call) was also difficult due to inconsistent internet and not knowing the person I was speaking to very well, thus being unable to open up. I began relying on text messages to friend groups within the MSW and my parents. At one point I wanted to leave the placement completely, but due to feeling unable to speak up, I stayed.*

*It was very stressful to feel so torn between the expectations of the university and the expectations of the agency. I felt I never belonged in either and wasn't properly understood or supported by either supervisor. I think I was taken advantage of by the agency and under supported by the university. It felt like an impossible situation.*

*On a wing and a prayer- you are there now so make the best of it*

There was no question specifically asking participants about the role of the University, but there were a large number of pertinent observations in the 'Other Comments' that were important to document and only four participants did not offer some feedback. There was a clear theme that once a placement is confirmed, then it was up to the student to work through any difficulties and they could not rely on the University to support them.

A number of students commented that the University needed to take more care in the selection of supervisors because it was often the case that the task supervisors were neither interested or had the time to supervise students. They also felt that all supervisors, on-site, external or task, need to be trained in how to be a supervisor.

*More support from Uni and the AASW to ensure that supervisors actually want to supervise students and support their growth and development, rather than to meet their own power needs.*

*In the team where I was based, field supervisors do not receive any support or training in how to conduct supervision. It is just assumed that people know how to do it if they want to progress to more senior positions. There was a demonstrable lack of support for new supervisors. My supervisor was pleasant and supportive but had no experience of supervision as developmental or reflective.*

*Appalling. A case of trying to fit a round peg into a square hole. Plus the lack of support and interest from the University people made things worse.*

*I would recommend that my external supervisor should consider either accepting fewer supervisees or retiring from professional supervision altogether, as she always seemed to be behind or running late, and was mostly unhelpful.*

When some of the ‘harrowing’ narratives were read, it was concerning that students did not consider contacting the University or their assigned liaison person who has a responsibility to

offer a mediating and trouble-shooting role for students experiencing problems on placement. Conversely academic staff were conspicuously absent from the placement experience.

*There are four of us placed in a primary school in (name of suburb) that was not prepared and gave us proper space to work and do placement. We were put into a storage room under the drama classroom that shakes and rattles every time the students move. Fans fell off the ceiling many times and dust has covered our air space. I felt that the supervisor we had, she doesn't really aware and have lots of knowledge on the field of social work in school setting. The task supervisor also not knowing what to do and expect from us. We were put in the deep end without a paddle. What a disappointment. I thought I was going to 'develop my practice'. Ha! Words! I wonder about this Degree that I now have; how I could use it, who I could help - skills dormant within ...*

### *Self-advocacy*

Students were asked to describe their supervision experience during placement and to describe any challenges. There were many comments that reflected their frustration with supervision that was problematic and the need for self-advocacy and taking initiative to ensure that learning occurred.

*During nearly half the placement period without social worker-qualified supervision, my student colleagues and I had to advocate very strongly to achieve the required social work supervision.*

*I did not receive task supervision but was active in my participation in getting in and having a go.*

*External supervision was great but my natural behaviour was not witnessed. I learnt little during placement from the workers. I took on initiative and taught myself a lot my supervision sessions were great in a reflective capacity with my social work external supervisor....otherwise...I had to advocate for my own practice with the guidance officers frequently*

#### *The value of supervision amplified*

An unexpected outcome for students learning on placement was their heightened understanding of the value of supervision. Comments from students in response to how ‘supervision added to your development as a beginning social worker’, included their ability to appreciate what good supervision looked like and its importance as they moved from being a student to becoming a professional.

*It was essential and made me realise the importance of supervision.*

*To value social work supervision and now is one of my key elements of my practice framework.*

*was able to experience and then understand the important role of supervision as part of their on-going professional life.*

#### Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, while there was involvement from every State program except one, it may reflect the particular contexts of that State which may limit its ability to generalise to other contexts. Second, common to all surveys, while the survey tool was carefully developed to reflect the literature and other relevant research, other information was explored in depth or clarified by the researchers. Finally, while the researchers were pleased with the engagement of students in answering the questions and

writing detailed responses in the Other Comments sections, they may represent participants who have particular issues to share.

## **Discussion**

Overall satisfaction with placement and supervision is not unusual in social work field education programmes; indeed, all the research cited that asks students about their experience on placement reports a positive response (Fortune, 2001; Cleak and Smith, 2012; Cleak et al., 2016; Regehr, 2013; Brodie and Williams, 2013; Wilson and Flanagan, 2019).

This study, therefore, was more interested in teasing out what contributes to the success of placements and maximises learning through asking how students experienced their supervision and the supervisory relationship. Students' perceptions offer a first-hand and person-centred understanding into their supervisory experiences and the researchers were very pleased with the high number of detailed comments provided in the open-ended questions. Interestingly, we found that students could value their supervision but not have a positive relationship with the supervisor and visa versa.

The types of placements that require external supervision were different to the placements with field educators within the agency. More students were placed in youth services and homelessness services where there were less social work qualified staff employed; whereas hospitals offered a large number of student placements but always with an internal supervisor. Interestingly, the same percentage of students from both models were placed in government child protection services which suggests that they require that some of their placements are supported by external supervision, although they employ qualified social workers. The field of practice showed a different distribution as well with students in placements with external supervision being more likely to undertake community development and research and less likely to engage in casework and counselling. All of social work practice provides valuable learning, but students require learning diversity and this reinforces

the necessity for programmes to adhere to the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) accreditation standards. The standards state that students only have one placement with an external supervisor (AASW, 2012), as this would give students more opportunity to experience direct service delivery modes of case work and counselling.

The pressures on field education programmes to find sufficient placements has necessitated the more frequent use of the external supervision model and recent research suggests that positive learning opportunities can still occur (Zuchowski, 2013; Scholar et al., 2014). The qualitative findings from this study confirm that students valued having time away from the workplace and bringing issues of concern outside of the agency context, but this model relies on the ability and support of the task supervisor. Two points are noteworthy. Firstly, almost one-half of students were unaware of the qualifications of their supervisor or did not think they had a task supervisor, which suggests that their role and contribution to student learning may be seen as superfluous. Secondly, a significant number of students felt disadvantaged by the lack of availability or interest of the task supervisor, resulting in inconsistent supervision sessions. This may be compensated by students receiving more regular, scheduled supervision sessions from the external supervisor, whose role includes scheduling the required number of sessions with the student at the beginning of placement.

Interestingly, there is scant literature on the role of the task supervisor, which may explain the negligible attention that Universities attribute to their contribution to the placement process. The experiences of students in this survey and anecdotal evidence from field education staff suggest that once a placement and external supervisor is arranged, the appointment of a task supervisor was frequently an afterthought and left to the agency to organise, often without adequate consultation, matching for appropriateness, training and considering if they actually wanted to supervise.

Unfortunately, this is not just a concern that was relevant to task supervisors; for some students, external supervisors were also hard to reach, over-worked and were unable to help them troubleshoot on behalf of the student. For a number of students this was coupled with a disappointment that their external supervisor was unable to observe their practice and unable to observe social work practice within the agency. The literature is clear about the link between student satisfaction on placement with being observed, receiving regular feedback on their performance and being able to observe social work role models (Bogo, 2015; Roulston et al., 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2019). Educating social work graduates through practice learning obviously requires students to critically engage with the practice context (Bellinger, 2010) and students confirmed the findings of other research which found that external supervisors ‘struggled’ when they did not understand the context of the student’s experiences (Zuchowski, 2016, p 416).

Fahey (2018) shared her experience of being a task supervisor and advised that it worked best when a good working relationship existed between the task supervisor, the external field educator and the university liaison visitor. Fahey (2014) recommended consideration of the specific tasks required of a task supervisor, whether they had the capacity to complete these tasks and what support can be expected from the university. The qualitative comments strongly suggest that these actions were not often followed by field education programmes, whose behaviour suggested that students should somehow work out how to access their learning opportunities themselves.

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This last theme is of more cause for concern as it relates to the involvement and role of the University. Although the survey did not ask specifically about this aspect of their placement, students gave considerable feedback in the open-ended questions about their experiences. It was clear that many students struggled in their placements and reported feeling unsupported,

confused or stressed, yet they did not consider that their liaison staff member or the University could offer an appropriate intervention. In most instances, students turned to their supervisor but when supervision was the issue, students had to advocate for themselves or endure. This sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement was expressed in a recent study of failing students who described the powerful role of the supervisor and the University and the hierarchical nature of the supervisory relationship (Roulston, Cleak, Nelson and Hayes, 2020). Emerging models of supervisory practices include an anti-oppressive approach that is responsive to structural power dynamics within supervision (Tsui, O'Donoghue, Boddy and Pak, 2017), but students in this study expressed their powerlessness to negotiate with their supervisor or University staff about inadequacies with aspects of their placement.

The gradual erosion of field education standards has been the by-product of the pressure for change coming from shrinking University budgets and increasing enrolments, characteristic of many Australian and international social work education programmes (Cleak and Venville, 2018; Cleak and Zuchowski, 2020; Regehr, 2013). The national survey reported that Universities employed less tenured academic staff to undertake field teaching and liaison roles (Cleak and Zuchowski, 2019) and many programmes were looking for placements in another state or territory in which the university was located. A number of students noted that this approach was unsatisfactory because of the lack of face-to-face external supervision and the inadequacy of technology to replace traditional methods of supervision and liaison.

A last point relates to the opportunities that placements with external supervision can offer. For students, having had two good supervisors with one guiding their practice in the organisation and one helping them make sense of the learning using social work frameworks, offers the best of both worlds and amplifies the learning. Additionally, it could also offer an opportunity for students to present social work models, knowledge and values to non-social workers (Scholar et al. 2014).



The AASW (2012) is clear that when external supervision is organised, the University is required to ensure that “a suitably qualified co–field educator is to be appointed to supervise the student’s day-to-day learning in conjunction with the external social work field educator” (p7). There are no possible short-cuts if quality learning is to be achieved and requires a collaborative effort, well-planned and properly supported by the University. This is summed up well by the former president of the AASW who wrote that ‘Any relaxing of standards needs to be done in the spirit of innovation and to address issues that we have identified as a profession, not for financial gain only for the universities (Craik, 2019, p 129).

## **Conclusion**

Social work education plays a vital role in gatekeeping the profession and has a responsibility to maintain rigorous standards to ensure that graduates are capable and skilled. The use of external supervision to increase placement options in social work field education is becoming more prevalent due to changes within higher education and welfare settings globally and is likely to continue. Researching students’ and supervisors experience of this model is building a clearer picture of the learning challenges and opportunities that can be possible.

These considerations require Universities to invest in sustainable field education models that deliver the required placement quotas without abdicating their obligations to support all of the stakeholders. In this study, social work students asked for supervisors who want to teach and not to be dropped into an agency on a wing and a prayer!

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