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International social work students in field education- Considerations for supervision

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Abstract

There is an increase of international students studying social work in Australia. Undertaking compulsory field work component of social work studies can be particularly complex for international students, as they have to acquire an understanding of social work practice, knowledge and skills in a new cultural context. Prior research has highlighted the importance of supporting students and field educators to ensure successful quality learning experiences for international students in social work field education experiences. This paper reports on a subset of 35 international students who responded to a 2019 field education supervision survey in one Australian state, Queensland. The findings highlight that more international than domestic students are placed in placements with external supervision, that

the overall the student cohort is younger than domestic students and that more international students reported longer supervision sessions. Despite field placements often being personally challenging international students rated their supervision experiences positively, and highlighted the opportunities it provided for support, learning and professional development. Students recognised that the process helped them understand concepts of critical reflection and an appreciation of the value of supervision and professional support for their ongoing professional development.

Key words

Field educations; Placements; International Students; Supervision

Background

International Education

International higher education programs are a rapidly growing industry worldwide and offer access to students in countries lacking the domestic capacity to meet the demand. Students from a wide range of countries but mainly from the Global South, are increasingly seeking degree courses that will be internationally recognised and allow uptake of attractive employment opportunities in other countries (Nash, 2011). In many countries from the Global North, such as the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom earn large profits from international students charging high fees (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Johnstone & Lee, 2014).

Growing recruitment of international students have coincided in recent decades with increasing internationalisation of higher education more generally (Crisp, 2015). Internationalisation is now seen as an aspirational goal, if not a key performance indicator, of many prestigious providers of higher education (Obst & Kuder, 2009). As a result, there has been a proliferation of study tours, exchange programmes and branch campuses originating in

the Global North which aim to broaden the student experience through living and studying in another country and at the same time gaining credit for study abroad at their home institution (Crisp, 2015). Most of the world's more than 2 million international students are self-funded, that is, they and their families pay for their own tertiary education. Students are therefore the largest source of funds for international education and contribute significantly to the provider's wealth (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

International social work education poses challenges with regards to assumptions of universalisation and the transferability of acquired knowledge and skills (Beecher, Reeves, Eggerstsen & Furuto, 2010; Gray & Hetherington, 2013). The curriculum is generally strongly focused on western values and policies, entrenched in cultural values, beliefs and insensitive to different practices (Lough, 2009). For social work practice to be culturally relevant and competent, it must integrate and embrace indigenous practices (Beecher et al., 2010). Of particular concern is the dominance of "westernised social work-related paradigms that dominate indigenous practices and perspectives" (Beecher et al. 2010, 204). International students who had studied social work in the US struggled with transferring western orientated social work perspectives to the local practice context, were unfamiliar with social work policies, laws and contexts in their home countries and with identifying non-western based practices (Beecher, et al. , 2010; Beecher, Eggerstsen, Furuto, & Reeves, 2012; Lough, 2009).

The Australian context

Australia is a leader in this current growth of international education and has the highest international proportion (20.6%) of tertiary degree enrolments of any Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country (OECD, 2010). In Australia, international education contributes significantly to the national economy and with the university sector of Australia is valued at a billion dollars per year (Universities Australia, 2020). International education and migration policies are linked, with the visa available to

graduate international students to work in Australia after they finish studies in identified areas of skills shortages (Department of Home Affairs, 2020).

In 2018-19 the Australian population increased by 239,600 people due to net overseas migration (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2020). The top countries of birth for migrants in Queensland were England and New Zealand, followed by China, India, South Africa and the Philippines. The majority of migrants arriving in Australia were aged between 15 and 34 years old (ABS, 2020). Nearly 30% of the Australian population were born overseas, in Queensland 24% (ABS, 2020).

Social work as a profession is forecast to have long-term growth and shortages of qualified employees due to an ageing population and workforce (Department of Home Affairs, 2020; Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2020). In the period between 2014 and 2019, the number of people employed as social workers in Australia grew by 33%, and the average weekly income of social workers is considered high compared to the overall average income (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2020).

The motivation for international students to study in Australia are manifold and include employment, migration and permanent residency (McCrohon & Nyland, 2018). Other reasons include a desirable physical environment, low university contact hours, alternative teaching styles and less competitive career opportunities (McCrohon & Nyland, 2018). More importantly, the completion of a social work degree in Australia qualifies international students to continue to live and work in Australia after graduation (Ross et al., 2020). Social work is identified as an area of skills shortage and after completing their studies, international students are then eligible to remain in Australia for up to 18 months. The Temporary Graduate Visa is popular with international students who see this as a pathway to migration, as it allows them to extend their stay to gain work experience, improve their English language skills and apply for permanent residency (Department of Home Affairs, 2020; Tan, Rahimi,

Tan, Dan, & Le, 2020). Over 73% of international students graduating from Australian degree courses plan to apply for a Temporary Graduate Visa as it allows them to extend their stay for up to 18 months and then apply for permanent residency (Department of Home Affairs 2020). Similar policies exist in other western countries, Canada for example, providing avenues for international students to move seamlessly from studies to employment and citizenship (Johnstone & Lee, 2014).

Social work field education and international students

Social work students are required to understand professional practice in an Australian context. This requires more than applying the skills, knowledge and ethical practice learnt in the classroom, and necessitates an understanding of the cultural norms and practices of a society (Harrison & Ip, 2013). For international students, acquiring the subtlety of these cultural conventions can be difficult (Harrison & Ip, 2013), as it necessitates the consideration of different cultural expectations, the recognition or misrecognition of experiences and skills across cultures, and English language competencies (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). Exposure to diversity in the classroom, prior to field education, can prepare students for culturally diverse practice in placements (Beecher et al., 2010). International students in placements have been identified as needing extra support due to lack of local knowledge and systems, and language, communication and critical reflection skills (Ross et al., 2020). International students can feel pressured to fully assimilate to the dominant culture of the host country in order to succeed. Yao (2020) found that for international students, assimilation and adaptation were significant factors in the professional identity development at the personal, professional, academic and cultural levels.

There has been a steady increase in the intake of international students into social work programs with some reporting up to 50% of their intake being international students

(Diamandi, Hudson, & Zuchowski, 2018; Harrison & Ip, 2013). This has implication for placements as field education is a major component of the social work education courses. An Australian survey of field education showed a great variation in the number of international students in the social work programs. While the median number of students placed was 8, one program placed more than 100 international students in field education during 2015 (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020).

A review of the available literature reports that international students require extra practice opportunities before placement (Beecher et al., 2010; Diamandi et al., 2018) and more frequent supervision, support and dedicated time than domestic students during their placement (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Zuchowski, Cleak, Nickson & Spencer, 2019; Ross, Tan & Oliaro, 2020). From the international student's point of view, field education can be the most influential factor in cultural adaptation (Battaglia, Flynn & Brown, 2018), but from the agency's perspective, these learning needs result in a reluctance to offer placements to international students (Harrison & Ip, 2013). Some field educators have expressed being unprepared to supervise international students, or they may feel that a student's accent might make the student unsuitable for work in the agency (Battaglia et al., 2018; Harrison & Ip, 2013). Students across disciplines report that they have unequal access to work integrated learning (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2008).

Field educators report that they need to supervise international students differently; in particular, that they need to provide extra encouragement, support and time to international students (Ross, Ta, & Grieve, 2019). Ross et al. (2019) expressed concern that the differences were framed as student deficiencies in terms of culture and language instead of opportunities for professional development and mutual learning. Other reasons why students might not be ready to undertake field education included limited English language skills, lack of contextual social work understanding and lack of driver's licence (Diamandi et al., 2018).

There is also some evidence that support needs, for international students, include more than English-language support (McMahon & Nyland, 2018; Ross et al., 2020). Some international student might need extra orientation, classes and guidance, availability of tailored placement projects and extra tuition during their first placement in order to thrive in field education (Diamandi et al., 2018; Zuchowski et al., 2014). Social work educators need to have effective working relationships with the field to facilitate equitable access to field education (Harrison & Ip, 2013). Importantly, higher education providers need to provide a quality learning experience for international students in field education, and this requires the preparation and support of field educators to supervise students on placement (Harrison & Ip, 2013). At times field educators felt they were not prepared or supported by the higher education provider to supervise international students (Ross et al., 2020). Further coordination, information and clarification about responsibilities and expectations were needed (Ross et al., 2020). Mentoring of and additional support for field educators to support international students can provide additional required support structures for agencies (Zuchowski et al., 2014).

International students have also identified the need to re-learn the basics, and some felt that their cultural, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds restricted their career opportunities (Yao, 2020). This is reflected in supervisors' view, that international students often did not meet the requirements for the future employer pool, despite the extra investment of time (Ross et al., 2020; Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett, & Diamandi, 2014).

The supervisory relationship has always been identified as crucial to student learning on placement and takes on particular importance in promoting competency for international students (Attrill, Lincoln & Mc Allister, 2020; Harrison & Ip, 2013). A supportive supervisory relationship can be a mutual learning experience, and both, students and field educators, can grow and professionally develop in the supervisory relationship (Ross et al.

2019). Useful strategies to help international students to make required cultural adjustments and understanding culture, clients and service delivery, include initial engagement about the students' prior learning and cultural background to identify learning opportunities and mutual intercultural learning (Attrill et al., 2020). Establishing transparent and explicit expectations, step by step modelling, solution focused timely feedback and establishing a positive supervisor relationship aided the facilitation of a valuable field education experience (Attrill et al., 2020)

In summary, the literature suggests that international students are considered to have specific learning needs which makes it harder to place them in social work agencies to undertake placements. This research explores the supervision experience of international students undertaking field placement in one state in Australia.

Methodology

This paper reports on a subset of data from a supervision survey sent to Queensland social work students on placement in 2019. All ten (n=10) Queensland universities with a Queensland campus that offered social work degrees agreed to send an invitation to participate in the research to students undertaking placements. The initial research inquiry had emerged from discussions conducted by the Queensland Field Education Network (QFEN) about whether students receive adequate supervision while on placement. Two of the authors are members of QFEN and collaborated with a third researcher in this research.

Insights from prior research, anecdotal data and literature were used to develop a draft questionnaire collaboratively within the research team (Grazino & Raulin, 2013). QFEN members provided feedback used to refine the survey. QFEN members agreed to support the research by sending the survey to their respective students. The online software Survey Monkey was used to create a survey tool.

Before sending an email invitation to participate in the research to the universities, the survey was amended further after the tool was pilot tested with a placement student and a field education staff member from James Cook University. A survey link was sent to all social work students (n=1,998) who have undertaken a social work placement in 2019 with a Queensland based university. Universities who sent the link to their placement students confirmed that the email had been sent out to students, and provided the total number of students who were enrolled during that period and thus would have received the email.

Survey questions sought demographic questions and students' experiences and opinions about placement supervision, including open ended questions, multiple choice items and Likert-scale items (Grazino & Raulin, 2013). Quantitative questions collected demographic information, where the placement was undertaken (locality, field of practice, method of practice), how supervision was provided (internally, externally, individual, group) and by who, how many supervision sessions were provided, whether any were cancelled and how students rated the quality of supervision, as well as the supervisory relationship. The data from the surveys were summarised and analysed using SPSS (Version 22). The qualitative questions asked students to describe the supervision experience, whether they faced any challenges and in what ways supervision had added to their development as a beginning social worker. The qualitative data were analysed thematically, initially by all authors separately and then jointly (Grazino & Paulin, 2013). Themes were suggested and then explored collaboratively over in a number of research meetings. The lead author further refined the themes for further discussion and finalisation.

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.

Findings

This paper reports on the responses of the international students who participated in the survey exploring students' experiences with supervision in field education. We were interested in exploring this subset of data as international students are reported to have specific learning needs and harder to place in field education. We wanted to find out whether this is reflected in their responses about supervision. Some of the international students' responses are considered in light of the responses of domestic students. The first part of the finding section presents the general demographics of students and placement description. The second part of the findings considers the themes that have been crystallised from the qualitative responses regarding the description of the experience, any challenges and whether students thought that supervision contributed to their professional development.

Student demographics

The overall survey was completed by 284 students, resulting in a 14% response rate of the total number of students who were on placement (Grazino & Raulin, 2013). Of those 284 respondents, 35 (12%) responded that they were international student, one student skipped the question. The findings below relate to the international students.

Seventy-three percent ($n=24$) of the respondents identified as female, 27% ($n=9$) as male and less than 3% ($n=1$) as non-specific. This is different to the overall student data of the 248 non-international students in the overall survey, where 88% of the social work students were female. A greater number of the international student were male (27%) in this sample, in contrast to the overall Australian welfare workforce, where only 13% are men (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019).

Both Bachelor of Social Work [BSW] and Master of Social Work (Professionally Qualifying [MSW]) students responded to the survey; however, the majority of students (89%) were MSW (PQ) students ($n=31$). Overall, 40% ($n=114$) of the students were 36 years or older, with 66 (45%) of the students in the MSW PQ and 48 (35%) of the students in the BSW degree. Less than 3% of the students were 36 and older, in contrast to the non-International students of whom 46% ($n=113$) were 36 years and older.

Details of Placement

The majority of students of the 34 students who answered this question undertook their placements in cities; 21% ($n=7$) in the capital city, 59% ($n=20$) in cities with more than 100,000 people, 18% in regional cities ($n=6$) and 3% ($n=1$) in rural areas. There was a higher percentage of domestic students who undertook placements in regional cities and rural areas (40%), whereas only 21% of the international students undertook placements in regional cities and rural areas.

The most common identified field of practice areas were in child protection, (11%, $n=4$), services for children and families (11%, $n=4$), mental health (11%, $n=4$), disabilities, (9%, $n=3$), youth services (6%, $n=2$), aged care services (6%, $n=2$) and homelessness (6%, $n=2$). Similarly, domestic students were allocated to child protection 14% ($n=35$), mental health (13%, $n=32$), youth services (12%, $n=30$), services for children and their families (6%, $n=15$), women's services (4%, $n=10$), homelessness (3%, $n=8$). The one significant difference was that domestic students also identified that they were allocated in hospital or other government health service (10%, $n=24$).

The majority of placements (63%, $n=22$) were in non-government organisations, which is similar to domestic students (60%, $n=148$). None of the international students

undertook a paid placement. Placements were generally undertaken full-time, with 83% of the students ($n=29$) doing a placement of 32 hours a week or more.

The modes of practice during placement identified by the 34 international students were community work (37%, $n=13$), case work (26%, $n=9$), counselling (11%, $n=4$), crisis intervention and group work (6%, $n=2$ respectively) and program development, management and research (3%, $n=1$ respectively). There is a notable prevalence of community work which is different to the group of 248 domestic students, where the most identified modes of practice during placement were casework (43%, $n=107$), counselling (11%, $n=27$), community development (9%, $n=22$), crisis intervention (7%, $n=17$), group work (6%, $n=14$) and program development (4%, $n=11$).

Supervision

Less than half of the students (46%, $n=16$) had a qualified field educator located in the agency in which they undertook placement and another student had a field educator located in the same organisation but in a different team or service. In 51% ($n=18$) of the placements, the field educator was external to the organisation. This differs to domestic students where fifty-six percent of students ($n=140$) had an on-site supervisor, 3% ($n=8$) a field educator who was located in the same organisation but in a different team or service and 40% ($n=100$) had an external supervisor. Thus, a considerably higher percentage (11%) of the international students than domestic students had placements with external supervision.

The survey explored the lengths of the supervision sessions that students had received during placement. There were more international than domestic students that reported that they had more than 1.5 hours of supervision per week. On average, 39% of the supervision sessions for the international students were 1.-1.5 hours per week, and 21% of the sessions were longer than 1.5 hours. This contrasts with the domestic students, where on average

48.5% of the supervision sessions were 1.5 hours in length and 6.5% of the sessions were longer than 1.5 hours.

Students were asked a number of questions about the supervisory experience during placement. The open-ended questions sought a description of the supervisory experience, any challenges and whether students thought that supervision contributed to their professional development. There were generally similarities between domestic and international students in relation to their responses, with domestic students being a little more critical of problems in the agency, such as lack of learning opportunities or insufficient supervision time. The responses from international students generally gave responses that emphasised the value of supervision as a new experience, highlighting being able to reflect on experiences, feelings and thoughts and to develop reflective skills which they may not have understood or been aware of before.

Critically reflecting and using reflective skills in analysing practice featured often in the international students' responses (n = 13). These have been generally recognised as a very important part of social work practice and supervision while on placement (AASW, 2013; 2014; Cleak & Wilson, 2018). Overall, the comments of both international and domestic students suggest satisfaction and appreciation of supervision and the quality of supervision.

There were four themes prominent in the qualitative data from the international students about supervision: Supervision provides opportunities for support, learning and professional development; being supervised is personally challenging; learning to critically reflect; and supervision and professional support is important for social work practice

Supervision provides opportunities for personal and professional support

International students used the words support and supportive 13 and the words help and helpful 17 times in their qualitative comments when referring to their supervisor and

supervision. Students also commented on opportunities that supervision provided for professional growth. Students for example, commented that the supervisory relationship was a ‘massive support to learning, valuable experience’ and ‘It was a wonderful experience and I learn[t] a lot from it which will help in my future social work practice’. Other students’ comments encapsulate the active engagement of them and their supervisor in supervision, and the opportunity supervisor thus provided for professional growth:

It was great for my professional development. It was a safe place for me unto talk about any challenges, questions that I [had]. I got to set the agenda, hence it helped me to be structured. ...My supervisor was approachable and always prepared for the sessions. I was able to communicate and ask questions or guidance through emails even out of supervision sessions.

I enjoyed all supervision sessions and experienced immense growth personally and professionally by participating. It was a good way to get a better understanding of some of the theoretical frameworks.

Being supervised is personally challenging

While supervision was generally related to support and professional growth, 17 students responded in the affirmative when asked whether they experienced challenges in regards to supervision. For some, initially there could be a reluctance to ask for help and support.

Due to my cultural background, to show my weakness was quite [a] challenge

Comments included general concerns also shared by domestic students such as accessing the supervisor or group supervision. Two international students mentioned English language barriers, but a further eight indicated that being supervised and engaging in the process of

supervision could be uneasy, confusing and personally challenging. Students outlines, for example,

Yes, at the beginning of the supervision, felt scared to ask... questions and seeking ... help.

Yes, at the beginning I felt a bit on edge about supervision but slowly grew to love it.

Having group supervision helped a lot as I saw others open up and I felt safe to do so as well.

Yes. I would say, these challenges were mostly help[ing] me to improve. For example, challenged me to think deeper and reflect critically

Learning to critically reflect

International students highlighted that supervision helped them learn about critical reflection and that critical reflective skills can be useful for professional practice:

It has helped me to think critically, be reflective, make sense of theory in practice, be professional by basing my decisions on theories and to be structured in my information recording.

An important element in my professional journey as being a social worker, critical reflection skills on my daily practice and also fill in my knowledge gap.

Supervision and professional support are important for social work practice

The international students shared their understanding of supervision as important for social work practice. They explored this in two way. First students highlighted that supervision

helped them understand social work practice, including the knowledge, skills and values used.

I fully understand now and appreciate the need for supervision in a workplace and especially for a profession like social work where we are working with human beings and then dealing with our own lives and pressures all around us.

[Supervision] always leads me to think about the values we are holding, which drives our practice appropriately and effectively. And remind me the hat of social work we need to put on when working. It also like a resource[s] for me to ask when I do not understand.

I learnt new knowledge and skills that I was not able to learn from my direct practice with clients, but from my supervisor's experience. It gave me a sense of securities and helped me to prepare if any similar issues arise in my future practice.

Second, students shared how they now appreciated the value of supervision and professional development as a graduate.

I fully understand now and appreciate the need for supervision in a workplace and especially for a profession like social work where we are working with human beings and then dealing with our own lives and pressures all around us. Supervision and debriefing is crucial to the health of a worker, it can have profound impacts on ones, practice, output of service, health and mental health. Supervision is indeed very important.

I learned that supervision is an essential tool for a social work. It reminds me how to critically reflect on myself in terms of social work practice, ethnics, values and professionalism.

It has made me appreciate it more and understand my motivations behind pursuing this career path. I am encouraged to continue to engage in supervision even after I graduate.

Discussion

The scant research of international students generally surveyed academics and field educators and their conclusions suggests that this group are harder to place and require more time and support from supervisors (Diamandi et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2020; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020). These findings confirm what supervisors have been raising that international students do take longer to supervise. However, from the perspective of international students almost all had a positive learning experience and supervision was able to offer them opportunities to attain knowledge and skills and an understanding of what social work practice was about. There were slight differences in the way international and domestic students responded to some of the questions. For example, when considering challenges, international students were reflecting more on their engagement in supervision, whereas domestic students referred primarily to the subject of supervision per se, including supervisor too busy; not enough supervision; and challenges to students brought about by the relationship with the supervisor. Domestic students commented on reflection on practice, in relation to practice in the future, whereas international students were sharing insights about learning to reflect. While international students overall were positive about their supervision experience, 18 domestic students in the overall study did not find great value in supervision.

What differentiated their comments from the domestic students, is that they placed more emphasis on learning about critical reflection, their engagement in supervision and how participating in supervision could be personally challenging. International students appreciated learning about supervision and recognising the value of supervision and professional support for professional practice. These responses fit with the idea that

international students benefit and appreciate the one-on-one attention that social work supervision during placement can provide (McMahon & Nyland, 2018). International students in this study valued the support from supervision, when available from both the external and internal task supervisor. The students responding to this survey had positive experiences with supervision and highlighted the help and support they received. A significant number of them also received longer supervision sessions. This finding, linked to finding that the focus of international students were learning to stretch themselves to engage in supervision despite this being personally challenging. Learning about the value of supervision is important, as this provides insights, from the student point of view, as to why supervisors might argue that they supervise international students differently, investing more time and support (Ross, et al., 2019). The extra support and helpful engagement of supervisors could help ease the confusion and ‘unease’ around the expectations for placement, which have been expressed by international students and assisted them in acquiring understanding of cultural norms and understandings (Attrill et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2019).

This study shows that a significantly higher number of international students had placements with external supervision. This could confirm the evidence from Universities that international students are harder to place in placements (Diamandi et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2020) and international students perception that they do not have equal placement access as compared to domestic students (Patrick et al., 2008). Moreover, fewer international students were allocated to a hospital or other government health service, which are major employers of social work graduates in Australia. Overall, this suggests that international students are probably more likely to have placements which offer a different and potentially narrower range of social work experiences. Potentially this can negatively impact their ability to secure social work employment, however it might also impact the development of their professional

identity as a social worker. Beecher et al. (2012) study found that international students who were placed with co-workers who were not social work training and in a non-typical social work setting increased students' difficulty in acquiring understanding of social work theories and terminologies.

While learning in placements with external supervision can offer valuable learning opportunities, these placements need to be carefully set-up and supported (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020). It is important that they are set up with clear learning tasks, structures and relationships, focusing on the students learning needs, rather than setting them up as a last resort (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Zuchowski, 2015). Social work educators need to consider better preparation for international students as well as the field educators and their organisations (Baron & Hartwig, 2020; Diamandi et al., 2018). This would be important, so international students are openly welcomed and supported to grow in any placement in a culturally responsive learning environment. On one hand, supervisors and the field need to be provided with training and support, such as training on cross-cultural supervision, understanding the impact of their own culture on the supervisory relationship, to be able support diverse students in field education (Cleak & Wilson, 2019; Diamandi et al., 2018). On the other hand, students need thorough preparation and support during placement (Diamandi, et al. 2018). If social work education providers are not able to invest in these endeavours, then the intake of international students in Australian social work degrees needs to be questioned.

On a final note, the findings of this research suggest that while international students bring diversity to the human service practice, they are also a younger cohort than the general social work student body and that more of the students are male. There are three implications to consider. First, value of diversity to the human services sector, second, whether and how would the differences in gender, age and ethnicity impact field education and, third, can the

international student offer a rejuvenation of the Australian social welfare workforce.

First, the demographic diversity offered by international students can enrich the social work workforce to practice in a culturally diverse population, such as Australia, where nearly 30% of the population were born overseas, and up to 50% have at least one parent born overseas (ABS, 2020). Students' contributions and their insights can be useful for professional and service development. A purposeful and respectful engagement with and insights from international students can broaden western paradigms and the social work education perspectives (Beecher et al., 2010).

Second, diversity in social work education needs to be explored, named and valued and the inherent power imbalance be recognised from a pedagogical viewpoint (Cleak & Wilson, 2019). Field education is about professional enculturation, yet, mutual learning and widening professional horizons through dialogue, embracing differences in learning and respecting cultural knowledge are important, if, as a profession, we want to address professional imperialism and western domination (Beecher et al., 2010) when working across cultures. If diversity in field education is ignored, and students are dealt with as if there is no difference than they are forced to assume the beliefs of the dominant group or individual (Cleak & Wilson, 2019) and their own indigenous knowledge is neither integrated nor explored, making the transference of knowledge difficult.

Third, while the data from the domestic students suggests that a significant number of graduates entering social work practice will be in a similar age bracket as the overall Australian welfare workforce, the international students potentially offer a rejuvenation of the workforce should they practice social work in Australia after graduation. In 2018 the average age in the human service workforce was 41.2 years (AIHW, 2019) which is a significant proportion of the 55-64-year-olds bracket (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2019; Healy & Lonne, 2010). In 2020, the average age of social workers in Australia is 42 years

(Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2020). However, what needs to be examined is whether the Government policies aimed at meeting the skills shortage in human services through an increased international student intake in social work will be effective (Department of Home Affairs, 2020; Tan et al., 2020). The question will be whether international students will actually work as social workers or whether the social work degree just offers a relatively easy opportunity to get a visa, and that this is the strong motivator to undertake this degree. Further research is needed to explore whether increasing numbers of international social work students will mean that skills shortages in social work are filled upon their graduation.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. First, common to all surveys, information could not be explored in depth or clarified by the researchers. Second, the survey was not designed with specifically exploring international students views on supervision, thus this is a subject of the overall survey and thus only indicative rather than representative. Third, the survey did not explore students' performance and learning outcomes, as such it is only a self-reporting of experiences. Finally, the survey only explored the views of the students and not field educators who may be able to offer different insights.

Conclusion

International students potentially offer a rejuvenation of the workforce should they practice social work in Australia after graduation and contributes to a diverse workforce, which is required to meet the needs of an increasingly multicultural community. However, they need to access the same learning opportunities as domestic students and this survey has highlighted, that a significant higher number of international students have placements with external supervision. This has resource implications, but also needs to be further examined in terms of student learning, equity and access.

The findings of this survey suggest that some international students may indeed have longer supervision sessions than domestic students. International students reported positive supervision experiences in this survey and put emphasis on the support and help they received, the ability to learn about critical reflection and the value of supervision and support for professional practice.

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