Social Work Placement Supervision: A Snapshot of Student Experiences

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Abstract

Supervision is an essential contributor to student learning in social work field education. There has been little exploration to assess the adequacy of supervision during placement in Australia. This paper reports on an online survey undertaken by 284 students who had completed a social work placement in Queensland. The survey explored students' experience of supervision in placements with on-site and off-site supervision, the duration and quality of the supervision sessions and the supervisory relationship as well as how the supervision contributed to their professional growth as social workers.

The findings highlight that, while the majority of students valued the supervisory relationship and the quality of supervision they received, only just over half of the students on placement received the required amount of supervision by a qualified supervisor or were able to be observed by their supervisor as per ASWEAS requirements.

Keywords: *Field education; Placements; Social work supervision; Student supervision; Social work education; Students; Observation*

Background

Field education is an important part of the educational journey towards professional social work practice. Field education has been coined the signature pedagogy (Wayne et al., 2010) and the heart of social work education (Homonoff, 2008). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) designates field education as a distinctive pedagogy where students are socialised into the profession "...through immersion in real practice contexts, while allowing a constructive and reciprocal learning space to develop" (2020, p. 7). Field education is a time of personal and professional growth, facilitating, "... students' personal and interpersonal capabilities: professional behaviour; relational skills; ethical understanding and conduct; and ability to engage with colleagues and in supervision" (Hay et al., 2016, p. 50). Much of this learning is facilitated through critical reflection and supervision (Bogo, 2015; Roulson et al., 2018; Wilson & Flanagan, 2019).

The importance of supervision during placement is encapsulated in the Australian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS), which set the parameters for field education programs, including the qualification and training requirements of field educators (AASW, 2020). They include the provision of a minimum of 1.5 hours of formal supervision with students per full-time week, and that at least half of these supervision sessions need to be on a one-on-one basis (AASW, 2020). The supervisory relationship is the major vehicle that facilitates much of students' learning during placement and adds considerably to the students' development of their professional identity (Ben Shlomo et al., 2012). It is a key factor in "determining the quality of student learning and attitude" (Hosken et al., 2016, p. 83). Students want their field educators to be available to them, supportive, respectful, knowledgeable, able to link theory to practice, help them develop skills for practice and be caring, encouraging and challenging (Baretti, 2009; Bogo, 2015; Parker, 2010). Coohey et al. (2017) found that students rated supervisors' availability and openness as behaviours that facilitated learning on placement. Students also highly value the provision of learning experiences, emotional support, instructions, feedback, being challenged and the encouragement of autonomy in their learning journey. A safe, trusting and supportive supervisory relationship can promote student's safe practice and their professional growth (Egan et al., 2017).

Bogo (2015) emphasises opportunities to observe, receive feedback and debrief in supervision as well as the opportunity for students to experience a positive learning environment, collaborative relationships and opportunities to practise as key elements in quality field education. Accreditation standards require field educators to be able to observe students' direct practice and other demonstrations of knowledge and skills (AASW, 2020). Students may undertake one placement without a social worker on site, but it needs to be supplemented with the appointment of an external social work supervisor who "must obtain regular feedback from the practitioner(s) charged with direct oversight of the student's practice on a day-to-day basis" (AASW, 2020, p. 32). However, it is unclear whether the required level of supervision is always provided. For example, Patford (2000) highlighted over 20 years ago that students were not always able to access supervision during field education.

Recent changes in the health and human service sector and uncertain funding environments have affected supervisors' capacity to offer supervision and support (Rollins et al., 2021). A crisis-driven work environment, workload pressures, staff recruitment and retention issues are influencing supervisors' ability to be available to assist students in integrating their theoretical knowledge to practice (Chinnery & Beddoe, 2011; Domakin, 2013; Hill et al., 2019). A survey of field educators in Victoria found that the lack of backfill for their clinical work impacted on potential supervisors' ability to offer more placement opportunities (Hill et al., 2019).

Neoliberalism has also changed the higher education sector, and for social work education, neoliberalism particularly impacts field education through "the economic imperatives within higher education, constraints in the industry sector and the broader regulatory, social work education environment" (Rollins et al., 2021, p. 3). In the last two decades, the number of universities offering social work programs and consequently the number of students enrolled in field education have risen exponentially around the world (Cleary, 2018). Together, these factors are challenging social work programs to source enough placements with on-site and qualified social work supervisors (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Hay et al., 2016; Hosken et al., 2016; Rollins et al., 2021).

A recent survey of Australian field education programs highlighted that up to 50% of social work students are receiving external supervision in field education (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020). Because of what is known about the value of face-to-face supervision, questions about the quality of students' learning arise when the social work supervision is provided by an external supervisor. Research suggests that students are often less satisfied in placements with off-site supervision (Cleak & Smith 2012; Crisp & Hosken, 2016) and lower placement satisfaction is generally related to students' inability to observe social work practice and having their practice observed. In the UK, the *long arm* model was explored, and the findings suggest that, while students were more satisfied with supervision provided external to the agency, they were dissatisfied with their inability to observe and identify with a social work model of practice (Cleak et al., 2015; Wilson & Flanagan, 2019).

On the other hand, some studies report that student learning in placements with external supervision can provide opportunities to practise a range of skills relevant to social work practice, facilitate skills in interprofessional work, provide distance to reflect and receive supervision by more than one supervisor (Hek, 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Zuchowski 2013). Placing a student in a setting that does not employ social workers can result in students learning to advocate for the profession, articulating the skills and knowledge that underpinned their practice and bringing a new perspective to the new field of practice or organisation (McDavitt et al., 2018). However, it appears that decisions about whether supervision is provided internally or externally are often based on the lack of agencies offering face-to-face supervision rather than the pedagogical value of this model to promote student learning (Zuchowski, 2015).

This review of the literature highlights that the supervisory relationship is key to student learning on placement and offers students significant personal and professional growth and competence (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Egan et al., 2017; Hay et al., 2016; Hosken et al., 2016). Currently a range of different supervision models are used by social work field education programs (Zuchowski et al., 2014), but little is known about how students experience the learning within these different approaches and the level of supervision received. This study explored these questions about field education supervision and sought students' reflections about the quality of the supervision and the supervisory relationship.

Methodology

This research emerged from discussions conducted by the Queensland Field Education Network (QFEN) about whether students receive adequate supervision while on placement. QFEN comprises field education staff from universities that have a campus in Queensland, and which provide social work or human service placements. Eleven universities are represented on QFEN, with 10 offering a social work degree. Two of the authors are members of QFEN and collaborated with a third researcher to implement the research. Literature, prior research, and anecdotal data were used to develop a draft questionnaire collaboratively within the research team (Grazino & Raulin, 2013). Feedback was sought from members of the QFEN to refine the survey. Members of the QFEN agreed to support the research by sending the survey to their respective students. Initial findings were shared at the QFEN meetings.

The online software, Survey Monkey, was used to create a survey tool. The survey included demographic questions and asked students about their experiences and opinions about placement supervision, including open-ended questions, multiple choice items and Likert-scale items (Grazino & Raulin, 2013). The survey tool was pilot tested with a placement student and a field education staff member from James Cook University and the functionality amended before sending an email invitation to participate in the research to the 11 universities. The invitation was sent out twice, once in August 2019, and again in November 2019. The email asked the programs to email all their students who have completed a placement in 2019 and asked them to participate in the research and provided the anonymous survey link for students. Programs needed to confirm that the email had been sent out to students, and to provide the total number of students who were enrolled during that period.

The survey contained both quantitative and qualitative questions. 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 whom, 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 Likert scales had a range out of three, and only named the end points, i.e., "horrible"and "awesome", but students could select the points in between. The scales were used to supplement the quantitative data, as sometimes respondents only highlight the most significant points in qualitative survey questions, and a scale can provide a general sense of their experience. 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 beginning social workers. The answers to the qualitative questions were analysed thematically, initially by all authors separately and then jointly (Grazino & Raulin, 2013). Themes were suggested and then explored collaboratively over several consecutive 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 at that university.

In total, all (*n* = 10) universities with a Queensland campus that offered social work degrees responded, saying that they had sent the invitation to participate in the research and the survey link out to all students who had undertaken a social work placement in 2019. They advised that the invitation would have reached 1,998 students in total.

Findings

The first part of the finding sections will present the general demographics of students and placement description. The second part of the findings will consider supervision received, observation of practice and students' reflections of the quality of their placement supervision.

Student demographics

In total, 284 students completed the survey, resulting in a 14% response rate of the total number of students who were on placement (Grazino & Raulin, 2013). Table 1 summarises the demographics of the respondents to the survey.

Table 1

Demographics of Research Participants

Gender		Ethnic Background					Age range (in years)				
Female	Male	Non-specific	Non-Indigenous	Aboriginal	Torres Strait Islander	Inter–national	>25	26-35	36-45	46-55	< 55
1st placement BSW *(n=66)*											
62	4	0	63	0	0	3	23	19	12	11	1
2nd placement BSW *(n=68)*											
61	5	2	65	1	1	1	23	21	14	8	2
1st placement MSW (PQ) *(n=87)*											
77	9	1	65	5	0	17	19	32	19	11	6
2nd placement MSW (PQ) *(n=60)*											
41	19	0	45	2	0	13	7	23	13	13	4
Repeat Placement MSW (PQ) *(n=1)*											
1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Total numbers *(n=282)*											
242	37	3	238	8	1	35	72	96	58	43	13

Eighty-six percent ($n = 242$) of the respondents identified as female, 13% ($n = 37$) as male and 1% ($n = 3$) as non-specific, which is not surprising considering that 87% of the overall Australian welfare workforce are female (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019). Of the respondents, 35 students (12%) were international students and nine were Indigenous students (3.4%). Both Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (Professionally Qualifying) (MSW(PQ)) students responded to the survey, with slightly more than half (52%) of the students being MSW (PQ) students ($n = 148$). Overall, 40% ($n = 114$) of the students were 36 years or older, comprising 66 (45%) of the students in the MSW PQ and 48 (35%) of the students in the BSW degree.

Details of placement

Most placements (74.91%, $n = 212$) were undertaken in the July to November 2019 period, 20% ($n = 57$) in the January to June 2019 period and 5% ($n = 14$) at other times (see Figure 1). These Queensland data reflect the findings of a national survey with Australian field education programs that highlighted the majority of placements in the BSW and MSW(PQ) degrees occur in the July to November period (Cleak & Zuchowski 2020).
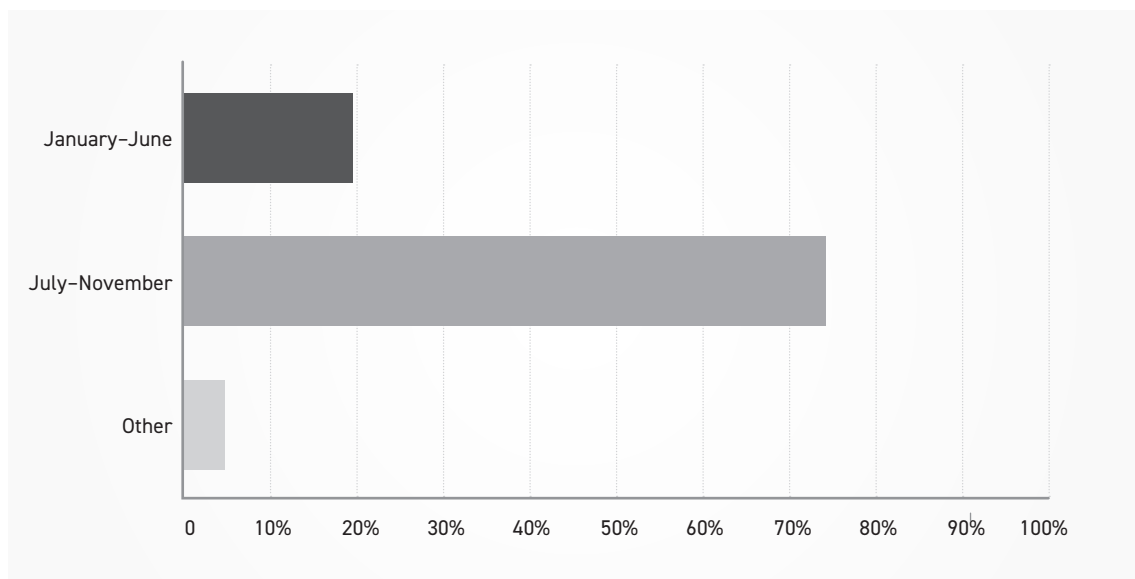

Figure 1. Placement Period for Queensland Students

The majority of students undertook their placements in cities: 35% ($n = 98$) in cities with more than 100,000 people; 29% in regional cities with less than 100,000 people ($n = 82$); 28% ($n = 79$) in the capital city; and 9% ($n = 24$) in rural areas (see Figure 2).
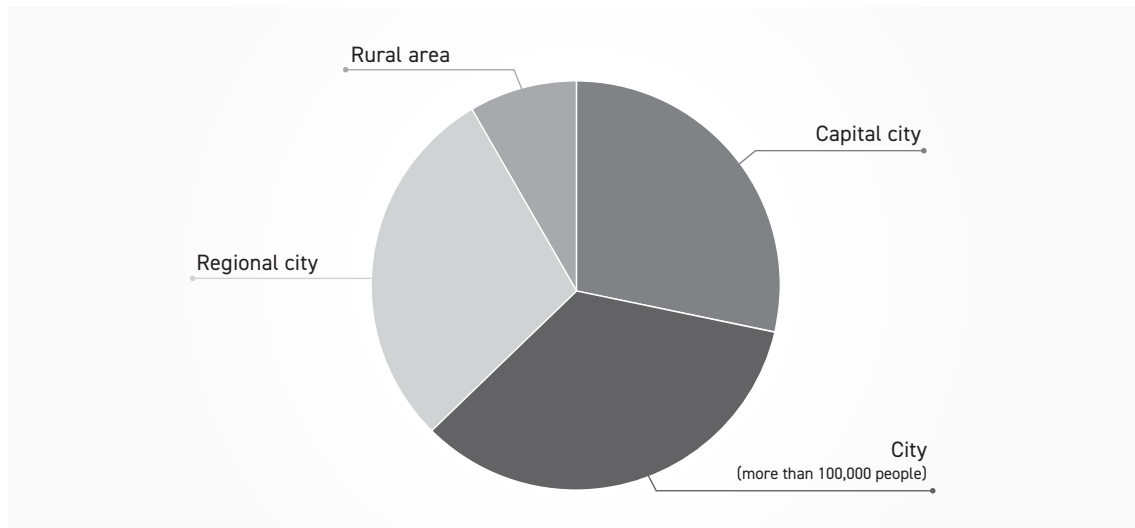
Figure 2. Location of Placement

The most common identified fields of practice areas were Child Protection, 14% ($n = 40$), Mental Health, 13% ($n = 36$), Youth Services, 11% ($n = 32$), Hospital or other Government Health Services, 9% ($n = 25$), and Services for Children and Families, 7% ($n = 19$). The most popular identified modes of practice during placement were Casework, 41% ($n = 117$), Community Development, 12% ($n = 36$), Counselling, 11% ($n = 31$), Crisis Intervention, 7% ($n = 19$), Group work, 6% ($n = 16$), and Program Development, 4% ($n = 12$).

Sixty percent of students ($n = 170$) had a placement in a non-Government placement and 5% ($n = 14$) undertook a paid placement. Placements were generally undertaken full time, with 75% of the students ($n = 212$) doing a placement of 32 hours a week or more.

Supervision

Just over half of the students (55%, $n = 156$) had a social work qualified field educator located in the agency in which they undertook placement. In 3% ($n = 9$) of the placements the field educator was located in the same organisation but in a different team or service and in 42% ($n = 119$) of the placements, the field educator was external to the organisation. This is in line with the national data, where larger programs in particular have placed about half of their students in placements with external supervision (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020).

Just over half of the participants, 56% ($n = 158$), reported that they had regular supervision with their assigned field educator at least once a week and 24% ($n = 69$) between 10 and 13 sessions. Just under a quarter, 21% ($n = 60$), received fewer than nine supervision sessions during placement, with one student stating they received no supervision and eight students stating they received two to three supervision sessions.

Just over half the students participated in supervision sessions that were at least 1 hour long with their field educator (see Table 1). Over the 14–17 weeks of placement between 32% and 42% of students received between 30 minutes to one-hour supervision, and between

2% and 8% of students received less than 30 minutes of supervision, not meeting the minimum requirement of 1.5 hours of formal supervision set by the AASW (2020). Only between 6% and 11% of students indicated that their supervision sessions were longer than 1.5 hours.

Table 2

Number and Duration of Supervision Sessions

Number of sessions	Number of respondents	Proportion of Respondents in the number session	Average median time (mins)
None	2	1%	0.00
1 to 5	21	7%	48.29
6 to 10	56	20%	60.31
11 to 15	84	30%	65.39
Sixteen	121	43%	62.48
Grand Total	284		61.42

Students were asked to differentiate between the different types of supervision they received – whether supervision was always just in the scheduled times, whether it happened in the scheduled times as well as *on the run*, i.e., informal feedback, debriefing and discussion at any point, or whether it happened just on the run, without prior planning. Just over half of students (53%, $n = 151$) received supervision in scheduled meeting times only, and 35% ($n = 100$) also received supervision on the run in addition to the scheduled supervision session. However, 9% ($n = 26$) of the students only had supervision on the run with their field education rather than scheduled formal supervision sessions.

Observation of practice and students

While the AASW (2020) requires that the field educator observes the student's practice, either directly or through use of technology where appropriate, only 58% ($n = 168$) of students' practice was observed by their field educator. Similarly, only 56% ($n = 164$) of students answered that they were able to observe the practice of the field educator. This left 42% of students with no opportunity to be observed by their field educator, and 44% of students with no opportunity to observe their field educator.

Several students expanded on the fact that their field educator did not observe their practice, and vice versa. Reasons given by students for non-observation included that some of the field educators were external to the agency, located elsewhere, or that the observation was done by an internal supervisor and then related to the external supervisor. Other reasons included lack of interest, confidentiality and lack of space. Other students identified opportunities for observation in group supervision, during meetings and triage counselling, exploration of their project work, or during planning and assessing with clients and due to close collaboration with the supervisor.

Interestingly, of the 140 students whose field educator was located with them in the team, 14% (*n* = 19) were not able to observe their field educator's practice and 18% (*n* = 25) did not have their practice observed by their field educator.

A number of students indicated that they could not observe the field educator practice because the field educator was too busy, had management roles, or there were confidentiality and complexity issues with the client group. One student explained:

> My supervisor never leaves the office unless it is for corporate meetings. A lot of my practice observation was left to my practice leader and colleagues.

For many, however, it was because the field educator was located elsewhere. One student commented:

> 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.

Another student commented:

> It was good to have a social worker to support myself, however, because I didn't have an opportunity to observe a social worker acting, I feel that I'm still struggling to develop some social worker skills.

Others discussed how they were either able to shadow the field educator or work alongside them, and some outlined the debriefing opportunities after the observation. Those who were able to observe, and be observed by their field educator, positively described this process. This student, for example, highlighted the growth they undertook through observation and being observed.

> I have been able to observe their practice and get feedback on my own practice. I felt like I was supported in learning so I was more willing to try new things.

Some students described that they observed poor social work practice, while others related that they had learnt much through the observation. For some it was both, as indicated by the following quote:

> Yes, I was able to observe and learn. Although, at times also identify how I would do it differently.

Quality of the supervision

Table 3 summarises students' responses regarding the quality of supervision and the supervisory relationship by placement type.

Table 3

Quality of Supervision by Placement Type

Type of Supervision Descriptor/ value		Supervisor external (n =118)	Supervisor internal, but in different team (n = 9)	Supervisor internal (n = 156)	All respondents (n = 283)
Quality of Supervision	Horrible/1	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	5 (3%)	6 (2%)
	No label/2	4 (3%)	0 (0%)	18 (12%)	22 (8%)
	No label/3	13(11%)	3 (8%)	22 (14%)	38 (13%)
	No label/4	23 (19%)	1 (19%)	39 (25%)	63 (22%)
	Awesome/5	77 (65%)	5 (66%)	72 (46%)	164 (54%)
Average Rating		**4.5**	**4.2**	**4**	**4.2**
Quality of supervisory relationship	Horrible/1	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	4 (3%)	6 (2%)
	No label/2	6 (5%)	0 (0%)	12 (8%)	18 (6%)
	No label/3	10 (8%)	0 (0%)	24 (16%)	34 (12%)
	No label/4	22 (19%)	3 (33%)	24 (16%)	49 (17%)
	Awesome/5	78 (66%)	6 (67%)	90 (58%)	174 (62%)
Average Rating		**4.4**	**4.7**	**4.2**	**4.3**

Students generally rated the quality of supervision (average rating of 4.2/5) and the supervisory relationship (average rating of 4.3/5) with their field educator highly. For example, 54% of students ($n = 164$) selected that the quality of their supervision was "awesome", and only 2% ($n = 6$) rated it as "horrible"; 62% of students ($n = 174$) rated the supervisory relationship as "awesome", and 2% ($n = 6$) rated it as "horrible." The average rating, which is above 4, highlights that most students chose ratings towards the end of the scale with positive descriptors.

Interestingly, these ratings were slightly higher for those students where the field educator was external to the agency ($n = 118$). The average rating for the quality of supervision was 4.5 out of 5, with 65% of students ($n = 77$) rating the supervisor as awesome and only 1% ($n = 1$) as horrible. Similarly, the quality of the supervisory relationship for students with external field educators got a higher rating with 4.4 out of 5; 66 % of the students ($n = 78$) rated it "awesome" and 2% ($n = 2$%) as "horrible."

Students were asked to describe the supervisory experience during placement, and 277 students responded to this question, and of those, 86% ($n = 239$) comments were positive.

In line with their responses to the rating scale of the quality of supervision and the quality of the supervisory relationship overall, students' comments were generally positive, highlighting that supervision was helpful and guided their learning experience, even though the length of supervision sessions was, on average, less than the required 1.5 hours. Most comments particularly referred to the learning that supervision facilitated, the knowledge gained and the support and guidance they received.

Fifty-three comments were made that included the word learning. Students highlighted that supervision contributed to their learning regarding theories, policies, procedures, their actions, practice gaps, reflections and growth:

> It was a wonderful experience and I learn[t] a lot from it which will help in my future social work practice.

> Excellent, really helped me to link theory to practice and help me to critically reflect on my actions. Supervision on the go was also highly beneficial to my learning.

On many occasions the field educator or the supervisory relationship was specifically linked to the learning through supervision:

> I had a fantastic field supervisor – knowledgeable, open and honest which allowed us to build a solid supervisory relationship.

> I found supervision during my placement to be a great benefit. My supervisor would break down situations into theories, AASW practice Standards and code of ethics and also legislation and policy where appropriate. He was also great in reminding me about self-care.

Positive comments about supervision also referred to the field educator providing support and guidance, being available, open relationships and clarity of expectations. One student's comment, for example, said that supervision was:

> Outstanding. I got a lot of support to reflect on and develop my practice. My supervisor asked me a lot of questions to prompt reflection and gave many practice examples for her career...including times when she made mistakes and how she reflected on this after he fact to improve future practice. I was given lots of space to ask questions, make mistakes and also discuss my feelings about the work. I cried more than once on placement due to the pressure of work and study, and felt really supported and not judged at all.

While most students were positive about their supervision experience, even when at times it might not have been ideal, 14% ($n = 38$ students) named the experience in negative terms, such as "appalling" or "poor." Comments or concerns about supervision were primarily expressed when the supervisor was not available, students were not feeling safe, or where the supervisor was unable to demonstrate a of depth or knowledge.

A strong theme in the negative comments was the lack of supervision, with thirteen direct comments by students about the lack of availability of supervision, as well as some students commenting on the busyness of the supervisor and their struggle to gain access to them.

Students commented:

> I did not have a very good understanding of what supervision was and how to get the best out of it. My supervisor was too busy with her full-time job to prioritise my learning.

> Overall it was not very good. When the supervisions did take place, I found them very valuable and beneficial but unfortunately I on average had a supervision every three weeks. This was due to busy schedule of my supervisor as well as their frequent illness.

Six students who commented positively on supervision specifically referred to the safety of the supervisory relationship, and, conversely, six students who had negative comments about supervision referred to a lack of safety. One student, for instance outlined the following:

> Fine at first, then a shifting dynamic around mid-term that displayed frustration, discontent, social avoidance, minimal supervision and negative supervision sessions that eroded a sense of safety and trust.

Discussion

As the total population of the Queensland social work placement students had the opportunity to respond to the survey, these data, while not representative, provide a useful profile of placement type, location, fields, and modes of practice as well as the student's satisfaction and experience of supervision. There appears to be very little change regarding the student demographics since Healy and Lonne (2010) reported on the social work and human workforce education and training needs. They found that social work students are, on average, significantly older than the overall student cohort, that there are fewer schools leavers, that there is more cultural and linguistic diversity and that about 86% of women make up the social work student body (Healy & Lonne, 2010, p. 45). The current study shows that a significant number of graduates entering social work practice will be in a similar age bracket as the overall Australian welfare workforce. In 2018, the average age of people in the human services workforce was 41.2 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2019) and there was a significant proportion of 55- to 64-year-olds (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2019).

Students generally valued the supervision and the quality of the supervisory relationship, which confirms the well-known impact that supervision and field placements have on student learning. This is not surprising, as the literature is clear that placements in themselves are valued by students as central to their understanding of professional social work, even when the organisation and the supervision is less than ideal (Bogo, 2015; Long & Theobald, 2019).

The qualitative data were also overall positive about the supervision that students had received with the majority of students pointing to the learning and growth that supervision facilitated. Considering that just over half of the students received the required amount of supervision, these are interesting findings and, of course, this study did not explore the actual learning outcomes of students, so there is no way of establishing whether quality learning actually occurred. So, although most students rated their supervisory positively, it is still concerning that field education programs are not maintaining professional standards and adhering to the ASWEAS guidelines. However, it does suggest that, while busy workplaces and time constraints make it difficult for field educators to provide the required supervision of students, it appears that what they are putting in is valued by the students and contributes to their professional growth.

One issue that must be taken seriously was the lack of observation of students' practice. The considerable research around learning activities that contribute to a quality placement report that observation of a student's practice, constructive feedback and reflection, constitute an essential component of supervision (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Cleak et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2009). Observation of practice and the ability to de-brief have been highlighted in research as a best practice principle for field education (Bogo, 2015). In Australia, the ASWEAS (AASW, 2020) currently requires that the student learning experience is guided by the field educator through direct observation, feedback and exploration. If the field educator is not able to observe the practice – or be observed – any discussion and explorations of the placement learning could become a purely theoretical exercise. This was more apparent for the students who were in placements with external supervision. A separate inquiry into their experiences highlighted the need for "self-advocacy and taking initiative to ensure that learning occurred" (Cleak et al., 2020, p. 13).

The findings of this study highlight that more than 40% of all students, and nearly 20% of those with field educators on their team, did not receive the modelling through observation and opportunities to be observed. So, while students were generally satisfied with their supervision, it is still unacceptable that there are significant numbers of placements where observation was lacking. A key concern is that a significant number of students are having to struggle without sufficient input, guidance and mentoring, which are the core functions of social work student supervision. This lack of observation of practice and being observed, combined with the earlier-outlined inconsistency in the availability of regular supervision, would leave students to fend for themselves, which has implications for the quality of graduates.

The lack of regular supervision is another significant matter of concern as 90 minutes of supervision per full-time week is a requirement of the AASW and supervision in general is recognised as a significant contributor to student learning (AASW, 2020). Almost half of the students did not receive regular weekly supervision and 20% of students received nine or fewer supervision sessions over the course of their placement, with some having hardly any sessions at all. Interestingly, for students who received fewer supervision sessions, those sessions also tended to be shorter.

Students' feedback in this study shows that they linked negative supervision experiences to lack of availability of the supervisor, not feeling safe in the supervisory relationship and their supervisor not having the necessary depth of knowledge to impart to the student. The analysis of students' qualitative responses indicates that these concerns are more likely to be related to the type of supervision model students were exposed to, with task supervision more frequently associated with inadequate supervision and limited opportunities for observing social work practice and receiving limited feedback after demonstrating practice (Cleak et al., 2020). However, this was also a concern for some students with field educators on site with them. While some of these deficits can be attributed to neoliberal contexts in education and industry, such as busy workplaces, risk-aversion on the part of organisations and the unavailability of suitable social work supervisors to act as field educators, increased student numbers are also a contributing factor (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Hay et al., 2016; Rollins et al., 2021). Social work programs have ultimate responsibility to ensure that students are provided with the required supervision, guidance and support (AASW, 2020). They need to be accountable to students, organisations, the AASW and, ultimately, to the clients that will be serviced by the future social work graduates.

It is interesting to consider what is happening in social work programs internationally, as they are also facing fiscal and managerial pressures, yet their government regulatory bodies insist on maintaining professional standards and report higher levels of adherence to supervisory guidelines and hence student satisfaction. For instance, an evaluation of social work programs in Ireland and Northern Ireland found that 84% of students from the UK program and 63% from the Irish program had weekly supervision throughout the placement. Of further interest, modelling was the most common learning tool used with Irish students (76%), who all received supervision from an on-site social worker and, therefore, these placements were able to provide greater opportunities for students to shadow and observe their practice (Wilson & Flanagan, 2019). A major difference between Australia, the UK and Ireland, is that they offer payment to on-site supervisors who are also required to complete a comprehensive supervisor training course (Wilson et al., 2009; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020).

Conclusion

This study highlighted the value of supervision to student placements and the importance of observing students' practice. While students were generally satisfied with their supervision, there were significant numbers of students who did not receive the supervision input they needed and did not receive the modelling and opportunities to be observed. Observation of student practice is fundamental to social work field education and the lack of regular supervision for students is a matter of significant concern. Supervision, debriefing and exploring of practice are important strategies to ensure ethical and safe practice of future social work graduates. Social work programs need to ensure that social work placements are well supported and meet the requirements of the ASWEAS (AASW, 2020). In the Australian context, this responsibility rests firmly with the providers of social work education and the respective accreditation and regulatory bodies.

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