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**It's up to you-the need for self-directed learning for social work students on placement
during Covid-19**

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It's up to you-the need for self-directed learning for social work students on placement during Covid-19

Abstract

Covid-19 in 2020 took social work programs by surprise and for many students, an e-placement was offered as the only alternative learning opportunity to complete their placement that year. In this paper we report on a mixed method study with data collected via an online survey with quantitative and qualitative questions exploring students' experiences in e-placements. Eighty-two students who had undertaken an e-placement responded to the survey that was sent to 1500 social work students enrolled in 21 Australian universities.

The results summarise demographic data about the students and a description of the e-placements used, as well as qualitative themes about the students' experiences and recommendations about e-placements. Four themes were prominent in the qualitative data; "opportunities for flexible learning but can be challenging", "Learning new skills but missing out on others", "drive your own learning" and "the need for structure, support and connection". Most students reported that they learnt a range of social work skills, but this required them to take initiative to ensure that learning occurred. The implication for social work education underscores the importance of future proofing social work field education through examining the learning and providing proactive support and clear structures for alternatives to traditional placements.

Keywords

Covid-19, Field education, remote learning, online learning, research placements; self-directed learning

Introduction

In this paper we report on an online-survey with Australian social work students who completed an e-placement in 2020. E-placement for the purpose of this research was defined as an online placement, a placement undertaken off-site/ remotely from the placement organisation or agency. Within the guidelines of the Australian Association of Social Work [AASW] (2021), the process of learning and immersion in real practice contexts in an e-

placement would have been guided and informed by the placement host organisation, the professional social work supervisor and potentially a task-supervisor. E-placements were either hosted by social service organisations or universities and allowed students to progress in the degree in locations where face-to-placements were not possible due to lock-down measures at the time.

This research arose because of government restrictions put in 2020 following the Covid-19 outbreak that caused disruptions to social work placements in Australia and elsewhere as agency staff were required to work remotely from home. This resulted in the abrupt ending of placements that had already commenced, a re-assignment of tasks and placement locations, and a greater focus on group projects and research placements (see for example, Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2021). The initial reporting on alternative placements internationally and locally during Covid-19 highlighted innovation and alternatives to traditional placement models, including opportunities for simulation as a melded approach to field education (Mitchell et al., 2021), online direct practice delivery (Sarbu and Unwin, 2021), a self-directed field practicum with the university as the placement host (Archer- Kuhn et al., 2020), community development focused projects (Bentley- Davey et al., 2020), student initiated social action projects (Morris et al., 2020); tele-health approaches to placements (McFadden et al. , 2020) and research placements (Morley and Clarke, 2020).

Explorations about alternative placement models comes at a time when finding sufficient quality field education opportunities for social work students was difficult even before Covid-19 across the globe due to an array of reasons. These include intense competition between social work programs, increased student numbers (Morris et al., 2020; Regehr, 2013; Zuchowski et al., 2019) and reduced funding sources across human service agencies which has impacted many organisations' ability to accept students and availability of qualified supervisors.

This study is important in order to future proof social work field education through examining whether e-placements can offer a viable placement variant, considering their pedagogical value and reflecting the considerable research that confirm the various learning activities that students value in building their competence and social work identity (Bogo, 2015; Smith et al., 2016; Roulston et al., 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2019).

Background

In Australia, social work field education is central to the professional degree. Students are required to complete 1000 hours of field education, “undertaken at minimum over two years of the professional social work program of study” (AASW, 2020, p.16). Following the global Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, the usual placement processes and standards became unviable and alternative placement arrangements were agreed to by the Australian accreditation body, the AASW (2020). Temporary amendments to accreditation requirements included a reduction of total placement hours by up to 20% as long as students were able to meet the required learning outcomes and consideration of alternative approaches to the structure and delivery of placements (Australian Collaborative Education Network [ACEN], 2020). In particular, it was agreed that where agency closures occurred, students could undertake some, or all, of their placement remotely (e.g. from home), as long as the placement had qualified agency supervisors or external social work supervision and that liaison requirements were met (AASW, 2020).

A review of the literature published during 2020 and 2021 reported that many field education programs around the world reported the relaxation or removal of practice hour requirements, and a focus instead on demonstrating that students had met practice learning outcomes, with a more permissive approach to how this might be achieved (McLaughlin et al., 2020, p.978). A study of field education programs across seven countries showed that practice placements ended or were paused (McFadden et al., 2020) but the interesting difference was the ability to act quickly if the universities were in national or regional partnerships with other universities and governing bodies. In Northern Ireland and England, an assessed year in employment enabled final year students to withdraw early from their placements, and recruiting them into the social work workforce to carry forward unmet learning needs into their first year (McFadden et al., 2020; Beesley and Devonald, 2020). Temporary amendments to social work education accreditation standards also occurred in the United States and Canada (CASWE, 2020; CSWE, 2020) with adjustments made to allow for a continuation of placement when the standard placement’s activities were interrupted and potentially threatened student progression and completion (McLaughlin et al., 2020).

Over time placement models have changed in Australia and elsewhere, and increasingly students are placed in agencies without social workers onsite, and the professional guidance and supervision is provided from a qualified supervisor located off-site (Schmidt, 2010; Zuchowski, et al. 2019). Successful placements in alternative placement

supervision models generally require students to be competent self-directed learners, as they are often placed in role-emerging field placements, where host organisations may not have a clear understanding of the social work role and the learning outcomes required by the profession (Cleak and Wilson, 2018, Crisp and Hosken, 2016; Schmidt, 2010). Students who undertake placements with external social work supervision can be frustrated with the task supervision, the lack of social work presence in the agency and a lack of support from the university which requires them to take control and demonstrate self-advocacy and taking initiative to ensure that learning occurs (Cleak et al., 2020).

E-placements

Early indications about students' experiences in e-placements highlighted concerns about wellbeing, capacity to manage remote settings and concerns about the quality of the remote learning experience (ACEN, 2020). While e-placements can be geographically inclusive, access to reliable technology has been identified as a barrier to virtual learning for some students (Mitchell et al., 2021). Students also identified that observation of their practice, being observed by the field educator and building meaningful relationships with service users could be challenging in a virtual environment (Sarbu and Unwin, 2021). Students can struggle when there is limited structure, a loss of support systems, extra caring demands during Covid-19 and isolation (de Jonge et al., 2020). Dilemmas can arise about separating the workspace from the private life and maintaining a functional office environment at home (Sarbu and Unwin, 2021).

E-placements lend themselves to social work research or project-based placements. A systematic literature review of research placements conducted in 2019 (Zuchowski et al., 2020) highlighted that students can be involved in a range of activities, from research planning to implementation and reporting which can benefit students, academics, organisations and the community. Benefits for students included improved professional soft skills and understanding of specific fields of practice, as well as advanced research skills and knowledge (Zuchowski et al., 2020). Challenges include supervisors' confidence in overseeing placements, disrupted flow of research projects, time and staff management, and facilitating supervision arrangements (Zuchowski et al., 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic took social work educators by surprise. Yet, they urgently responded to explore coordinated curriculum, program and professional development to develop curriculum online which generally required additional staff workloads in already

busy times to ensure a continuation of student learning considering social distancing restrictions (Archer- Kuhn et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2021). Archer- Kuhn et al. (2020) identified the importance of timely communication with students and mitigation of anxiety, grief and loss specifically considering the abrupt ending of field placements for many. Mclaughlin et al. (2020) extrapolated that social work education needs to be more than flexible and be prepared to provide educational and support services through innovation and creative responses that can shape future social work education. Moreover, not all service users easily embrace accessing services that are delivered remotely, some experience conditions that might make remote work unsuitable and some are challenged by building safe online relationships, assessment or identification of deteriorating well-being (Johnson et al., 2020; Liberati et al., 2021) so preparing future social workers online practice and to consider its usefulness and limitations will be important. Social workers in agencies and teaching platforms in Universities were increasingly using information and communication technologies before the onset of Covid-19, so it will be useful to explore how students responded when the use of information and communication technologies became the formal modality to undertake a field placement (Mishna et al., 2021).

The research to date that are concerned with placement arrangements during Covid-19 are largely descriptive and discursive, so this research is important as it explores students' experiences of an e-placements and the value and usefulness of these placement for their professional development. This information will be useful for developing innovative and pro-active placement models.

Methods

This mixed method research emerged after significant numbers of students undertook e-placements due to Covid-19 limitations in Australia in 2020. Three of the researchers had planned, implemented and supported e-placements in semester 1 of 2020 (see Bentley- Davey et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al., 2021) and collaborated with the fourth author to explore early insights gained from students, colleagues and researchers about students' experiences in e-placements across Australia. Anecdotal data and insights from previous research and literature were used to develop a draft questionnaire collaboratively within the research team and a social work student on placement (Grazino and Raulin, 2013). The social work student and researchers sought feedback from fellow students and pilot tested the survey tool with one student, who had just completed an e-placement through purposeful sampling in order to

check the clarity of the questions and the functionality of the survey tool (Neuman, 2006). To recruit the student an email invitation was to a group of students who had completed an e-placement at JCU. One student completed the survey and provided feedback. The survey tool was created using the online software Survey Monkey.

The survey included a total of 43 questions, both quantitative and qualitative. The survey collected demographic information and students' experiences and views about e-placements. Students were asked to provide feedback about their placement tasks and professional growth and learning in open ended questions, multiple choice and Likert-scale items (Grazino and Raulin, 2013). The qualitative questions asked students to consider what were the best aspects and the challenges of doing an e-placement, the skills they had developed in this placement and the advice they would offer to future students, agency and university staff in regard to e-placements. The study conforms to internationally accepted guidelines and was approved by the James Cook University's Human Ethics Committee, approval number H8234.

Sampling for this survey was purposive, the criteria for sampling were that students had to have a social work e-placement in 2020 at an Australian university (Neuman, 2006). To recruit students for the survey an email invitation was sent to the Heads of Schools of 32 universities who were listed on the AASW website as offering professionally accredited social work courses in Australia. The Heads of Schools were invited to send the anonymous survey links to students in their degree (BSW and MSW-PQ) who had undertaken a full or partial e-placement in 2020. Follow-up emails were sent between October and December 2020. It was requested that programs confirm that the email had been sent out to students and provide the total number of students who would have received the survey invite.

The answers to the qualitative questions were analysed thematically, initially divided up so that 2 authors each separately looked for the themes in specific questions and then by all authors jointly (Grazino and Raulin, 2013). The data from the survey were summarised and analysed initially individually by each researcher and then explored collaboratively. The coding process involved initially open coding and then selective coding, after major themes were identified (Neuman, 2006). Each author suggested themes and these were compared and explored collaboratively over a number of consecutive research meetings. After selective coding, the themes were refined further by the lead author for further discussion and finalisation (Grazino and Raulin, 2013).

Content analysis was used to summarise and present the quantitative data, looking for frequency to present the demographic data (Neuman, 2006). To ensure that data is kept confidential and not identifiable, no data was sought about the student's university and in the data analysis process the collected data was not de-aggregated according to States (Grazino and Raulin, 2013; Neuman, 2006). Respondents were allocated numbers to order to identify quotes in the findings, but ensure that responses stay anonymous (Neuman, 2006)

In total, twenty-one (n=21) of the 32 Australian universities agreed to send the survey link to students who undertook an e-placement in 2020. Of the remaining 11 universities, one university (n=1) had not commenced the social work degree, eight (n=8) were unresponsive and two (n=2) declined the invitation to participate. As only 65.6% (n=21) of universities sent the email to their placement students, it is unclear how many Australian students in total undertook e-placements in 2020. Moreover, two of the 21 participating universities did not advise how many email invitations they sent out. According to the advice of the remaining universities the email invitation has reached 1500 students.

Findings

The numbers of e-placements that occurred during 2020 varied greatly. Some universities advised that only a handful of students had e-placements, some reported that the whole cohort moved from an onsite to an e-placement in semester one and some had the whole student cohort in onsite-placements, particularly in the second semester.

Student details

In total, 82 students completed the survey, 55 undertook placement in the first semester, 23 in the second semester and 4 in a third semester. Of those, 56 students were enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work and 26 in a Master of Social Work (Professionally Qualifying). Table 1 highlights that the majority of student respondents (n=38) were located in Queensland.

Table one shows that 72 respondents identified as female and 10 were male. There were 20 international students, and one identified as Indigenous. For 60 students this was a first placement, 21 students were in their second placement and one in a repeat placement.

Table 1: Demographic data of respondents

	Gender	Cultural Background	Level of placement
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State	Female	Male	Non-Indigenous	International	Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	1 st	2 nd	repeat
Queensland (n=38)	33	5	27	10	1	23	15	0
New South Wales (n=18)	18	0	14	4	0	15	3	0
Western Australia (n=14)	13	1	13	1	0	13	0	1
Victoria (n=6)	4	2	3	3	0	3	3	0
South Australia (n=5)	3	2	4	1	0	5	0	0
ACT (n=1)	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
	n=72	n=10	n=61	n=20	n=1	n=60	n=21	n=1

Students who undertook a final or repeat placement were asked whether their first placement was supervised by an onsite social work supervisor. This was the case for half of the students (n=11).

E-placement details

The survey explored the reasons for e-placements. Sixty-two students moved to an e-placement because a face-to-face placement within an agency was rescinded due to Covid-19; for 15 students this was not the case, indicating that an e-placement was set up prior to Covid-19, and 5 students were unsure. Of the 62 students who had their placement rescinded, 60% (n=37) had their placement rescinded by the agency, 23% (n=14) by the university, 11% (n=7) by themselves and 6% (n=4) were not sure.

E-placements took the form of project work (38%, n=31), research (39%, n=32), service delivery (6%, n=5) and community work (9%, n=7), or a combination of these tasks (10%, n=8). Fifty-two % (n=42) of students received individual supervision and 48% (n=39) of students received a combination of group and individual supervision.

Themes from the qualitative questions

Several themes crystallised from the data analysis of the qualitative questions that explored students' experiences of e-placements. These have been distilled to 4 key themes; opportunities for flexible learning but can be challenging; developing useful skills but missing out on others; drive your own learning and the need for structure, support, and connection. The themes provide focus areas to explore the positive factors, or highlights, and the negative, or down-side of the overall student experience.

1. Opportunities for flexible learning but can be challenging

Flexibility was one of the best aspects of the e-placement according to the respondents. There were two subthemes to flexibility- learning flexibility (autonomy, time management, creativity) and flexibility as convenience (travel time and money, continue work and life balance). Students highlighted that the learning flexibility was positive relating to autonomy, time management and creativity.

Flexibility, Surprised how much I learned and how well I can autonomously work.

R36

Flexibility of doing work from home, it meant there were new opportunities for creativity and connection with the target group. R39

E placement was a great opportunity. It was not in any terms easy. However social work is fluid and unpredictable learning to adapt to situations and be flexible is part of the profession as no two days will be the same this is exactly what e placement is like. R53

Flexibility was also explored in terms of convenience and benefits. Comments highlighted that e-placements enabled students to cut down on travel time and money, allowed them to continue working and keep a work-life balance. As suggested by the varying commentary below, the ability for students to work autonomously provided the flexibility they needed to meet other responsibilities. Another important factor was having time for self-care; which is significant in light of the increased stressors and anxiety felt during this time.

It allowed me [to] have more space and concentration to perform my task, I do not have to face the hurdle of traffic while travelling to and from work. R23

I also appreciated that I could complete the e-placement as this allowed flexibility into my family life and I could continue working and receiving an income (less financial stress). R55

I had down-time/self-care from the challenging aspects of social work practice (clients' hardships etc.). R42

However, this flexible aspect was also identified as a challenge. Consistent comments related to isolation, distractions and lack of communication and connection, and a lack of connection impacting communication and the ability to access help. Moreover, for some students time management, and keeping motivated when working alone was difficult, and feeling isolated is one of the negative factors that needed to be considered as highlighted in the comments below:

Prone to vulnerability and overthinking....not having colleagues to chat with. Harder to communicate with supervisors and colleagues when you need help. Time management became even harder because of the distractions around and not being in a working environment. R45

Felt isolated and could not just email/ring and arrange a coffee in the staff lounge to have a quick chat like we did in the early stages pre-Covid. R42

Prepare a solid time schedule that you can stick to so that placement does not flow over into home life - especially if you work from home. R51

2. Developing useful skills but missing out on others.

Student described their professional growth during placement, the ability to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding of research skills, theory, adaptability, knowledge and communication skills. The most prominent skill highlighted was research ($n=22$), with students stating research contributed to the learning in the placement. Students expressed the benefit of focussing on one area, or topic, allowing the student to become well versed in the theory, practice and work with a specific sector, as shown in the quotes below:

I was given the opportunity to thoroughly research (& hope to publish) an area I am extremely interested in/want to practice in. R43

Through theory, I gained a lot of knowledge about how aged care functions and also explored other fields of social work. R16

Greater understanding and awareness of an indigenous social enterprise even through a remote learning environment was an invaluable tool for my social work placement. Collaboration with peers through zoom was a terrific learning environment for me and using zoom provided me with knowledge that this can be used in practice with agencies where rural and remote clients can or services are based. It highlighted to me that services can be provided to everyone regardless of distance.

R26

Students also reported on feeling prepared for practice in unexpected ways, for example, use of technology, teamwork and new ways of communicating. Another skill that students acknowledged was gaining experience and confidence with online technology and linked this to the need for social workers to be fluent with a range of compatible tele-health software.

This is exemplified in the following comments:

The additional learning goals which may not have been available on a face-to-face placement; to be able to create and maintain professional relationships with staff members across the organisation and to be able to submit high quality assessments for the agency. R3

I think the best aspect is the learning experience that if the future I was to experience a pandemic in a different organisation I have lived experience on how to best transition services online. R81

I was able to learn a new way of communicating, and working. R43

However, there were a large number of students ($n=25$) who expressed concerns about their lack of or less direct practice and social work skills (interpersonal skills, organisational skills) when asked “what were the challenges of doing an e-placement?”.

Not having the opportunity to practice on site skills such as counselling or observing sessions/getting to practice skills I wasn't confident with yet with other staff and even service users. R71

The lack of face to face client interaction made it difficult to practically utilise those interpersonal skills worked on in the first two years of study ... It was difficult to

really get a feel for the office and other staff as I was not in the office except toward the end of placement I was able to go in alternating days. I was not able to really observe how people worked around me and get a feel for the way the org operates on a day to day basis. R20

Not meeting learning goals/needs - Feeling disappointed as the placement did not live up to expectations or deliver any opportunities for practical social work experience. R7

Notably, the placement needs to be valuable to students' learning needs. Some students were concerned about the quality of their learning experience:

Don't call packing food boxes social work and expect students to be happy about it....For agencies.... understand that your students will be upset that they are getting a watered down placement and that any projects should actually be contributing to your function rather than just keeping the students out of the way. R31

3. Drive your own learning

The great majority of comments ($n=61$) advised students to 'drive their own learning'. This was framed in terms of scheduling/ planning, seeking support, taking charge of the project, being a motivated learner, using the learning opportunity, exploring additional learning and goal setting. Respondent 31, for example, suggested

Control your project your self and make it something actually impacting service on the ground rather than simple busy work. R31

Many students ($n=23$) also highlighted the importance of staying in touch with others, primarily other students and supervisors, but also organisations and other support networks. Respondent 59 highlights this and emphasises how taking charge of your own learning in this e-placement can prepare for future practice:

I guess the one advice would be to try and keep your online connections with the University staff and other students so that you don't feel like you are on your own. Another piece of advice would be to try and get as much out of your online experience as possible - learn as much as possible from your designated agency, from university lecturers and other students. Working with clients online in the future could very well

be a reality. An e-placement could prepare you for that. Some agencies already do video link ups with clients. R59

Other recommendations were about adjusting expectations, use of technology and self-care. The link to meaningful projects was made by students, Respondent 11 recommended:

Ensure that the project students are working on are used for something so they feel valid and that they are contributing to something important. R11

The last comment, as well as earlier comments about collaborating with peers and teamwork, highlights the importance of ‘collective learning’ spaces and how this has contributed to counterbalance the sense of isolation. It also attests to the importance of regular feedback from peers and supervisor(s), which contributes to students becoming more accountable (taking ownership) for their actions and therefore their learning.

Eight students recommended to avoid doing an e-placement.

4. Structure, support and connection

Respondents highlighted the importance of support and connection, through supervisors and academic staff staying in touch (keeping students updated, checking in, feedback, being contactable and reassuring students), support in general and the role of liaison. One of the essential ingredients reported was:

‘Keeping the communication channels open’ R53

This was also highlighted by other students, who explained that how this was important for their learning and emotional wellbeing:

Keep communication and response levels high. It can be quite an isolating experience as a student and you feel like you don’t really know what’s going on - you also don’t have quick access to teachers as it would be face to face so having responses to emails and questions quickly is good. R10

Be understanding, patient and compassionate towards students because e-placements are quite challenging. My supervisors were very understanding, patient and compassionate which helped me a lot to go through and pass my placement. R45

In several comments, students felt that the university was not offering the support they needed to make an e-placement work, as highlighted in the following comments:

I feel, personally, University could play better role in helping students with right and helpful information especially when students are doing their placement remotely. R49

The worst part was my organisation not knowing what was going on and whether I was meant to be there or not. Everyone was waiting on baited breath for answers that never came and as a student I felt unsupported and forgotten about by my university.

R31

Discussion

The increased use of e-placements might have been a temporary strategy to ensure that students can progress through their degree as contact restrictions were in place due to Covid-19. However, this research provided an important opportunity to consider how students were faring in such alternative learning models and what valuable learning might be gained for utilising e-placements for future placements. E-placements might be a necessary complement to other placement models, as the pre-Covid-19 environment was already difficult in terms of finding sufficient placements in human service organisations (Morris et al., 2020; Regehr, 2013; Zuchowski et al., 2019). The question is whether e-placements could be a viable model for learning in field education, particularly considering that while many students were thankful that they could complete their field education requirement, they would not have chosen this if there were other options, and some would not do it again.

The findings highlight that e-placements can offer flexible learning opportunities for social work students and that students do develop some useful skills and knowledge for social work practice, especially in project and research areas. Students also reported on feeling prepared for practice in unexpected ways, for example, use the of technology, teamwork and new ways of communicating. Whilst this can be replicated in a typical placement experience, being off site, and having a singular project provided resulted in a tangible or concrete outcome as opposed to an on-site agency experience that was more observational and general in nature. This requires of students to drive their own learning, have a clear structure, support and opportunities for connection. Successful placements that require self-directed learning skills, can develop competence and confidence in a life-long professional

development approach to practice (Schmidt, 2010). Self-directed learning requires students to be active in their learning and seeking and utilising supervision. Students might be required to take a lead in setting and pursuing relevant professional and skills-based learning goals, to actively self-monitor their professional performance and to initiate research and professional discussion to support their learning (Schmidt, 2010).

Mclaughlin et al.'s (2020) review of the recent literature of responses to the pandemic by social work field education highlights that social work educators have been remarkable for their creativity and imagination but raised a concerning theme of the need for support and connection with students feeling that they were not fully included in the decision-making process. Importantly, the placement needs to be valuable to students' learning needs. Some students were concerned about the quality of their learning experience, and this raises concerns for the integrity of the field education program. Working in collaboration with agencies and developing creative contingency plans is one of the key learnings for field education practitioners. Looking toward best practice internationally would identify strategies such as internships and other arrangements to ensure continuity of student learning in placement. Programs need to find ways of connecting students to staff and peers. It is important that this is a facilitated process, as structured online sessions can have mixed responses from students (Sarbu and Unwin, 2021; Zuchowski et al, 2021). In several comments, students felt that the University was not prepared and able to offer the support they needed to make an e-placement work. This warrants further critical discussion about the benefits of moving to an e-placement, and solid contingency planning to provide the resourcing required for any future placements that are disrupted. While self-motivation and being pro-active in learning is a general expectation in field education (Maidment, 2010), to be self-directed learners, all stakeholders need to be 'robust' and students need to have guidance, support and resources available to them (Beesley and Devonald, p1146). This clearly has significant workload implications for academic staff and needs to be factored in.

While there needs to be a continuing focus on developing direct practice skills in placements, learning the practicalities of research, project work and policy analysis is fundamental to critical analysing the complex layers and structural contexts that impact social workers, organisations and service users. This requirement for ethical, accountable and competent practice is embedded in the updated ASWEAS practice standards which note that new graduates need to 'understand the role of research and evaluation in assessing and generating new knowledge for practice' (AASW, 2021). These skills are core to critical

social work with a focus on social justice and human rights at its core, questioning and exposing unjust and harmful practice and resisting dominant social forces and power relations that create inequality and oppression (Morley et al., 2019).

The findings also show that flexible learning in e-placements has a flip-side with a potential disconnection from others and struggles with time management and motivation, and that students can feel that they miss out on further developing their direct practice skills and understanding of organisational practice. This has also been highlighted by Sarbu and Unwin (2021) and others (Roulston et al., 2018; Wilson and Flanagan, 2019) who suggest that when students are not exposed to having their practice observed, or observe the practice of their field educator and build relationships with service users, that their readiness for practice as new graduates can be compromised. This would be of particular concern for the students who completed two placements without an on-site supervisor and contrary to the Australian standards of the professional association (AASW, 2021).

One implication for social work programs is the need to carefully select students who possess the personal qualities and attributes that would help them thrive in e-placements. Schmidt (2010) highlights that students need to be able to take the lead in setting and pursuing their learning goals, to actively self-monitor their professional performance and to initiate discussion to support their learning. A further consideration is the context of the students, and whether their environment, family and other commitments would facilitate students progressing in an e-placement (Crisp and Hoken, 2016). This would require an exploration of the content and the placement parameters with the student so that they do not feel coerced into agreeing to a placement opportunity that does not suit their needs and contexts. Respondents in this research outlined the importance of valuable placement activities, rather than learning tasks to keep them busy. This is reflected in the key elements of quality placements, which are to provide a positive learning environment and multiple opportunities to practise (Bogo, 2015), and the understanding that organisations and supervisors have meaningful work available for students to get involved in (Cleak and Wilson, 2018). Ultimately, the pedagogical framework and learning standards for placements need to remain central in field education, irrespective of the format or model of supervision.

E-placements could prepare students for future practice contexts and to undertake social work in an online environment. This will have implications for students, organisations and service users. The Covid-19 pandemic has required social workers to work in new ways,

reducing proximity, presence and embracing technologies to support service users (Taylor-Beswick, 2021). What students initially noted as ‘unexpected outcomes’ in this research, are core skills to building relationships with clients in online environment. It will be important that social work students are well-prepared to build positive relationship online, as Liberati’s (2021) study highlights that clients who inadvertently needed to engage with workers remotely, experienced building relationships remotely with staff unknown to them problematic. Learning to relate in an online space, managing one’s time and motivation while working remotely, being technology literate and ready to use online communication platforms thus will be crucial to supporting service users through direct service delivery, programs and service review in current times. More training, professional development, supervision, information and consultation is needed to support social workers, other professionals and service users in the use of information and communication technologies to mitigate the challenges of online spaces (Liberati et al., 2021; Mishna et al., 2021). To date, learning with and about technologies is underdeveloped in the social work curriculum. Students and practitioners often have little digital confidence or capital (Taylor- Beswick, 2021), yet e-placements require students to experience practice in a setting that is facilitated through online communication platforms. This study shows that universities cannot assume that all students are technology literate and have access to reliable technology and internet, which raises access and equity issues. Universities need to ensure and facilitate students’ access to technology when considering offering e-placements.

Furthermore, the issue of equity and access expands to users/clients of social services. Even though the focus of this paper is not on the service user, the impact on clients of shifting social service support to entirely technology-based platforms needs to be acknowledged. Remote services are not suited to all service users, for example, some experience and disconnect due to lack of experience with the technology, accessibility issues including language barriers, or other contextual circumstances that prevent a safe use of technology such as domestic violence (Johnson et al., 2020; Liberati et al., 2021). It will be important for social workers to determine whether online work environments are suitable for the context of their work, or whether they are a reduced level of service to clients, their families and the community in order to cut funding (Johnson et al., 2020). Students’ own experiences of challenges in e-placements might give them a foundation to explore how clients are impacted and instil motivation to explore and advocate for selected face-to-face and remote services dependent on individuals’ needs (Johnson et al., 2020; Liberati et al., 2021).

This paper provides an early snapshot of what students have experienced in e-placements. Further interrogation of the student learning in consideration of the various tasks they have undertaken will be important. This will allow a more nuanced consideration of how e-placements' potential could be rolled out in a more considered way.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include that we have not explored the feedback and experience of field educators, task supervisors, liaison and university staff. Moreover, participation numbers were relatively low and not all Australian states were represented in the survey respondents and a number had a low return rate. While we have received confirmation that the survey invite was sent to 1500 students, two universities did not advise the numbers. Thus, it is unclear what the exact response rate to the survey was. Common to all surveys, information could not be explored in depth or clarified by the researchers (Neuman, 2006).

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Conclusion

This study highlights the advantages and challenges of the flexible placement environment that e-placements can provide and that learning relevant to social work practice, particularly about communication, teamwork, theory integration and research, can take place. It can build students online communication skills that will be useful in all practice contexts, and strengthen their research capacities fundamentally needed for critical analysis of contexts and structures. E-placements need to be supported with a special emphasis on connection, information and guidance and they need to offer engagement in activities that are relevant and valuable to students' learning. It will suit more easily some students, those who can be pro-active and self-driven and those who can establish a working environment within their own home. Now, that we know that Covid-19 might require the use of such placements in the near future, it will be important to adequately resource social work education programs in order to pre-plan useful learning activities, structures and support strategies.

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