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Professional Development Needs of Social Work Field Education Supervisors in Australia

Ines Zuchowski ^a, and Katheryn Margaret Pascoe^b

^aSocial Work and Human Services, James Cook University, Douglas, Queensland, Australia; ^bSchool of Social Sciences, Social work and Community Work, Otago University, Otago, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

The centrality of field education in social work education is widely recognised. Past research findings highlight the role of placement supervision to support students' professional growth, navigation of ethical dilemmas, integration of theory, and competence to practise within professional standards. The role of social workers supervising these placements (field educators) is essential and they must have a range of knowledge and skills including an understanding of adult learning theory, assessment and supervision methods, and managing conflict. This mixed methods research study used an online survey to gather perspectives from social work field educators in Australia to better understand the training and support received in preparation for their role, and how confident they felt in their ability to support students effectively. Invitation to participate in the survey was distributed via Australian tertiary social work programs. One hundred supervisors completed the survey. Results identified various models of supervision, desired topics for training, and the knowledge ranked as essential to their roles. Although some respondents received an induction and had sought additional training, there was a mixed level of satisfaction with the training available. These results highlight the importance of higher education providers working with the field to provide ongoing development opportunities for supervisors.

IMPLICATIONS

- Supervisors of social work placements are motivated to take on this important role, but need and request further training to support them in this work.
- It is vital to ensure that induction training includes more than a basic focus on processes and expectations.
- Field Education program staff need to be adequately resourced to support field educator training, particularly as field education is a workforce development strategy.

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CONTACT Ines Zuchowski  ines.zuchowski@jcu.edu.au

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In Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere increasing numbers of social work programs are competing for placement opportunities for their students (Hay et al., 2016; Murphy, 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2019). By 2017, the tally of accredited social work programs in Australia reached 91, offered by 32 higher education providers (HEPs), and as of 2024 there were 103 courses offered by 39 HEPs as reported by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (AASW, 2024). Likewise, student enrolment in social work in the United Kingdom (UK) has soared, with 65 masters and 87 bachelor programs in social work, deemed adequate for market demands but criticised for insufficient funding and resources a decade ago (Murphy, 2016). Currently, there are 76 universities with regulator-approved social work programs in the UK, teaching bachelor, masters, diploma courses, and postgraduate certificates in social work (Social Work England, 2025)

Field education is a cornerstone of these programs, constituting no less than 25% of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum and up to half of the curriculum in the postgraduate qualifying social work programs (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020). Central in a student's journey towards professional practice (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021), accreditation standards in Australia mandate that students complete a minimum of 1,000 hours of field education across at least two placements and be supervised by a social worker with a minimum of two years' postqualification experience (AASW, 2023a). The AASW (2023a) requires that HEPs induct, support, and train all key stakeholders in field education. Current challenges in field education include difficulties in sourcing placements, supervisor availability, workload pressures, and supporting increasing numbers of international students (Cleary, 2018; Zuchowski et al., 2019). An Australian study of social work placement supervisors reported that although they generally felt supported by their organisations, they were concerned that the demands of staffing and workload were affecting their capacity to ensure high-quality placements (Hill et al., 2019). Commonly known as field educators in Australia, the role of the placement supervisor is essential as they socialise students into the profession, support students in understanding values and ethics, and help them to integrate theory with practice as well as assessing and guiding students' practice and performance (Parga & Doyle, 2020). Indeed, field educators are "one of the biggest determinants of a quality practicum", and as such are influencing the next generation of social workers (Hay et al., 2016; Hay, 2020, p. 56). Field educators must therefore be "skilled in using a range of teaching and learning strategies" (Cleak & Smith, 2012, p. 246). As Parga and Doyle (2020) argued, field educators must have a range of knowledge, including an understanding of adult learning theory, assessment, supervision, and managing conflict; thus, training is important for quality assurance and to meet the needs of the students.

The *Code of Ethics and Practice Standards 2023* clearly outlined the parameters and expectations for professional social work practice (AASW, 2020, 2023a, 2023b). Upfront are expectations of cultural safety and sensitivity and a commitment to social justice and human rights and professional competence (AASW, 2020). The expectations include that practice is guided by professional values and ethics, and that social workers "practice in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to support their priorities and aspirations ...", apply professional knowledge, and practise respectfully and inclusively (AASW, 2023b, p. 6). This has implications for preparing students in field education for practice. Field educators need to be prepared to support students to

understand their “taken for granted” assumptions and dynamics of power and privilege, challenge oppression and racism, and provide culturally safe environments (Ife et al., 2024; Levine et al., 2023; Mooney et al., 2020). Research on supervising international students suggests cultural and linguistic differences have been perceived as student deficits (Ross et al., 2019), emphasising the importance of appropriate training for supervisors to be responsive to diverse cultural needs and promote equitable outcomes.

Two decades ago, Egan (2005) highlighted that social work field educators generally fulfill their supervisory role in an unpaid capacity, often without formal acknowledgement of how it affects their regular duties and workload. Yet, they can struggle to fulfil this role due to organisational and structural factors (Hill et al., 2019). Field educators’ motivations to take on that role include the desire to give back to the profession by mentoring social work students, personal and organisational accountability to stay up to date with current developments, and their own experiences of field instruction (Hill et al., 2019; Tufford et al., 2024a). Field educators in Hill et al.’s (2019) research expressed the desire for more supervision training and access to learning resources, findings reiterated by research in Aotearoa New Zealand, which “suggests PEs [placement educators] are entering the role with a lack of adequate preparation” (Pascoe, 2025, p. 14). Supervision, adult learning theory, and principles of assessment are generally not covered in professional social work qualifying degrees, which do equip graduate social workers with a range of social work knowledge. Studies around the world suggest that there is limited training for field educators to prepare them for the role or enhance their supervision skills (Cleak et al., 2022; Miehl et al., 2013; Tufford et al., 2024b). Hay and colleagues (2016), for example, pointed to the need to provide more training when institutional field education requirements change. Hill et al. (2019) highlighted that apart from workload relief, further resources and training could increase field educators’ capacity to support student placements. Considering the AASW requirements that students on placement are supervised by qualified social workers, it is important to explore what training and support field educators in Australia receive in preparation for this task. Similarly, it is useful to explore how confident they are in their ability to support students effectively and what training opportunities they desire.

Changes in Field Education Supervision and Structures

Traditionally, field education has been delivered predominantly through a dyadic model, pairing each student with a supervisor. This approach has been widely recognised as pivotal for student learning, effectively catering to the distinct educational requirements of each student and highlighting the centrality of the supervisory relationship (Cleak & Wilson, 2022; Hay et al., 2016; Hosken et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the surge in student enrolment coupled with the reduced ability of agencies to accommodate this growth has resulted in an increased use of alternative supervision models, including provision of co-supervision, external supervision, and group supervision (Zuchowski et al., 2019). Field educators in Australia currently provide individual supervision to students, or a combination of individual and group supervision (Egan et al., 2023). Egan et al. (2023) found that an off-site supervision model that combines individual and group supervision can allow students an independent opportunity for discussion, a safe space to critically reflect, and time to build peer networks. Up to 50% of social work placements

in Australia are supported by external supervision (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020). Thus, field educators might operate in the internal setting, supporting and observing social work students' engagement with practice; however, many operate in an external context. External supervisors use a range of strategies to build their understanding of the context, including role-plays, clarifying roles, preparing for supervision, reflections, and considering a range of perspectives (Zuchowski, 2016). Considering the pivotal role of field education in preparing social work students for professional practice and the centrality of field education supervision, it is essential to examine how well prepared field educators are for this role, their confidence in undertaking it, and their training and development needs.

This research was undertaken to contribute to the development of social work professional training and education. It is based on a project in Aotearoa New Zealand implemented by Pascoe (2025) that sought to map the training that field educators receive, what they perceive as their continued development needs, and how they are meeting these needs. The New Zealand project was informed by the Social Work Registration Board, which was reviewing the potential for developing a national training framework and opportunities for establishing microcredential standards, making the research relevant and timely (SWRB, 2023). As social work in Australia is exploring compulsory registration for social work (McCurdy et al., 2020), this project is timely in providing useful insights to inform these processes and this consideration.

Methodology

Research Design

The aims of this current research project were to map the training Australian field educators already access; their understanding of supervision requirements and their confidence in meeting these requirements; field educator's ongoing development needs; and any gaps in having these training needs met. A mixed methods approach that combined open and closed questions within the survey was determined to be appropriate to gather both depth and breadth of knowledge, providing greater evidence for understanding the experiences and perspectives of respondents (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). It is acknowledged that a survey can only provide a partial understanding of the phenomena in question and that this is an explorative study. Thus, a mixed methods design aids in highlighting the complexity of the challenges and opportunities faced. The research question posed was "What are the current training practices, understanding of supervision requirements, confidence levels, and ongoing development needs of Australian field educators, and what gaps exist in meeting these training needs?" The study was approved by the James Cook University Human Ethics Committee, approval number H9363, prior to data collection.

Respondents

An email invitation to participate in the research was sent to potential respondents via the Queensland Field Education mailing list, the National Field Education Network via ANZSWWER, and to Heads of academic units of Australian Social Work programs. At the time of the survey distribution there were 37 Higher Education Providers (HEPs)

that offer Bachelor and/or Master of Social Work degrees in Australia. Of those 37 providers, six providers were only offering provisionally accredited degrees and therefore were excluded from the study. As the survey could have been redistributed to other parties—with only some programs providing feedback about how many invitations to participate were sent out—information about how many received the survey form is not available.

Data Collection

An online survey employing Qualtrics software was used to collect the data. Online distribution of the survey was an appropriate method to reach a target audience, as social workers regularly access emails and internet platforms via computers and other devices (British Association of Social Workers, 2018; Parton, 2008). Online surveys are cost and time effective and can reach a wide group of potential respondents (Campbell et al., 2017). The survey collected a combination of demographic data, Likert-scale responses, and qualitative data. Demographic information sought included gender, years of experience in social work, number of students supervised on placement, and fields of practice. Closed questions and Likert scales were used to capture field educators' level of satisfaction pertaining to their induction and training, ranging from 1 (Extremely satisfied) to 5 (Not satisfied). The same scales were applied to measure perceived level of importance across core areas of knowledge, on a scale of 1 (Not important) to 5 (Very important), and self-reporting confidence, on a scale of 1 (Not confident) to 5 (Very confident). The core areas of knowledge were drawn from literature examining the role of field educators and existing professionally regulated credentials for field educators overseas. These included the following topics: reflective models, principles of adult learning theory, constructive alignment, managing relationship dynamics, methods of assessment and feedback processes, reflective models, and supervision methods.

Data Analysis

An quantitative data was analysed employing SPSS and this article reports on descriptive statistics, reporting percentages and frequencies. As the survey collected ordinal (Likert scales) and nominal (Categorical) data, and involved nonrandomised sampling and data collection at a single point in time, parametric and nonparametric tests were not appropriate for this study (Pallant, 2020). Open questions explored what influenced field educators to take the supervision role, the training accessed, how training could be improved, and the use of reflection in supervision. The answers to the qualitative survey questions were entered into NVivo software for coding. Open questions were analysed thematically to identify trends in the data and areas for extended analysis (Terry et al., 2017). Both researchers explored the data for common themes, separately and then jointly to refine the themes collaboratively (Terry et al., 2017).

Results

The final dataset included 100 respondents, of which 78% were social-work-qualified supervisors and 22% nonsocial-work-qualified supervisors. The final dataset excluded those who did not select yes to giving permission to being part of the study, and excluded those who did not progress past question one. Table 1 provides an overview of the

Table 1 Respondent demographics

		Female	86
		Male	12
		Prefer not to say	2
Gender (<i>n</i> = 100)		Gender diverse	0
Sector of employment (<i>n</i> = 100)	Government agency		34
	Nongovernment organisation		32
	Private practice		17
	Other		15
	Not declared		2
Field of practice (<i>n</i> = 99)	Mental health support services (Adults)		11
	Hospital-based social work		10
	Higher education and training		8
	Mental health support services (Children)		8
	Childcare and protection		8
	Community development		6
	Counselling		5
	Policy development and research		4
	Social worker in schools		4
	Disability (Adults)		3
	Primary health		3
	Advocacy services		3
	Family violence		2
	Probation services		1
	Youth justice		1
	Other (including homelessness, forensic social work, and undefined private practice)		22
Member of AASW (<i>n</i> = 100)	Yes		60
	No		40

demographics collected, highlighting that the sample includes respondents from across all three major sectors of employment, and includes a wide range of fields of practice. The majority of respondents identified as female and 60% were AASW members at the time of survey completion.

Overall, many respondents had vast experience in supervising students on placement, with 49% of respondents selecting that they had supervised more than eight students. This included one respondent indicating they had supervised hundreds of students, two stating that they had supervised 60 students, some noting they had lost count, and eight reporting between 20 and 30 students. Conversely, 25% had supervised only one or two students.

Preparation, Training, and Skill Development for Student Supervision

The survey explored whether respondents had received an induction when they first took on the role of a practice educator for a HEP in Australia and, if they did, what this included. Ninety-nine people responded to this question, with 49.5% (*n* = 49) responding yes, 35.4% (*n* = 35) responding no, and 15.2% (*n* = 15) could not recall whether they had received an induction. Of the 44 respondents who answered the follow-up question about the type of induction they received, eight could not remember, but the majority (75%, *n* = 33) described training that outlined the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the field educator. Several responses mentioned learning about supervision (23.7%, *n* = 10), managing difficulties (15.9%, *n* = 7), understanding student learning (15.9%, *n* = 7), and helping students demonstrate their learning and giving feedback. Forty-two respondents

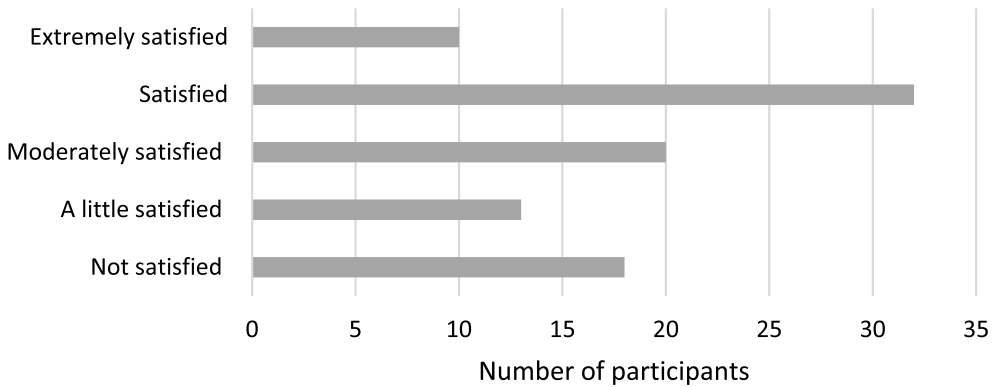


Figure 1 Reported levels of satisfaction with the training available from the respondent's affiliated higher education institute ($n = 93$)

indicated the length of the induction: 50% ($n = 21$) attended a half-day induction training, 26.2% ($n = 11$) a full day, 19% ($n = 8$) two hours or less, 4.7% ($n = 2$) two days, and 2.3% ($n = 1$) one and a half days.

Qualitative comments indicated the general topics and broad understanding included in their induction, with respondents noting they mostly covered basic requirements. For example, one respondent stated that their induction experience included “all the basics of working with students on placement”, upon which they further reflected “I felt confident afterwards and recently attended a refresher”. Conversely, one respondent noted that although there was a “broad overview of what was expected from us as field educators” they identified an ongoing need for “a more in-depth session on individual and structured supervision but it was not provided”. Lastly, the importance of ongoing training was raised whereby one respondent shared that their induction “was some time ago. I can't remember sorry. But I know what the requirements are as a supervisor and field educator, so I must have learnt something”. Lastly, respondents were asked to report their level of satisfaction with the training provided. With 54.8% indicating only moderate ($n = 20$), little ($n = 13$), or no satisfaction ($n = 18$), the findings suggest this is an area that requires further attention. The findings are limited, however, as the data does not provide evidence of any examples of best practice and cannot identify regions or institutions associated with “Extremely satisfied” ($n = 7$) or “Satisfied” ($n = 28$) respondents as illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

Recommendations for Improvement to Training

Sixty-eight respondents commented on whether they had accessed additional training through their associated HEP to support their role as a field educator, of which half ($n = 34$) commented that they had not accessed additional training. Others had accessed supervision trainings ($n = 14$) or refreshers ($n = 8$). Although a few other training topics were noted, another group of respondents identified the interactions they had with the team or placement coordinators ($n = 7$) and regular meetings ($n = 4$) as supporting them in their role as field educators. Thirty-six respondents made recommendations about how HEPs could improve training for field educators. The recommendations

included making training available ($n = 4$), providing supervision-specific training ($n = 8$), yearly inductions and refreshers ($n = 5$), reflective practice training ($n = 6$), and delivering the training at alternative times and in different modes ($n = 6$), with interest in training being “made available online so that it can be done in a time that is convenient for potential field educators and liaison support staff”. Additionally, training “needs to be published and shared more openly and through a channel that is easily accessible”. Respondents specified the importance of “free supervisor training”, so that costs are not transferred to the social worker.

Models of Student Placement Supervision Provision

The most popular model of supervision predominantly employed across all survey respondents was one-on-one internal supervision (60%, $n = 60$), followed by one-on-one external supervision (30%, $n = 30$), as shown in [Figure 2](#). While internal and external group supervision was provided by respondents, only 10% ($n = 6$) of the social-work-qualified supervisors and 18% ($n = 4$) of the nonsocial-work-qualified social workers identified that they mainly provided group supervision.

Use of Reflection in Supervision

Ninety-one percent of respondents used reflection as a tool in supervision regularly, with 43% ($n = 42$) stating this was applied in every supervision, 37% ($n = 36$) almost always used reflection, and 11% ($n = 11$) used reflection as a tool in at least half of the sessions. Eighty-two respondents answered the question of what reflective models they incorporated into their supervision with social work students. Of those, four were unsure of the model used and another 22 described what they were doing in supervision, but did not refer to a specific model, with statements such as “I wouldn’t say I use a formal tool”. Several respondents offered an overview of their process followed, for example, by one

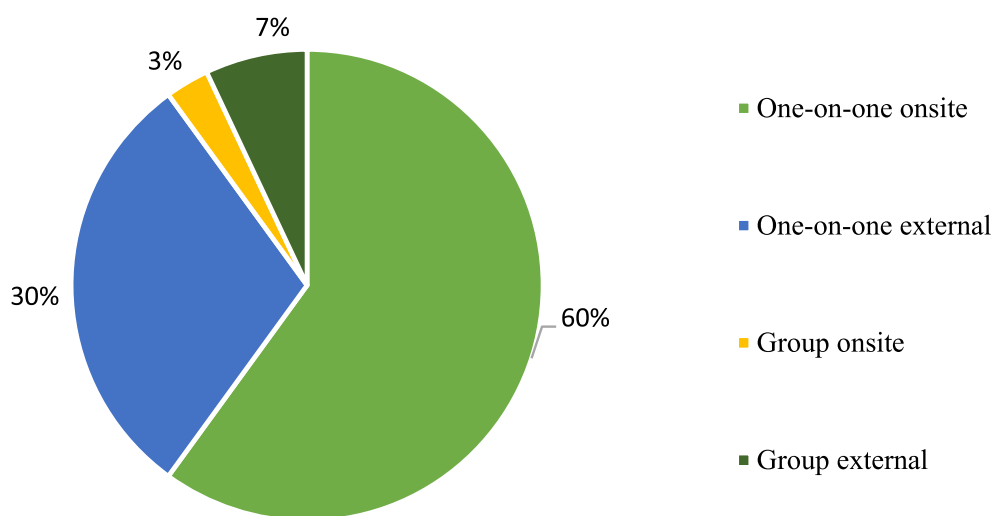


Figure 2 Model of supervision employed across all survey respondents ($n = 100$)

respondent sharing how their approach would support the student in “describing the event/issue, detailing impact, what was done well [and] what could be done different[ly], and evaluating at the end”. The importance of adapting to different student needs was highlighted, recognising how it “Depends on what the students preferred learning/communication/reflection style is”. A final example demonstrated how one respondent emphasised the importance of “reflecting on the here and now; in other words, what was your day like, what have you noticed that you’re doing better or that you need to improve on? What did you find challenging in the beginning, and what is easier for you now?” This comment was not in isolation, however, as they went on to discuss the importance of “reflecting from past to present, for example, where have you improved from previous placements, what have you learnt in a different way? The model of reflecting through written explanation”.

Sixty respondents named at least one specific reflective model for supervision. The most popular models were Gibbs reflective cycle (34 mentions) and Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (22 mentions). Thirty-nine respondents named more than one model they were using, and several respondents explained their use of the model and/or approach, as exemplified by one respondent who highlighted that “Reflective models are essential tools used in supervision. It is important to encourage critical thinking and self-awareness and to incorporate the use of a journal into their learning”. They went on to then list several models and their application including “The Reflective Learning Model—helping students deepen their understanding of complex practice scenarios, Kolb’s Reflective Cycle—helpful to move the students through reflection, learning, and applying that learning in practice, Gibbs’s Reflective Cycle—... helpful when developing a plan with the students and providing a framework for examining experiences, [and] Critical Reflection Model—provid[ing] an opportunity for a deeper level of reflection [and] understanding power dynamics and systemic issues”. These quotes and data provided evidence for the perceived value in reflective models and reflective processes for effective supervision designed to support student learning.

Informed by the literature and prior research, respondents were asked to rate their perceived level of importance across core areas of knowledge. On a Likert scale of 1 (Not important) to 5 (Very important), the majority of respondents suggested all areas were important or very important, as reflected in a mean score of more than 4 for each topic (See [Table 2](#)).

Table 2 Perceived importance compared to reported confidence in core areas of knowledge

Perceived importance	Mean (Maximum 5)	S.D.	Confidence in each area	Mean (Maximum 5)	S.D.
Relationship dynamics (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.44	0.658	Relationship dynamics (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.27	0.697
Adult learning theory (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.56	0.829	Adult learning theory (<i>n</i> = 98)	3.39	1.127
Enhanced practice with Indigenous Peoples (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.6	0.658	Enhanced practice with Indigenous Peoples (<i>n</i> = 99)	3.82	0.919
Connect theory to practice (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.7	0.488	Connect theory to practice (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.22	0.763
Map learning activities to objectives (<i>n</i> = 98)	4.16	0.577	Map learning activities to objectives (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.28	0.655
Constructive feedback (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.55	0.533	Constructive feedback (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.25	0.705
Reflective models (<i>n</i> = 98)	4.35	0.522	Reflective models (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.05	0.873
Methods of assessment (<i>n</i> = 99)	4.69	0.611	Methods of assessment (<i>n</i> = 98)	4.17	0.746
Institutional policies (<i>n</i> = 98)	4.23	0.742	Institutional policies (<i>n</i> = 97)	4.12	0.767



Figure 3 Topics for desired training ($n = 100$)

Extending on rating the importance of core areas of knowledge and skills, respondents were asked to consider their confidence in each area. Although subject to potential perception bias, the findings suggested respondents held a lower average in confidence compared to their perceived importance across all areas except for mapping learning activities to learning objectives (See Table 2). The general reduction in confidence continued in the perceived importance in listed skills and knowledge, as is reflected in Figure 3, where 93% of respondents indicated at least one topic they desired further training in. Only seven respondents did not select any of the training topics outlined, nor did they provide suggestions for additional areas not listed. Enhanced practice with Indigenous Peoples came up as a topic considered of high importance by respondents (mean = 4.6), yet was identified as an area with reduced confidence, presenting as the topic with the second lowest level of confidence when ranked based on mean scores (mean = 3.82). These findings suggested more attention and resourcing may be required to build knowledge and skills in this core area for field educators. Reviewing Figure 3, this is further reinforced whereby 57 respondents specifically selected enhanced practice with Indigenous Peoples as a topic they desired further training in, surpassed only by adult learning theory ($n = 60$) and methods of assessment ($n = 59$).

Discussion

Field educators have a significant effect on student learning (Ayala et al., 2014; Papouli, 2014). To contribute to preparing students for professional practice, field educators need to draw upon a range of skills across contexts, effectively taking on multiple roles including social worker, educator, assessor, and supervisor. The aims of this study were to ascertain the current training practices; gain an understanding of supervision requirements, confidence levels, and ongoing development needs of Australian field educators; and discover what gaps exist in meeting these training needs. The data from this study

suggested that field educators are aware of the complexity of their role, with most respondents rating all core areas of knowledge as important or very important. Ongoing training and development can feed into supervision practice and subsequently impact the experiences of students involved in placement. With less than half of respondents accessing an induction before taking on a student, and respondents noting induction focused predominantly on processes and expectations, the research supports the findings of Miehl et al. (2013) and Cleak et al. (2022), who argued social workers often have little training before supervising students. This finding shows a gap between the minimum standards of the profession (AASW, 2023b) and the reality of placement supervision. It is likely that the lack of induction is due to the fact that there are simply too many supervisors to induct in the context of the increasing number of placements with external supervision (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020; Egan et al., 2023); however, it would seem that HEPs need further resources in order to place further focus on ensuring the induction and ongoing training support of their contracted staff. A consideration could be the role of the AASW to fund and resource field educator training nationally.

Respondents had vast experience in supervising students, with almost half stating they had supervised more than eight students. Despite this level of experience, 93% of respondents indicated at least one area of skill or knowledge in which they desired further training. This suggests a commitment to continued professional development. In particular, adult learning theory was the most cited area for further training, with 60% of respondents highlighting this as a topic for desired development opportunities. This mirrors the lack of confidence reported regarding their knowledge of adult learning theory, with 7.1% reporting no confidence, 13.3% indicating they were a little confident, and 29.6% only somewhat confident on this topic. Research underscores the centrality of knowledge of adult learning theory to effective teaching (Parga & Doyle, 2020), influencing assessment methods, development tasks, and learning strategies. Furthermore, the literature suggested utilising adult learning theory in field education can encourage students to be active learners, a necessary condition for meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student cohort (Cleak & Smith, 2012). As an area of knowledge not typically covered in qualifying training for field educators with a social work degree, the findings suggest a continued gap in which respondents would value additional support to enhance their practice as field educators.

The survey findings indicated field educators are conscious of the significant role of reflection in supervision to support student development, with 91% using reflective models in half or more of their sessions. Additionally, 60 respondents named at least one reflective model, suggesting that, although not all respondents described the models or processes used, respondents are familiar with the importance of tools to foster reflection in a learning environment. This is an encouraging finding, as critical self-reflection is foundational for ethical decision making. Use of reflective models in supervision would provide social work students with the tools to develop awareness of their own beliefs and values, question the influence of both implicit and explicit biases, and identify the “many factors related to organizational and institutional oppression” that affects practice (Rogerson, Meakin et al., 2020, p. 1035). Critical reflection and self-awareness for decision making is promoted through the AASW, highlighting reflective processes as central for managing ethical dilemmas and managing power relationships (AASW, 2023b). Arguably, without the ability to engage in reflection “social

workers might enter the field believing that what they think and do is ethical social work practice if it fits the norms or beliefs they have internalized from personal experience” (Rogerson, Prescott, et al., 2020, p. 1037). The importance of critical reflection is similarly embedded in global standards for social work education, whereby it is expected that students are supported to “develop as critically self-reflective practitioners” to consider the impact that values, knowledge, skills, biases, and culture may have in influencing the development of relationships in their practice (IASSW & IFSW, 2020, p. 16).

The respondents highlighted the importance of having appropriate knowledge and skills for enhanced practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The data suggest low levels of confidence in this area and that respondents desire training and support to develop enhanced practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; therefore, this should be considered a priority in future offerings. This is an important point, as preparation to work respectfully and in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a professional requirement (AASW, 2020; 2023b). Field education can be a place for students to explore what Ife et al. (2024) raise as important: considering privilege and antioppressive practice and to reflect on your own practice so as not to unintentionally or intentionally perpetuate colonialist practice. Moreover, supervisors themselves need training and reflection to prepare them to support others. Engaging in discussion about decolonising requires genuine dialogue and spaces for this dialogue and exploration (Ife et al., 2024). Thus, supervisors need to feel prepared to engage in such dialogue safely. If field educators are not prepared for antiracist supervision, they could inadvertently perpetuate racism in their actions or instructions (Levine et al., 2023). Furthermore, culturally safe environments for Indigenous students are essential for quality learning on placement, with previous research highlighting how additional external cultural supervision may be valuable as the student’s “cultural identity should be recognised and integrated into the placement” (Mooney et al., 2020).

When asked what topics respondents would value further training on, the use of reflective models was the third most highly sought after topic, after adult learning theories and methods of assessment, with 57 (57%) respondents indicating this as an area in which they would value some further development opportunities. Again, this is important for HEPs and the AASW to note and consider how continuous professional development is made available to field educators. Ultimately, a desire for enhancing skills in reflective models to nurture reflective practice in students aligns with core motivations for being a field educator: to provide quality placements and support the development of the profession. It should be noted that knowledge and skill of applying reflective models remain relevant to all forms of supervision, whether this be internal, external, one-on-one, or group formats, with alternative forms of supervision still providing opportunities for students to critically reflect on their practice and learning (Egan et al., 2023).

A consideration is whether the reality of tertiary education provides the environment that is required to support the social work field educator’s desire to further develop their supervisory skills and related knowledge. Key points in current public news and debates are fiscal restraints and the changing tertiary sector. The lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced numbers of fee-paying international students, and difficult economic conditions are impacting many universities, who are reporting declining revenues

(Australian Government, 2022). In spite of the financial position of Australian universities still remaining relatively strong (Australian Government, 2022), social work programs have been reporting high student—staff ratios, the increasing complexity of placing students in field education and the lack of support by universities for field education programs, citing workload issues and concerns of appropriate staffing levels (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020). Similar issues are reported elsewhere, with academics in the UK reporting growing student cohorts and depleted staff numbers, and stating that staff are “working long hours and being personally exhausted by the workloads they are carrying” (Cleary, 2018, p. 2262). When the field education teams are constantly under pressure, understaffed, and are dealing with difficult contexts and competition (Cleary, 2018; Egan et al., 2023), it is difficult to provide more than the minimum required training to field educators. Yet, in working jointly with the field and field educators to grow our future social work workforce, we will attain what is needed, starting with a review of induction content and processes, and finding additional resources to further up-skill our expert supervisors.

A final consideration is how we can afford field educators with the time and space needed to deliver the valuable supervision they are motivated to provide. For some organisations the preparation of students for their workplace or field seems core business, with several field educators advising that supervision of students was an expected part of their position. Research highlighted that field educators’ ability to support students is impacted by workload demands and staffing. Field educators in Hill et al.’s (2019) research state that they would like to have workload relief to undertake this important role. Building capacity for field education, therefore, requires appropriate funding models that intrinsically value the preparation of our future workforce through appropriately providing support to field educators.

Limitations

Although this research surveyed 100 respondents, the survey data remain limited as not all programs were represented in the sample, and there is diversity across individuals, teams, context, and experience. The findings are subject to volunteer bias as respondents could opt into the survey. However, it is the first study of this size that moves beyond individual program evaluations and has attempted to explore how well field educators are prepared for their role, how confident they are in undertaking this role and what their training and development needs are. Although the survey did not focus on capturing best practice examples for current training and development programs for field educators, this is an area for further research when considering how to respond to the needs raised in the current study.

Conclusion

Despite the well-documented challenges facing field education in the current climate, this study highlighted the importance of training to best prepare supervisors to effectively support student development and learning. The data showed field educators are motivated and committed to providing positive learning opportunities but have expressed a desire for further training to enhance their practice. With limited satisfaction in

current provisions and less than half of respondents having accessed an induction, field educators require higher education providers (HEPs) to jointly work with host agencies to strengthen and meet their needs. Within a currently restrictive and compressed context, this may start with a review of induction timing and context, and collating additional resources that can be made available to further up-skill our expert supervisors while HEPs and others further explore opportunities to feasibly enhance offerings.

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ORCID

Ines Zuchowski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1270-203X>

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