

Pedagogical Intent and Placement Diversity in Social Work Field Education: One University's Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Field placement is central to the professional education of aspiring social workers. The immersive learning that occurs in health and human service organisations under the direct supervision of practising social workers provides a real-world context for the integration of classroom and field-based learning. Yet, in recent decades, a range of contextual changes have impacted on the supply of quality placements. The concurrent marketisation of higher education and health/human services has led to widespread placement shortages. Universities and placement organisations are diversifying practice learning opportunities to build capacity for placements in organisations. Also, little is known about how today's placement opportunities align with the pedagogical intent of social work education. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion about placement diversity and how this aligns with our pedagogical intent. Adopting a case-study approach, the paper reports on the nature and structure of placements undertaken by 76 Deakin University social work students in 2018. The findings suggest that, although the traditional one-to-one placement remains dominant, placements are diversifying, yet not necessarily in line with our pedagogical intent. A more strategic approach is needed if we are to reap the pedagogical gains of practice-based learning.

Keywords: *Field Education; Social Work Placements; Placement Supervision; Practice Learning; Practicum*

Social work has traditionally relied on the one-to-one placement model to prepare students for professional practice. In this model, each student is allocated to a single direct practice setting under the supervision of a qualified social worker practitioner who is responsible for the student's daily practice learning and assessment for the entire placement period. (Bogo, 2015; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2006). The ability to source placements that are characterised as individually-focused, direct service placements with traditional one-to-one supervision has become increasingly challenging in recent decades. The deregulation and marketisation of the Australian higher education sector have resulted in the proliferation of social work programs and the number of students within these programs (Healy & Lonne, 2010; Karger, 2012).

As field education is a core component of all social work programs, the demand for social work placements has invariably increased. Yet at the same time, placement supply has progressively declined amidst the managerial mandates and fiscal pressures facing the health and human service organisations that have traditionally hosted most of these placements. In recognition of these challenges, social work education providers have routinely partnered with health and human service organisations to develop new ways of delivering placement learning with a view of enabling the sustainability of social work field education programs into the future (Crisp & Hosken, 2016). However, in line with Cleak (2018), we (the authors) regularly deliberate on whether the evolution of our placement program is aligned with our pedagogical intent and is not merely a reaction to the contextual pressures facing field education programs more broadly.

As academic leads of Deakin University's social work field education program, we consider it paramount to gain an accurate, local-level picture of how our placements are evolving in actuality. In this case study, we examined where 76 Deakin University social work students were undertaking placement in 2018 were placed (practice settings), what practice learning they were exposed to (learning focus), and how that learning was supervised (supervision arrangements). The aim of this study is to engage in an evidence-informed analysis of how our existing and emerging pool of placements is evolving and the extent that this aligns with the pedagogical intent of our social work program more broadly.

BACKGROUND

The traditional model of social work field education emerged from the psychodynamic schools of thought dominant in the early 20th Century (Wayne et al., 2006). This model involves the provision of one-to-one supervision from a qualified social worker employed within a specific practice setting to an individual social work student. The student-supervisor relationship is viewed as the primary vehicle for the student's professional learning on placement. More specifically, this relationship is modelled on the psychodynamic client-worker relationship and is the medium through which the student navigates the integration of theory with practice, reflects upon their professional use of self, and develops their emerging social work identity and practice skills (Bogo, 2015; Crisp & Hosken, 2016).

Despite significant reforms in both the higher education and health/human service sectors, this traditional model continues to be regarded as the "gold standard" of social work field

education. Testimony to this is how social work accrediting bodies, such as the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2012), still base their field education policies and guidelines on this traditional model. Individualistic practice teaching and learning is emphasised in the traditional model and seems to echo the profession's longstanding assumptions about what constitutes best practice in social work field education, rather than what the empirical evidence might suggest. As Crisp and Hosken (2016) argued, the social work profession needs to be mindful of not reinforcing those oppressive practices and philosophies that the profession seeks to challenge if such assumptions are not critiqued. In order to do so however, it is necessary to start from an informed position of how the contemporary field education environment is evolving and to base one's critique on this informed positioning.

Social work field education programs continue to find themselves placing students within health and human service agencies that are increasingly driven by neoliberal ideology. The reconfiguration of health and human services as a (pseudo) marketplace through the formalisation of competitive tendering in the mid 1990s has been pivotal in shaping their operative goals, outputs, and outcomes (Ozanne & Rose, 2013). In the current context, economic rationalism and managerialism have reduced social work practice to "simple answers and short-term solutions that focus on minimalist service provision, specialization [sic], and fragmented services" (Preston, George, & Silver, 2014, p. 59). While the social work profession strives to embody its social justice and human rights values (AASW, 2012), and to instil these values in our social work students, the neoliberal socio-political environment continues to commodify such values.

For example, respect for individuals and their rights to a quality service are increasingly being conceptualised in government schemes, such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), as the right of service users to choose their preferred services from a (pseudo) market of health and human services. These services then find themselves competing against each other for their market share of service users and the "business" (i.e., revenue) that these service users could bring. It is this increased contestability in the sector, under the guise of a respect for the individual's rights, that has been cited as the reason for erosion of professional autonomy in favour of technocratic, formulaic approaches to complex social issues and service delivery (Dominelli, 1996; Healy and Meagher, 2004; Singh and Cowden, 2009; Lonne, 2013).

Under these circumstances, it is imperative that we seek to broaden our repertoire of placement models and practices with a view to optimising emerging opportunities for quality placement learning in a changing environment (Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Scholar, McCaughan, McLaughlin, & Coleman, 2012). For example, social work students on placement may find themselves receiving onsite task supervision (i.e., day-to-day workload management and informal supervision) from a worker trained in a discipline other than social work, with at times a Diploma or Certificate IV level qualification. In these instances, the students would also receive formal supervision from a qualified social work external to the placement organisation once a week or fortnight. While such variations in placement arrangements may meet the program's accreditation requirements, the lack of social work presence could pose a challenge for beginning social workers who, in trying to develop their social work identity, do not have daily contact with appropriate social work role models (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2018).

In recent times however, experienced social workers are often engaged through Universities to play key roles in the planning and delivering of alternative placement innovations, as well as providing the daily supervision and support to the students. Vassos, Harms, and Rose's (2018) rotational placement model and Crisp and Hosken's (2016) remotely supervised action research placements are illustrative of the types of innovations being pursued. Additional out-of-the-box models of field education are needed if we are to meet the growing demand for placements into the future.

While the planning and resourcing of a growing repertoire of placement models is required, this needs to be based on an evidence-informed understanding of the local contexts in which each field education program operates. It is this understanding, in the context of Deakin University's social work field education program that we sought to ascertain in this study.

Deakin University's Social Work Field Education Program

Deakin University offers both the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and the Master of Social Work (Qualifying) (MSW) courses with full AASW accreditation status. The courses are run from Waterfront campus, in Geelong which is a regional centre in Western Victoria. Although situated in Geelong, both courses attract students from across Australia given the availability of blended learning modes, that is, predominantly online study with 20 days of face-to-face intensive workshops. While the BSW is offered as both an on-campus and blended learning course, the MSW is only offered as a blended learning program. At the time of writing, 624 students were enrolled in the BSW, with a further 220 students enrolled in the MSW.

Contemporary critical approaches underpin X's social work program. These approaches include critical practice (Ife, 1997), critical postmodernism (Fook, 2012), feminist social work (Dominelli, 2002), anti-oppressive social work (Mullaly, 2010; Baines, 2011), human rights-based social work (Lundy, 2011), anti-racist social work (Dominelli, 2008) and anti-discriminatory social work (Thompson, 2012). As such, the program is oriented towards emancipatory change at personal, cultural and structural levels.

In accordance with the AASW's (2012) education and accreditation standards, the field education program forms a core component of both courses. All students undertake a minimum of 1,000 hours of placement across at least two placements. Not unlike other programs, our BSW students undertake their first placement in the third year of their four-year course. MSW students undertake their first placement after one semester of academic study, in the first year of their two-year course. BSW and MSW students undertake their final placement after completing all other units of study. In line with the philosophical underpinnings of our courses, the field education program endeavours to prepare students to reflect systematically and critically on issues of power, privilege, and oppression within their placement context and to practice in anti-oppressive ways within these contexts.

Our Pedagogical Intent

Consistent with the education principles of the AASW (2012), we emphasise a developmental model of education underpinned by adult learning principles (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005) and a social constructivist perspective (Dewey, 1938) on learning.

Vygotsky's (1978) pedagogical concept of "zones of proximal development" and Wood, Bruner & Ross' (1976) "instructional scaffolding" are particularly relevant to our intent in transitioning students from the classroom to the field in their practice learning. The zone of proximal development is essentially the difference between the student's current stage of learning development and the level of potential development one is working towards with guidance and support from others. Instructional scaffolding involves the use of different teaching techniques to support students in moving incrementally towards a deeper understanding of, and greater independence in their problem solving, practice reflection and reflexivity as emerging critical social workers. With these two concepts in mind, our primary role as educators is to facilitate "just out of reach" practice learning opportunities in order to continually stretch the students slightly beyond their current stage of development. Direction and support are progressively withdrawn as students' confidence and competence builds in their emerging role as critical social workers.

As such, in the context of our field education program, our intent is to match students to placements that will enable them to relate and integrate meaningfully their classroom learning with their placement practice learning. Placements are essentially sites for intentional learning and critical reflection on the opportunities for, and challenges in enacting critical social work theory and practice within the real world. Placement experiences then form a key frame of reference for further learning in the classroom after the first placement.

Study Aim

The aim of this study was to develop a local level picture of the nature and structure of our placements at Deakin University, with a view of ascertaining the extent to which our placement development and allocation decisions align with our pedagogical intent. Our rationale was to develop an evidence-base to inform our future decision making in both the strategic direction and resource investment of our placement program - the goal being to systematically improve the alignment of our placements with our pedagogical intent. The study was therefore focused on the following research questions:

1. Where are our students undertaking their placements? (Practice Settings)
2. What are the practice learning methods that our students are exposed to on placement? (Learning Focus)
3. What placement supervision arrangements are in place? (Supervision Arrangements)
4. Does the nature and structure of our pool of existing and emerging placements reflect the pedagogical intent of the social work program at Deakin University?

METHOD

Design

A case-study approach was utilised in this study. The focus of case study research in general is to provide an understanding of a particular "case" within its localised environment (Woodside and Wilson 2003; Yin, 1994). In the current study, the "case" under

investigation is Deakin University's social work field education program. This case study involved a cross-sectional design (Hair Jr., Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010) in that data was collected at one point in time, thus providing a "snap shot" of the field education program as it currently stands in its local context. In particular, we wanted to know the diversity of the practice settings in which our social work students were undertaking placement (e.g., hospital), the type of learning opportunities the students are exposed to on placement (e.g., direct service with individuals and families), and the supervision arrangements in place (e.g., 1:1 onsite social work supervision).

Procedure

Ethics approval for the conduct of the study was granted from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. A target sample (Hair Jr. et al., 2010) of participants were recruited via email invitations sent to all social work students who were involved in a field placement during the study year (2018). The invitations outlined the aims of the study and the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation. The invitation email also included a Plain Language Statement (PLS) outlining the participation requirements and a link to an online questionnaire, which the authors developed for this study, for participants to complete. Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that completion and submission of the online questionnaire would constitute their informed consent to participate in the study. No incentives were offered for their participation.

Materials

In the first section of the online questionnaire, all participants were asked to report demographic data on their age, gender, degree studying (BSW or MSW), and placement level (first or final). In the second and final part of the online questionnaire, participants were asked to select the practice setting in which their placement was located from a range of given options (e.g., hospital, youth service, mental health) as well as an open-ended "other" option. The same question format was utilised in terms of participants' type of learning focus on placement (e.g., direct service placement working with individual service users and their families), and their supervision arrangements (e.g., 1:1 supervision with a qualified social worker). Given the nominal nature of the questions, no reliability analyses could be performed.

Participants

A sample of 76 social work students from Deakin University (93% female) with a median age of 26-30 years participated in the study. This sample represents a 41% response rate of the total social work student population at Deakin University who were undertaking placement during the study period (2018) which, according to Moser and Kalton (1989), is sufficient for the purposes of statistical analysis. A Mann-Whitney *U*-test revealed no significant difference in age by gender (Mann-Whitney $U = 160.00$, $p = .71$). Participants were enrolled in either the BSW (59%) or the MSW (41%). Fifty-four per cent of participants were undertaking their first placement, with the remainder were undertaking their final placement. These sample characteristics (age, gender, degree, and placement level) appeared representative of the current student population in Deakin University's social work field education program.

RESULTS

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 25. Frequency analyses were conducted to gain an overall picture of where our students undertaking their placements (Practice Settings), what practice methods they are exposed (Learning Focus), and what placement supervision arrangements are in place (Supervision Arrangements).

Placement Practice Settings

Participants reported completing their social work placements across approximately 16 different health and human service practice settings. It was not possible to test for any association between practice setting by degree studied or by placement level without combining practice setting groups and therefore confounding cells, due to expected counts of less than 5 in more than 20% of the cells (Yates, Moore, & McCabe, 1999). As seen in Table 1, the top four practice settings accounting for 44.7% of participants' placements were: (1) hospital-based health (including mental health) settings (17.1%), (2) community-based child and family services (10.5%), (3) community housing/homelessness programs (9.2%), and (4) community mental health organisations (7.9%).

The most frequent practice setting for both BSW (15.6%) and MSW (19.4%) students was in hospital-based health organisations. Hospital-based health organisations were also the most frequently used practice setting across first and final placements (14.6% and 20% respectively). The second most frequent practice setting for first placement students was in community housing/homelessness services (12.2%). For final placement students, the second most frequent practice setting was in community child and family services (11.4%) and statutory child protection (11.4%). Interestingly, there were no first placements in statutory child protection.

Table 1. Frequency (%) of Sectors in which Participants Completed their Social Work Placement by Degree and Placement Level

Placement Sector	Degree (%)		Placement Level (%)		Total Frequency (%) (n = 76)
	BSW (n = 45)	MSW (Q) (n = 31)	First (n = 41)	Final (n = 35)	
Health (Hospital) Organisation	15.6	19.4	14.6	20.0	17.1
Community Child and Family	8.9	12.9	9.8	11.4	10.5
Community Housing/Homelessness	6.7	12.9	12.2	5.7	9.2
Community Mental Health	11.1	3.2	9.8	5.7	7.9
Community Disability	8.9	3.2	9.8	2.9	6.6
Community Health	2.2	12.9	4.9	8.6	6.6
Large Community Organisation (Multiple Services)	2.2	12.9	4.9	8.6	6.6
Youth	11.1	-	9.8	2.9	6.6
Mental Health (Hospital)	6.7	3.2	2.4	8.6	5.3
Migration or Refugees	6.7	3.2	7.3	2.9	5.3
Statutory Child Protection	6.7	3.2	-	11.4	5.3
Family Violence	6.7	-	7.3	-	3.9
School-Related Program	-	6.5	4.9	-	2.6
Commonwealth Department of Human Services (Centrelink)	2.2	-	-	2.9	1.3
Community Justice/Corrections	2.2	-	2.4	-	1.3
Government Disability	-	3.2	-	2.9	1.3
Other	2.2	3.2	-	5.7	2.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

NOTE: BSW = Bachelor of Social Work; MSW (Q) = Master of Social Work - Qualifying; Other = Peak Body for Community and Not-For-Profit Organisations; Government Health Counselling Service.

Placement Learning Focus

In terms of placement learning focus, the majority of participants completed a placement focused on direct service provision with individuals and their families (77.6%). In addition, 13.2% of participants completed a direct service group work or community development placement, while 5.3% of participants completed a research or policy focused placement. As mentioned earlier, it was not possible to test for any association between placement type by degree studied or by placement level due to low expected counts in multiple cells. In observing the frequencies by degree however, almost the same proportion of BSW (77.8%) and MSW (77.4%) students were in direct service placements working with primarily individuals and their families. In addition, a greater proportion of MSW students (12.9%) than BSW students (4.4%) were in placements whose learning focused on direct service provision with groups.

When looking at placement learning focus by placement level, there was a higher proportion of final placement students (88.6%) in direct service placements that focused on work with individuals and their families compared with first placement students (68.3%). Furthermore, there were no MSW students undertaking a direct service placement working with groups compared with 14.6% of the BSW students undertaking such a placement (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency (%) of Placement Types by Degree and Placement Level

Placement Sector	Degree (%)		Placement Level (%)		Total Frequency (%) (n = 76)
	BSW (n = 45)	MSW (Q) (n = 31)	First (n = 41)	Final (n = 35)	
Direct Service with Individuals and their Families	77.8	77.4	68.3	88.6	77.6
Direct Service with Groups	4.4	12.9	14.6	-	7.9
Community Development/ Project-Focused	4.4	6.5	7.3	2.9	5.3
Research or Policy-Focused	6.7	3.2	4.9	5.7	5.3
Other	6.7	-	4.9	2.9	3.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

NOTE: BSW = Bachelor of Social Work; MSW (Q) = Master of Social Work - Qualifying; Other = Mix of direct Service with either community development or research/policy work

Supervision Arrangements

The most prominent supervision arrangement was an onsite social worker providing one-to-one supervision and facilitating the student's placement learning on a daily basis (42.7%). There was however, a further 40% of students who did not have an onsite social worker facilitating their daily placement learning. In addition, almost a quarter of participants (24.9%) reported that they had access to an onsite task supervisor on a daily basis and formal supervision with a university appointed qualified social worker who was external to the organisation.

There was no significant association between placement supervision arrangements and the degree that the student was studying ($\chi^2[4] = 1.24$, $p = .87$; Cramer's $V = .13$), although a greater proportion of MSW students (48.4%) than BSW students (38.6%) received supervision from an onsite qualified social worker who also managed their daily placement learning experiences. Also, a significant association was found between supervision arrangement and placement level ($\chi^2[4] = 9.72$, $p = .04$; Cramer's $V = .36$), with over half of the final placement students (54.3%) receiving the one-to-one model of supervision compared to only a third (32.5%) of first placement students. In terms of receiving external supervision from a university appointed social worker, this supervision arrangements was greater for first placement students (35%) than final placement students (11.4%) (Table 3).

Table 3. Frequency (%) of Supervision Arrangements on Placement by Degree & Placement Level

Placement Sector	Degree (%)		Placement Level (%)		Total Frequency (%) (n = 75) ^a
	BSW (n = 44)	MSW (Q) (n = 31)	First (n = 40)	Final (n = 35)	
One-to-One Traditional Model	38.6	48.4	32.5	54.3	42.7
External Supervision	25	22.6	35.0	11.4	24.0
Task Supervisor (not social work qualified) + Onsite Field Educator	18.2	12.9	10.0	22.9	16.0
Co-Supervision	11.7	12.9	15.0	8.6	12.0
Rotational Model	6.8	3.2	7.5	2.9	5.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^a missing n = 1.

NOTE: BSW = Bachelor of Social Work; MSW (Q) = Master of Social Work - Qualifying;

DISCUSSION

In line with other studies exploring the nature and structure of placements in the contemporary context (e.g., Barton, Bell & Bowles, 2005; Cleak & Smith, 2012; Zuchowski, Cleak, Nickson & Spencer, 2018), the findings of this study similarly point to an emerging diversification of placement approaches. At present however, this diversification appears to occur on the periphery of the dominant, traditional one-to-one direct service placement model. Even despite Deakin University's investment in developing and implementing alternative placement approaches such as the rotational placements (Vassos et al., 2018; Vassos, Harms, & Rose, 2019) and remotely supervised action research placements (Crisp & Hosken, 2016), to date these approaches have been used intermittently on an adhoc basis. Cleak's (2018) discussion of the key drivers for the emergence of new and different placement approaches resonates in that pedagogical imperatives have not necessarily driven new and different placements. Cleak (2018) argued that the main driver for placement development is the widespread shortage of traditional one-to-one placements in increasingly marketised health and human services, coupled with a growing demand for placements due to the proliferation of social work programs and student numbers.

Exploring the Diversity of Practice Settings

In terms of where students were undertaking placement, it was not surprising that approximately 16 different practice settings were involved and confirms the breadth of social work practice in the Australian health and human services context (Ozanne & Rose, 2013). This finding also suggests that a range of organisations recognise the relevance and value of social workers within service organisations. We know from our own experiences at Deakin University, that third sector organisations with few, if any, qualified social workers on staff often embrace social work placements as part of their organisational capacity building strategy; for example, the Salvation Army, neighbourhood houses and Local, Learning and Education Networks (LLEN).

Also unsurprising is the observation that approximately 75% of students undertook their placement in third sector organisations, with over half 50% in community-based third sector organisations, and 25% in health services. It is important to note at this point that the Australian Government no longer deems health (including hospital) services as government services and instead are part of the third sector. As such they are a primary target for further market-based reform, as reflected in the most recent Productivity Commission inquiry (Australian Government, 2017). Only a small number of students undertook their placement in state and commonwealth government services. These findings are consistent with the way that health and human service delivery has evolved in Australia with the ascendancy of neoliberal politics since the mid-1980s. The wholesale marketisation and privatisation of public services in the name of increased competition, contestability and service user choice has ultimately resulted in the expansion of the third sector as the predominant provider of public services (Marston, McDonald & Bryson, 2014). As such, students can find themselves undertaking placement within a diverse array of practice settings.

This approach to health and human service delivery has allowed governments to drive efficiencies. A significant drawback however is the focus in many placement organisations in delivering on the managerial mandates set by (government) funding bodies, rather than on professional activities such as social work student education. Another drawback is that the service delivery within these organisations becomes increasingly fragmented (Wallace & Pease, 2011). On the one hand, the range of third sector practice settings can provide valuable learning opportunities for social work students undertaking placement. For example, students can experience and reflect on the strengths, limitations and challenges of critical social work theory and practice (a core aspect of Deakin University's social work degrees) within organisations driven largely by market-driven funding arrangements. On the other, there is the risk that students could internalise dominant neoliberal ways of being, knowing, and doing; particularly if the placement experience precedes relevant classroom learning. Contrary to our pedagogical intent, placement experiences that do not match the students' developmental stage can result in beginning social workers being easily co-opted as instruments of social control, rather than as beginning social workers who assume their professional role as agents of emancipatory social change (Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

In addition, the results also indicate that a relatively small number of government-based placements were almost exclusively undertaken by final placement students. This reflects the growing trend in both state and commonwealth government services to use student placement programs predominantly as a recruitment pipeline (Vassos & Connolly, 2014). These market-based approaches to government workforce planning and recruitment appear to drive the way in which student placements are viewed and implemented. This is particularly evident in services with a long history of high staff turnover, for example statutory child welfare services (Lonne, 2013). In the case of child protection programs, Deakin University and all other Victorian universities have been advised that only final placement students will be accepted. Other government-based human services also, although less overt about their strategic intent, often request final placement students.

The preference for final placement students appears to be linked, at least in our experience, to organisations' perception of them delivering immediate returns on investment.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least the human resources arm of some organisations, perceive student placements as a cost-efficient way of recruiting and training the future workforce of their organisations. This is clearly reflected in the language used with respect to student placements. For example, the use of business terms such as “try before you buy” is not uncommon. Also, students who are predominantly focused on securing immediate employment in relatively well-paid graduate level positions are, understandably, keen to undertake their final placement in these settings. The use of placements as a recruitment pipeline is also attractive to universities as it increases rates of graduate employment, which is a key measure of the education providers’ success in meeting industry demand for work-ready graduates (Johnston, 2011).

Exploring the Diversity of Placement Learning

It was clear that the majority of placements were solely focused on direct service with individuals and their families (77.6%). A small number of placements involved direct service at group and community levels (17.1%) and very few involved macro-level social work practice (5.3%). As most health and human services are government funded to work at the individual service user level, it is unsurprising that placements (most of which were hosted within the third sector) focused on direct service with individuals. This is consistent with the neoliberal narrative that valorises the role of the individual in society (Preston et al., 2014; Wayne et al., 2006).

One prominent example is the emphasis on “consumer-focused” care in public health and disability services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme. While the provision of such versions of person-centred care has its benefits in diminishing paternalism in the services sector, there is also the risk of reinforcing the neoliberal narrative around personal responsibility and public services as a last resort for support. It is important therefore, that social work students undertaking direct service placements with individual service users are critically reflective on such issues to avoid internalising oppressive values.

Furthermore, when examining the results by placement level, it becomes apparent that final placement students were largely concentrated in direct service placements where the sole focus is working with individuals and their families (88.6%). Although most first placement students were also in these types of direct service placements (68.3%), first placement students were more likely to undertake placements that involved meso (group work and community) or macro (research and policy) level social work practice. Although individual-focused placements may meet students’ preferences and the demands of placement organisations, there is scope to broaden the placement learning of our students to include at least one placement that involves meso and macro level practice learning.

Placement Supervision Arrangements

The findings clearly show that the traditional one-to-one supervision model remained dominant in Deakin University’s field education program in 2018. At the same time however, the incidence of external supervision (24%) suggests that there is also a challenge to the one-to-one supervision model as it comes face-to-face with the contemporary environment where there may be few qualified social workers within placement organisations (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2018; Crisp & Hosken, 2016). These findings do not support those of Cleak

and Smith (2012) who found that most of the 263 students they surveyed (86.3%) had access to on-site social work supervision; either as part of a traditional one-to-one (54.7%), co-supervision (9.9%), combination task supervision and on-site social worker supervision arrangement (21.7%).

In addition, while Cleak and Smith found 13.7% of their student sample received external supervision, the incidence of this supervision arrangement in our study is considerably higher at 24%. Whether the use of external supervisors in the study year is an anomaly or indeed reflective of a trend is yet to be established. Replication of the same study across multiple years will help to discern this. It is noteworthy however, that an analysis of supervision arrangements by placement level revealed that 35% of first placement students had external supervisors compared to only 11.4% for final placement students. Also noteworthy is the finding that almost two thirds of final placement students (65.8%) had direct access to qualified social workers within the organisation, in either one-to-one supervision, co-supervision or rotation model arrangements, as compared to just over half of first placement students (55%) who experienced the same.

As social work practitioners and educators, it is incumbent on us to engage with the ethical and professional implications of having students, and especially first placement students, developing their sense of professional identity and practice competence in placements that are under the daily guidance of non-social workers. This is particularly pertinent when we consider that the quality of practice learning in social work placements is directly impacted by the presence, or in this case absence, of credible social work role models on placement (Lee & Fortune, 2013).

Alignment of Placement Learning with Pedagogical Intent

Like many other accredited social work courses, the curriculum of BSW and MSW courses at Deakin University is designed to scaffold learning from micro to macro level social work practice. As a consequence, first placement BSW students and especially first placement MSW students are least likely to have participated in core study units that equip them with the critical social work knowledge and skills necessary to engage in intentional learning and critical reflection in the areas of group work, community development, practice research, and policy practice. It is not until the final placement, the capstone unit in both courses, that students have had the formal learning inputs to integrate theory and practice in placements involving meso and macro level practice.

The findings show that almost one third of BSW and MSW students (31.7%) undertook a placement prior to engaging in classroom learning related to their placement learning. This result brings into question the extent to which pedagogical intent is informing decisions around placement allocation. As discussed earlier, widespread placement shortages and the exclusion of first placement students from some practice settings can drive placement development and allocation. The high proportion of final placement students in individually-focused direct service placements however, suggests that there are additional variables at play.

The AASW stipulates in its field education standards (AASW, 2012) that all students are required to undertake at least one direct service placement during their course. The

findings imply that there are many more students at Deakin University undertaking two individually-focused direct service placements than there are students undertaking a combination of direct service and research or policy placements. Although this is not problematic from an accreditation viewpoint, it is concerning from a program leadership perspective, particularly in an environment of constricting placement capacity. If final placement students are being allocated to individually-focused direct service placements when they have already completed one direct service placement, then this creates an unnecessary bottleneck for first students who would benefit most from an individually-focused direct service placement.

Anecdotally, it appears that most students perceive that placements providing individually-focused learning opportunities represent the gold standard social work placement. In an era where students have become the consumer of higher education degrees, there is increasing pressure on social work programs to allocate placements in line with students' preferences. Yet, placements focused on meso and macro level social work practice are equally valuable in supporting students to develop practice knowledge and skills in working towards social change at cultural and structural levels. Furthermore, it is these practice learning opportunities that align coherently with the critical social work underpinnings of Deakin University's social work program.

Study Limitations

Although this study offers some useful insights into the field education program at Deakin University, caution needs to be exercised in interpreting the findings. A key limitation is that the study offers only one year of data, 2018. Replication of the study over a number of years would enable us to develop a deeper understanding of the emerging trends in the distribution of placement settings, learning foci, supervision arrangements, and the alignment of placement learning with pedagogical intent. At best, this study provides a useful benchmark for measuring the impact of any programmatic changes we make into the future to more coherently align our placement allocation decisions with the pedagogical intent of our field education program.

Another key limitation is the study's focus on one field education program. As such, findings are not generalisable to other field education programs. In saying this, a cross-institutional benchmarking study would enable us to compare and contrast the findings of this study with other social work field education programs. We have proposed a cross-institutional study to our field education colleagues across the other six Victorian schools of social work. There is widespread agreement that such a study will provide a broader-scale picture of field education and enable evidence-informed decision-making on how we might capitalise on the existing and emerging placement opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The aim in this study was to determine the structure and nature of placements undertaken by students as part of the BSW and MSW programs at Deakin University in 2018. In canvassing the current placement environment in which Deakin University's social work field education programs operates, a preliminary picture of the complexities of field

education was ascertained. In many ways this study affirms Cleak's (2018) findings in that the current diversity of practice settings, placement learning foci, and supervision arrangements is largely driven by the impacts of marketised service systems and the pressures that this generates at the personal, cultural and structural levels. It is perhaps time for us to resist more strategically the pressure of current conditions through a systematic alignment of our placement distribution and allocation decisions with our pedagogical intent.

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