Field Education for International Students in Australia: Preparing students and the sector

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study which explored strategies utilised by staff of the Masters of Social Work program at the University of South Australia to support some international students in meeting the requirements of their first field education placement. Strategies included curriculum redesign, the introduction of a hurdle requirement, student integration seminars, field educator training and the establishment of a campus-based community centre. The multipronged approach aimed to improve students' spoken and written English language skills, introduce them to social work practice in the Australian context, develop their confidence and increase the number of students accepted into placements at their first interview. The lessons learned and feedback received from students, field teachers and academic staff involved are presented with recommendations for future developments.

Keywords: *Field education, Social work, Innovation, Rural, School wellbeing*

INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant and continual increase in international student enrolments in the Australian higher education sector over the past three decades (Back, Davis & Olsen, 1996; Australian Education Network, 2014). Large numbers of international students, with varying levels of language proficiency and diverse cultural assumptions, can make it difficult for schools of social work to place and support students in field education placements. The problem is exacerbated by the relative speed with which students reach first placement in qualifying Social Work Masters programs. We note that most international students have only recently arrived in the country, move straight into classroom study and are then expected to be ready for their first field placement just six months later. Put simply, some students have not had the time or support required to adjust to life, study and professional practice in the Australian context.

The two-year Master of Social Work (qualifying) [MSW (Q)]) program, offered at the University of South Australia has attracted a large intake of international students in recent years. The student intake has steadily risen to approximately 80 new students per year since 2009, with almost 50% of those being international students, often newly arrived in Australia. The focus of this article is to, first, consider the context of field education for international social work students in Australia; second, to present and discuss the multipronged approach developed by staff to better support students; and finally, consider future directions. To establish a context, this article briefly explores some drivers behind increased international students enrolments in the Australian tertiary sector before moving on to discuss some of the challenges international students face in making the transition to study in Australia. A brief overview of the issues specific to international students and field education placements is presented.

The context of international students in the Australia tertiary sector

Attracting international fee paying students to tertiary degrees can be a strategy for universities across Australia to alleviate impacts of shrinking resources and reduced government funding. Education has become a commodity, an attractive income source and major export industry, rather than a form of international aid (Back et al., 1996; Bartoli, Kennedy, & Tedam, 2008). In such funding climates, teaching and student support can be relegated to secondary status, as universities are focused on attracting income, prioritising research and industry partnerships (Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

In 2006, Australia had the highest proportion of international students in the OECD, when 17.9% of all undergraduates in Australian universities were international students (OECD, 2008). By 2014, the total proportion of international students studying at Australian universities had increased to 25% of all students (Australian Education Network [AEN], 2014). The majority of international students in higher education who choose to study in Australia come from developing countries. In particular, many students are from Asia (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2015) and, most recently, the largest number of processed student visas have gone to students coming from China (Dutton & Colbeck, 2015). From a social work perspective, emerging recognition of the need for social work to address social problems has led to an expansion

of social work education programs throughout the Asia Pacific region (Barretta-Herman, Leung, Littlechild, Parada, & Wairire, 2016). There has been a particularly rapid growth throughout China with plans to have a workforce of 1.45 million professionally qualified social workers by 2020 (Meng, Gray, Bradt, & Roets, 2018).

Research shows that international students prefer to base themselves in capital cities rather than in regional areas when moving to Australia for study. In 2016, 33,400 international students settled in Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia, with approximately 42% of those enrolled in tertiary education programs (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2017). The University of South Australia had a total of 5,104 international students enrolled in 2016 and of those, 40 enrolled in the first year of the MSW (Q) program at the Magill Campus.

Transitional challenges for international students and universities

International students moving to a different country face numerous practical, social and emotional challenges which can impact their ability to study. For example, research shows that international students can experience acculturative stress due to the challenges associated with trying to overcome language barriers, academic problems, isolation, discrimination and the practical problems arising from settling into a new environment (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011; Gornisiewicz & Bass, 2011, Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Further, international students can feel isolated and unwelcome in the classroom (Ryan & Dogbey, 2012).

In addition to coping with the emotional effects of transition to study in a different country, international students at times do not present with sufficient abilities to read, write and speak English in a professional context (Harrison & Felton, 2013). Limited spoken English skills in particular, can make students reluctant to communicate in the classroom, thereby suppressing their ability to engage in productive, class-related discussions (McCluskey, 2012). Creating an authentic learning experience by encouraging roleplaying of the use of effective communication, terminology and colloquial language with peers and native English speakers can be helpful to develop international students' confidence and support networks (Crawford & Candlin, 2013). A study of Asian-born international students in Australia found that positive experiences with peers of different cultures in or outside of the classroom increased international students' self-esteem and confidence in social interactions (Mak, Bodycott, & Ramburuth, 2015). Further, research has also shown that when the content of English language support programs link spoken English skills with demands of practice contexts, students are more likely to value and participate in the experience (Murray, 2012) due to seeing the benefits of participation to future work experience opportunities.

Implications for field education in social work and the human services

Large numbers of international students and the challenges associated with language proficiency, cultural assumptions and social isolation, make it difficult to place, and then support, international students in field education placements (Cleak, Anand, & Das, 2016). Often curriculum content caters for domestic students and is not adjusted to the additional learning needs of international students (Rai, 2002). Outside of the university,

difficulties in placing international students are partially linked to agencies' expectations. For example, expecting international students to be work-ready, seeking extra funding to cover the cost of more support and viewing international placements as particularly complex (Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett, & Diamandi, 2014). Agency managers often choose students for placement positions who have experience in the sector, can 'hit the ground running' and avoid what they might perceive as 'risky' students (Hanlen, 2011). Often it is the international student who is supported to 'assimilate to the field' rather than the organisation being encouraged to provide a learning environment suitable for international students (Harrison & Ip, 2013). Consequently, the mismatch in the expectations of international students and agency managers and staff is a matter that needs to be addressed and action taken to find ways to meet the needs of both.

Supervision and support of international students in field education

There are a number of factors that will impact the supervisory relationship. For example, it has been shown that learning style is influenced by culture (Manikutty, Anuradha, & Hansen, 2007). Students from various cultures may be reluctant to raise issues in supervision or burden supervisors with the unique challenges they experience (Harrison & Ip, 2012). Harrison and Ip (2013) highlight that supervisors may feel ill-prepared to supervise international students. This has implications for field education, as it cannot be assumed that all qualified and experienced social work practitioners have the necessary skills to supervise international students in the field education placement process. Wolfsfeld and Haj-Yahia (2010) contend that a mismatch of supervision and learning styles can cause tension in the relationship between field educator and student. Supervisors may not be reflexive in considering their own level of awareness nor make adjustments to differences to the workplace (Harrison & Ip, 2013). Training should facilitate supervisors' understanding of how their own cultural background may influence the supervisory relationship (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). Cleak and Wilson endorsed culturally aware supervision where "the cultural dynamics of the supervisory relationship are discussed" and time is devoted to "discussing the cultural assumptions of social work theory and service provision" (2013, p. 153).

Ongoing support to placements with culturally diverse students in particular is important, for instance, schools of social work need to maintain an active feedback loop between field educator, university and student which includes mutual evaluation and debriefing in order to avoid misunderstanding (Mathieson & Lager, 2007). Harrison and Ip (2013) suggested that schools of social work take the lead and create awareness of the issues relevant to cross-cultural supervision and find ways of working with field educators and agencies to address those.

Importantly, schools of social work with large intakes of international students need to consider student preparation for field education, preparation of agencies to host social work students with an international background and the support provided to students and field educators during placement. Factors for consideration are the skills of students and field educators, their capacity to learn and support, as well as the field educators' understanding and adaptability to work cross-culturally. Outlined here are strategies developed by the social work program staff at the University of South Australia to address issues identified in their work with students and agencies.

Improving social work field education learning for international students: A case example

In response to the concerns of agencies and the difficult experiences of some international students in the MSW (Q) degree, field education staff have developed a multi-pronged approach to better prepare and support international students and their field educators. The approach included curriculum redesign, inclusion of hurdle requirements, student-integration seminars, field educator training and creation of placement projects.

These measures were chosen as the most effective way of addressing the needs of some international students who were experiencing difficulties with understanding the Australian context for professional social work, had limited spoken or written English skills and, as a consequence, could not demonstrate the knowledge and skills required at pre-placement interviews in preparation for their first placement.

Figure 1 sets out the courses in the first semester of the MSW (Q) and provides information about delivery modes and hurdle placement.

FIRST COURSE	**Social Work in the Australian Context** Delivery 1 week intensive – being redeveloped to 6 week online delivery with a 3 day workshop.	A ONE DAY FIELD EDUCATOR TRAINING IS RUN PARALLEL TO THE STUDENT PREPARATION
THREE COURSES DELIVERED CONCURRENTLY	**Effective Human Service Delivery.** Delivery: 10 weeks weekly face-to-face teaching.	
	Contemporary Practice Theories for Social Work. Delivery: 6 weeks online with 3 day face-to-face workshop. Hurdle exam in June: must be passed to progress to placement.	
	Social Work Practice Skills Delivery: 10 weeks weekly face to face teaching. Preparation for Field Education Placement class delivered Hurdle interview conducted to assist students to be more fully prepared for agency interview with prospective field educator	
	Integration Seminars Delivery: 12 weeks weekly face-to-face teaching.	
	Community Projects Creation of suitable field education projects to transition international students into Australian Social Work. Additional support and training in project management and community development.	

Figure 1. Course requirements and supports for international students in field education.

Curriculum redesign in the SWM (Q) program

The first-year curriculum was redesigned to include a specific course that provides international students with more content on an Australian context for social work practice. The 4.5 unit course is mandatory for all international students and additional to three other core courses (see Figure 1). Course content includes an overview of the welfare state, the three-tiered government system, the funding models and inherent design and delivery of social work and human services programs. Through participation in the course, international students explore the purpose of social work, social work roles and functions, intervention models, social work theoretical frameworks and practice skills. This focus came from staff observations that some international students did not have sufficient levels of knowledge in this area. Understanding the context of practice, terminology and colloquial language can be a challenge for international students (Crawford & Candlin, 2013). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) *Code of Ethics* (2010) and ethical decision-making frameworks, and the core domains of social work are also a strong focus. It should be noted that, while this course was specifically designed for newly arrived international students who have no, or limited, knowledge of the Australian context for practice, it was made available upon request to domestic students wanting to enrol due to their lack of familiarity and knowledge of the social work sector.

Hurdle requirement

Exams in the Contemporary Practice Theories for Social Work course and the Social Work Practice Skills course at the end of the first semester in the MSW (Q) were also introduced. Effective communication and terminology are important to student preparation, but can be especially challenging for international students (McCluskey, 2012; Crawford & Candlin, 2013). This hurdle requires all students to demonstrate and articulate, in writing and verbally under exam conditions, their theoretical social work knowledge and to demonstrate their practice skills with clients prior to field education. Academic readiness can be a challenge for international students (Harrison & Felton, 2013). The hurdles give staff a chance to uniformly identify any student who is not ready and in need of extra support with theoretical knowledge or skills at the end of their first semester in the program.

Additional integration seminars

International students were provided with additional weekly integrative seminars over 12 weeks following completion of the four semester-one courses and immediately prior to embarking on the first field education placement. The focus of these integrative seminars was the application, integration and articulation of social work theoretical knowledge to practice settings. Research has shown that international students often struggle to make adjustments to local systems (Bartoli et al., 2008). The integrative seminars also aimed to help international students prepare for the pre-placement interview with a prospective field educator. Role-plays with students and a "prospective field educator" were used to help develop spoken English skills (Crawford & Candlin, 2013). Role-plays provided an opportunity for students to practice articulating key aspects of other theoretical relevant bodies of knowledge. This strategy of ongoing revision and articulation helped students to conceptualise and articulate the application of social work knowledge to social work practice.

Field educator training

As a result of university and school reviews and an AASW accreditation review identifying support needs for international students on placement, field educators were offered specific training for working with international students. Bridging the gap between student learning needs and agency needs was necessary in order to provide a suitable learning environment for students and support agency staff. Training for field educators is important in order create awareness of the issues relevant to cross-cultural supervision and to find ways of working with field educators and agencies to address those (Harrison & Ip, 2013). It can also facilitate an understanding of the particular needs of international students (Rai, 2002).

A field education training program has been developed as a one-day workshop and is offered twice a year just prior to students commencing the field education placement. Literature supports the need for training that will facilitate supervisors' understanding of how their own cultural background may influence the supervisory relationship (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). The main focus of the training is the skills and knowledge required for working with cultural diversity, differences in values and in cultural practices. Differences in expectations and understandings of the roles of both students and field educators from culturally diverse perspectives are explored to debunk cultural stereotypes and assumptions and breakdowns in communication. The field educator training also provides field educators with strategies to assist international students to settle into the workplace and to articulate their social work purpose and knowledge.

Community development placement project: Alternative placement options

Field education staff found there was a small group of international students who were deemed to be not ready for traditional placement experience despite having passed the prerequisite courses. The reasons for this were, most often:

- limited English writing and speaking skills;

- no detailed comprehension of social work in Australia;

- no international driver's licence;

- unable to travel the required distance to a placement using public transport; or

- special circumstances that needed to be considered in the placement matching process.

Staff sought options that would provide students with a placement experience and the extra support needed to help them succeed and pass first placement. At that point in time the School of Psychology Social Work and Social Policy was exploring the possibility of establishing a community centre at the Magill Campus. This was the catalyst for staff to establish a community development placement on university campus grounds.

Staff of the school negotiated with community partners to identify a range of projects that would meet the needs of the partners and which could be further developed to accommodate the requirements of a 500-hour social work hour placement (AASW, 2013).

The projects were developed to better cater to the needs of international students (Rai, 2002). Students were also encouraged to speak English while working on these projects and interacting with staff. Research indicates that when spoken English skills were linked to practice contexts, students were more likely to value and participate in the experience (Murray, 2012); thus closely guided placement projects presented an opportunity for professional and academic growth. The first intake of students to this new placement option occurred in 2015, with 30 students undertaking their field education placement on campus. Of these students, 93% (n=28) were international and 7% (n=2) were domestic.

Student preparation and support

The students in the community development placements were supported throughout by four social work field education staff who were allocated across the six community projects, and who were responsible for leading two projects each. In each group, a student who had previously demonstrated leadership skills was then allocated as project manager for each of the projects. These students were supported to provide student peer mentoring and leadership to other group members to progress each of the community projects.

Students were allocated to one or two community projects throughout the entire placement based on their identified interests. All students were provided additional support and training in basic project management and community development. This training was provided prior to placement and gave students exposure to external agencies and guest speakers. During the community placement, students were provided with intensive support and supervision both individual and group based.

University community development placement examples

Varied community projects provided students involved with opportunities to identify broad social issues in the community that social workers and human service workers address and advocate for change in these areas. The projects included:

World food group: This project aimed to promote an increased awareness and understanding of vulnerable community members who experience food insecurity by holding a Hypothetical Q & A forum during Anti-poverty Week and on World Food Day.

Mental health and well-being group: This project aimed to promote positive mental health issues and present an informative interactive educational "mindfulness" session on mental health and well-being during Mental Health Week.

Intercultural sports group: This project aimed to organise a family fun day for newly arrived refugee communities at a local primary school to assist in developing links and relationships with the broader community through the use of sporting activities.

Flourishing life project with older people: This project aimed to interview older people in residential care facilities and those living independently in their own homes to capture and record their narratives and highlight significant achievements and experiences.

Domestic violence awareness raising and film production: This project aimed to increase

community awareness about the impact of domestic violence and to help students understand and identify the important social work skills in supporting migrant women and children experiencing domestic violence as well as perpetrators of domestic violence.

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome support group: This project aimed to increase awareness about the issue of foetal alcohol syndrome and develop an information session on key issues surrounding this issue.

PROJECT OUTCOMES, CHALLENGES AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Overall, the extra support to international students and creating supportive placement opportunities had positive outcomes. Field education staff and students recognised that students were better positioned to conceptualise the role of social workers, and could conceptualise and articulate their position, understanding and skills as student social workers on placement.

An initial challenge of the project was encouraging students to value their participation in the community projects and not to view it as a remedial strategy in response to their learning needs. Students at times were resistant to the placement because they felt they were being discriminated against. Most of these students questioned why the university had accepted them into the MSW (Q) program if their English-speaking and writing skills were considered below the standard required for placement. It should be noted that a number of these students were initially referred to an external agency field educator for an interview and placement; however, they were not able to be placed in the agency for one or more of the reasons mentioned previously.

During the weekly sessions and at the end of the preparatory classes, students were asked to complete a questionnaire asking for feedback about the weekly content of the sessions. These were collated by staff using a thematic analysis based on the qualitative approach to gathering this information. The feedback showed that students felt these opportunities provided them with greater understanding of the social worker role and the purpose of social work. Specifically, students appreciated asking questions of individual supervisors that they did not feel comfortable asking in the larger classrooms. Students felt they were able to develop a stronger, trusting relationship with the supervisors on these projects because of the closer contact and collaboration they experienced and the relationship they had built with these supervisors. Students also expressed satisfaction in listening to guest speakers from various agencies sharing the role of social workers in those specific agencies and varied fields of practice.

Feedback from field educators also highlighted that the international students who participated in the revised courses and on-campus community placement projects were able to better understand how they fitted in an agency and the field of practice, the Australian contexts of social work and what this meant for their engagement in social work practice.

Important considerations for this project were relationships with the community organisations and the field in general. The field education team valued the relationships

with community organisations and under the guidance of the field education director, worked closely with a number of university departments and staff to further strengthen the relationships and identify suitable projects for the community development placements.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Although resource-intensive, the multi-pronged approach to supporting international students has had positive benefits for the school. The trial of the on-campus community project placements in 2014 has led to the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy progressing its plans to establish a community centre on campus. The community centre will also provide learning opportunities for psychology, social work and human services students for their field education placements.

DISCUSSION

Reflecting upon these developments in supporting students on placement and, in particular, international students, it is clear that the academic requirements for successful field education learning is resource intensive. Further, that supporting international students is the responsibility of more than one stakeholder in the field education experience. Appropriate strategies, such as those described here, need to be developed in order to support the academic needs of international students (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2011). If field education staff are expected to support increasing numbers of international students they will require appropriate support and resources to do this competently and professionally. The investment needed to best address the learning needs of international students in understanding how social work is operationalised in Australia has been described as ongoing and intensive (Harrison & Ip, 2013; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). In this case, whilst the response to increasing numbers of international students and their specific learning needs has been addressed by creating challenging on-campus placements, this has been mostly due to the dedication and extensive support of the field education manager, course co-ordinator and the team and with the ongoing support of the head of school. Without additional staffing this level of intensive support and collaboration is unsustainable due to workload pressures and current levels of infrastructure. Funding a coordinator position with appropriate workload allocations can be instrumental in appropriately supporting international students in their learning (Rai, 2002). Further support is also required from different levels of the university and the professional association. While universities continue to accept international students they have an obligation to provide a quality learning experience in line with student expectations.

Schools of social work also have a responsibility to set boundaries and ensure that students who are accepted into social work programs will have the best possible chance to succeed in their study. In this example the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy at the University of South Australia has employed other measures to ensure that the students admitted to the program have the minimum requirements upon entry. For example, there is now a minimum International English Language Test Skills (IELTS) requirement level of 6.5 and this has since been raised to 7 across all bands of the IELTS test. A cap has also been placed on the number of international students accepted into the program and a higher minimum requirement for the GPA average that students need to achieve. This

is a space that will need to be monitored, in particular regarding the overall university's understanding of the requirements of social work field education.

The curriculum in social work programs is another area of consideration in better supporting international students. As described in the case example, curriculum redesign must meet student needs by introducing them to the Australian context for social work practice, equip them with the required skills and enable them to better understand cultural differences. Changes in curriculum may also include acknowledging and working with cultural differences to facilitate processes for students to become critical independent learners and thinkers and to understand different educational and organisational cultures to their own home country (Harrison & Ip, 2013). If schools of social work are to be more successful in supporting international students to adapt to new environments and different learning and teaching styles in social work, it is vital that the curriculum addresses these issues.

Finally, greater collaboration between the professional accrediting body, the AASW, the universities and the social work and human service agencies needs to be developed in order to effectively address inequities in learning experiences for international students compared to those of domestic students. The focus of this interagency collaboration would be to develop and incorporate a cultural competency framework to build cultural knowledge and increase awareness of cultural diversity. The framework should include competencies in being more culturally responsive to cultural differences, culturally appropriate practice, teaching and learning styles, and supervision of social work students from diverse cultural backgrounds. These competencies would enhance the capacity of academics, field educators and agency staff to help international students develop their social work identity in the Australian context of social work practice. Universities, professional bodies and social work and human services agencies must become familiar with, and develop, culturally appropriate understandings of culturally diverse values, practices, traditions, belief systems and customs in order to be able to support international students undertaking social work placements in new and different environments in Australian contexts (Harrison & Ip, 2013). The AASW and the Australian Community Workers Association have a professional responsibility to provide training and supervision to their members who are providing placement opportunities to international students.

The case study reported has limitations, as it only reports on a specific program that to date, has only been evaluated through student feedback mechanisms and anecdotal feedback from staff and field educators. To strengthen our insights and findings, further evaluation and research will be useful. The exploration of the overall value of the learning for the professional practice in the context of international students' own country would also warrant further research.

CONCLUSION

Increasing numbers of international students entering social work programs in Australia present challenges for key stakeholders. Those challenges are particularly evident in the field education component of social work education. Students have a right to an education that will meet their learning needs which includes a quality field education experience as per the

requirements of the professional body the AASW. To achieve this, universities and schools of social work will need to find new and creative ways to support and prepare students for practice. Social work and human service staff and agencies are under pressure to do more with less but also have a professional obligation to the next generation of social workers through the provision of placements. To meet this obligation, agencies and staff need the support of the AASW and the schools of social work to build their confidence and capacity to provide placement opportunities. These may be new and creative versions of traditional placement experiences which could prove to have unexpected benefits to the organisation, as was the case in this example.

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