The Impact of Remote Social Work Field Placements on Academic Performance

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to measure the impact of rural and international placements on students' academic performance, this article compares the trends in average marks of social work students completing final placements across three different sites (Pacific Islands, Rural NSW and Sydney) over the past four years. Trends show some quantitative differences across the sites that are not necessarily addressed within other literature on the topic. To complement the quantitative data, some basic qualitative data were gathered from participants in the remote placement programs to give insight into students' perceived factors in the academic performance of the different cohorts

Keywords: *field placement, international, rural, remote, academic performance*

INTRODUCTION

Western Sydney University (WSU) delivers an accredited, on-campus, four-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program but is not a registered Distance Education provider. We have, however, had opportunity in recent years to have a growing number of students from the main cohort who complete their final placement either in the Pacific Islands or in rural New South Wales (referred to in this article as "remote placements"). Students go through an application process for both opportunities, with the rural NSW placement supported by scholarships from NSW Department of Family and Community Services, and the Pacific Islands placements supported by HECS-enabled OS Help grants.

WSU is one of the Australian universities that still runs an integrated field education curriculum, where students engage in field placement and undertake academic subjects at the same time. For students in remote placements, the challenges associated with this arrangement include: the aspiration to equity in delivery of unit content; the reliability of information and communication technology (ICT); the regularity of communication between staff and students; the capacity for pastoral care of students; the quality of students' work in relation to unit outcomes; and the amount of university control over the learning process. There is much insightful literature and much more nuanced research that can be conducted into the value of remote placements for students, but it is important to state at the outset that the research reported in this article is not concerned with assessing competence in placement performance. Neither is it primarily related to student growth and learning as a result of placement, but rather attempts to quantitatively assess the impact of undertaking a remote placement on students' academic performance, as represented by differences in average marks. This use of quantitative research methods has implications which are significant for exploration around the impact of remote placements on academic performance. The article discusses these challenges ahead of further research into the use of ICT and other strategies for ensuring equitable, quality learning experiences for students on placement in remote locations.

For the purposes of this article, "Sydney" refers to the CBD/greater Sydney region, "rural NSW" refers to locations outside the greater Sydney region, and "Pacific Islands" includes Fiji, Samoa and Tonga.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

A number of different themes emerge from the current literature related to rural and international placements, collectively referred to in this article as remote placements. Firstly, some of the literature steps into the area of preparation for placement. Students need to prepared for their remote placement experience (Flynn, Brydon, Kornhauser, & Grimes, 2014; McLennan, Boddy, Cartmel, & Chenoweth, 2012; Riebschleger, Norris, Pierce, Pond, & Cummings, 2015) in terms of practicalities, reflecting on their motivations and learning goals, and developing awareness of the idiosyncrasies of the placement environment. Other literature (Pawar, 2017; Ravulo, 2016) stresses the importance of the university being prepared in relation to administrative processes, communication channels and placement learning frameworks, particularly the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing – in this regard Aboriginal Australian knowledges for rural NSW placements and Pacific epistemologies for Pacific Islands placements.

A second area that attracts discussion (Hosken et al., 2016; Jones-Mutton, Short, Bidgood, & Jones, 2015; Noble & Henrickson, 2011) relates to models and style of social work super-vision. There is no shortage of suggestions around how to create a positive learning opportunity within the agency that is accompanied by best practice in supervision; however, it is also acknowledged that the quality of social work supervision (whether it is onsite or external) can vary greatly.

A third point of interest explores the value and challenges of ICT in placements (Hickson, Theobald, & Long, 2015; Moore, 2012) There is a subset of the literature (Ballantyne, 2008; Biggerstaff, 2005; Maidment, 2006; Oterholm, 2009) that considers the use of ICT for placement learning as a pedagogically different learning framework requiring a different set of competencies and strategies to engage students in critical reflection

The bulk of the literature is drawn towards an analysis of the nature of learning and the student experience whilst undertaking a remote placement. Despite the obvious challenges for students dealing with isolation (Fox, 2017b Matthew & Lough, 2017), learning can be seen as a holistic experience (Ashencaen Crabtree, Parker, Azman, & Paul Carlo, 2014) that not only incorporates student development and measurement of social work competencies (Barton, Bell, & Bowles, 2005; Cleak, Anand, & Das, 2016; Lough, Moore McBride, & Sherraden, 2012; O'Sullivan, Ross, & Young, 1997) but also formation of professional and personal identity (Fox, 2017a; Wehbi, 2009). Further, there is an added element in the learning process that immersion in a remote culture presents a qualitatively different holistic learning experience (Hall, 2015; Brown & Duguid, 1991) that also embraces development of competencies in culturally sensitive practice (Ravulo, 2016).

While there is a significant amount of research in the social work education literature that highlights the benefits and challenges for students in both rural and international placements, it has been difficult to find quantitative research aligned with the academic outcomes of students who have engaged in remote placements. This gap in the literature is possibly related to the predominance of mastery assessment (i.e., pass/fail) in field education subjects, and the smaller number of universities that still contain an integrated curriculum. From discussion with field academics across a range of Australian universities, there appears to be a general discourse that – despite the benefits to students for growth and learning – engaging in remote placements may result in lower marks for other academic subjects. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to explore whether this perception has actually been the trend for social work students, and whether there are any particular factors that may impact on emerging patterns.

METHOD

Sample

The study was based on data collected from students enrolled at WSU in the BSW from 2013 to 2016 who, following a full-time BSW progression, completed their final Field Education unit (final semester) *and* either Contemporary Social Work Practice (final semester capstone unit) or Social Work Honours Thesis 2 (final semester Honours unit), *and* undertook their final field placement in the same semester. Table 1 (below) shows the

comparative numbers of students who fulfilled the above conditions, grouped into cohorts according to the placement locations of: Pacific Islands, Rural NSW, Sydney (mainstream students) and Sydney (Honours students).

Honours students undertake slightly different units in 3rd and 4th year of the degree and so were given a separate cohort.

Table 1. Description of Cohorts Analysed

YEAR	COHORT	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER OF STUDENTS
2013	1	Students on placement in Pacific Islands in 2013	2
	2	Students on placement in rural NSW 2013	1
	3	Mainstream students on placement in Sydney 2013	41
	4	Honours students on placement in Sydney 2013	9
2014	5	Students on placement in Pacific Islands 2014	4
	6	Students on placement in rural NSW 2014	4
	7	Mainstream students on placement in Sydney 2014	40
	8	Honours students on placement in Sydney 2014	5
2015	9	Students on placement in Pacific Islands 2015	5 (includes 1 Honours student)
	10	Students on placement in rural NSW 2015	4 (includes 1 Honours student)
	11	Mainstream students on placement in Sydney 2015	50
	12	Honours students on placement in Sydney 2015	10
2016	13	Students on placement in Pacific Islands 2016	8 (includes 1 Honours student)
	14	Students on placement in rural NSW 2016	5
	15	Mainstream students on placement in Sydney 2016	62
	16	Honours students on placement in Sydney 2016	4

The cohort sizes may appear to be small, but the conditions to be met only eliminated a small number of students and so final sizes do represent approximately 98% of all students enrolled in the program. The study could therefore be reasonably expected to produce more than just indicative findings. This representation is a valid strength of the research but one limitation is that the data are from one institution only and therefore should be regarded as a case study without necessarily being generalisable to the whole university sector.

Figure 1 shows that there has been a steady increase in overall numbers of students over the past four years proceeding to the final year of the BSW, with gradually growing numbers of students successfully applying for placement opportunities in rural NSW and the Pacific Islands. For the first two years, no Honours students applied for remote placements but

over 2015 and 2016, three Honours students successfully applied, adding a small but not insurmountable disruption to the numerical analysis of comparative average marks.

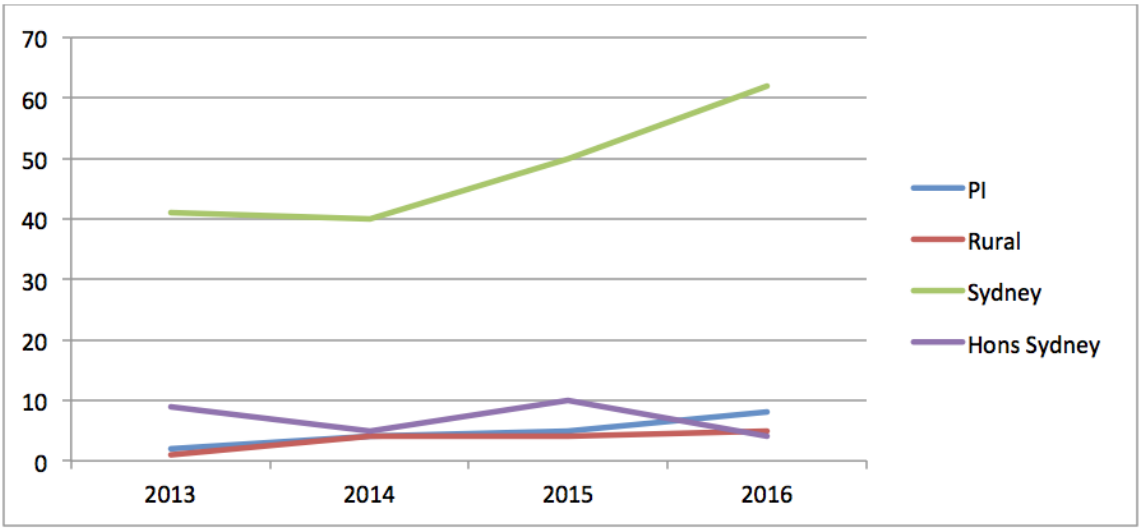

Figure 1. Students on placement per cohort per year

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The research method is drawn from a *mixed methods* approach which, according to Bazeley (cited in Burke et al 2007, p. 112), "involves the use of more than one approach to or method of design, data collection or data analysis within a single program of study, with integration of the different approaches or methods occurring during the program of study, and not just at its concluding point." More precisely, this study adopts *multi-method* research, which Morse (cited in Esteves & Pastor, 2004) says is about using quantitative and qualitative methods separately during the research study. Bazeley (cited in Burke et al2007) points out that this process can occur in parallel or in sequence but integrates the analysis after conclusions are reached. The particular technique utilised in this research is most closely related to *data mining* which, according to Han, Pei, and Kamber (2014, p. 8), is "the process of discovering interesting patterns and knowledge from large amounts of data. The data sources can include databases, data warehouses, the Web, other information repositories, or data that is streamed into the system dynamically." Auslander and Rosanne (2016) reinforce the importance of data mining as a research method for social work. Plath and Gibbons (2010, p. 1) agree, and point to data-mining as "a method for practice-based research that draws on existing organisational data to inform practice issues and build social work knowledge."

Given that the cohort sizes represent almost the full complement of enrolled BSW students, quantitative data on students' marks was collected via data mining of student records. Initially, utilising a simple spreadsheet formula, average marks were calculated for each student: (i) whilst on final placement; (ii) pre-placement across their whole course; and (iii) pre-placement across third and fourth year only. These individual averages were then converted into an average mark for each cohort and tabulated to facilitate a comparison. A simple numerical analysis was applied to highlight the differences in average marks between the cohorts and the range of differences within each cohort. It is these differences that are the main point of focus in the quantitative data.

A second set of quantitative data (relating to student use of resources) was mined from the tracking statistics on the Field Education unit website, class attendance records, the email account and a log of phone calls kept by the unit coordinator. The purpose of utilising this data was to measure a range of student actions/behaviours that could impact on their academic performance.

As these sets of quantitative data were disaggregated and therefore not identifiable, ethics permission was straightforward.

Lastly, a set of qualitative data was gathered to gain some insight into students' perspectives on what might impact academic performance, and was collected on two levels. Firstly, relevant comments from students were collated by data mining placement-related open public Facebook pages (with permission). Secondly, email messages and comments from remote placement students after completion of placement were collated (with permission). A basic thematic analysis (Walter, 2013) was applied to the qualitative data sets to indicate preliminary themes for discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section will provide and explore the nuances of the grades comparison and analyse some of the factors that may impact on the emerging trends. After having calculated average marks for each student and then collective average marks for each cohort, Table 2 provides the comparative data for each cohort across all years of the BSW.

Table 2. Average Marks First–Fourth Year

COHORT	AVERAGE MARK PRE-FINAL PLACEMENT (WHOLE COURSE)	1ST YEAR	2ND YEAR	3RD YEAR	4TH YEAR (1ST HALF)	AVERAGE MARK WHEN ON FINAL PLACEMENT
1	72.71	71.5	73.94	71.92	73.88	75
2	66.04	62.5	65.29	65.5	73.5	78
3	65.47	64.19	65.1	65.78	68.32	68.44
4	75.90	73.07	74.78	78.61	81.25	80
5	71.01	74.31	72.58	69.47	69.73	74.75
6	70.72	73	73.92	70.41	67.5	80.75
7	67.68	68.86	69.17	66.81	66.86	74.05
8	68.86	70.49	70.82	68.04	67.89	74.29
9	68.56	67.71	68.83	69.52	68.3	65.4
10	69.19	64.3	70.78	72.17	72.69	81.67
11	66.99	65.37	66.26	69.16	68.5	73
12	75.8	73.64	74.01	78.57	81	74.55
13	69.24	67.84	68.58	70.59	71.34	74.62
14	69.21	68.58	67.25	70.06	73.12	71.5
15	68.92	67.85	67.66	70.67	70.91	73.63
16	77.98	77.42	76.5	80.16	80	74.04

Table 2 shows that, on the whole, students' average marks increase progressively through the duration of their course, although there was recognisable variation across the cohorts from third year to fourth year without necessarily showing a pattern. To tease out more of the nuances of the impact of remote placement on academic performance, Table 3 shows the differences in average marks for each cohort, and indicates the range of differences within.

There are a number of particular areas of this data to which to draw attention. Table 3 shows that in all but one of the 16 cohorts across this four-year period, the third/fourth year average mark is higher than the whole course average mark shown in Table 2. This general trend may be one that is somewhat expected given the gradual increases indicated in Table 2, but does lend some support to the notion that field placements (situated at WSU in third and fourth year) enable students to make more sense of their classroom learning.

Table 3. Differences in Average Marks

COHORT	AVERAGE MARK WHEN ON FINAL PLACEMENT	AVERAGE MARK PRE-PLACEMENT: 3RD/4TH YEAR	DIFFERENCE:	RANGE IN DIFF: (LOW TO HIGH)
1	75	72.09	2.91	2.72 (1.55 to 4.27)
2	78	68.7	9.3	0
3	68.44	66.6	1.88	19.2 (-8.6 to 10.6)
4	80	79.3	0.7	15.1 (-6.1 to 9)
5	74.75	73.16	1.59	10.1 (-5 to 5.1)
6	80.75	72.86	7.89	2 (7 to 9)
7	74.05	68.95	5.1	25 (-6 to 19)
8	74.29	70.46	3.83	24.3 (-19 to 5.3)
9	65.4	69.03	-3.63	15.73 (-11.13 to 4.6)
10	81.67	72.38	9.29	15.70 (-2.70 to 13)
11	73	68.89	4.11	29.08 (-11.2 to 17.86)
12	74.55	79.8	-5.24	34.25 (-23 to 11.25)
13	74.62	70.89	3.74	19.4 (-2 to 17.4)
14	71.5	71.28	0.22	9.9 (-3.3 to 6.6)
15	73.63	70.35	3.28	32.3 (-15.2 to 17.1)
16	74.04	80.03	-5.99	12.13 (-3.63 to 8.5)

However, as can be seen in Figures 2 and 3, the patterns show very clearly that the average marks *increase at different rates* across the site-based cohorts. For example, the difference is significantly higher for students who undertook placement in rural NSW from 2013 to 2015, although there is a lesser increase in 2016. For students undertaking placement in the Pacific Islands, there is still an increase in average marks in 2013 and 2014 but it is a smaller increase compared with the other cohorts. In 2015, the Pacific Island cohort average mark decreased but then in 2016 it is actually the highest increase of the four cohorts.

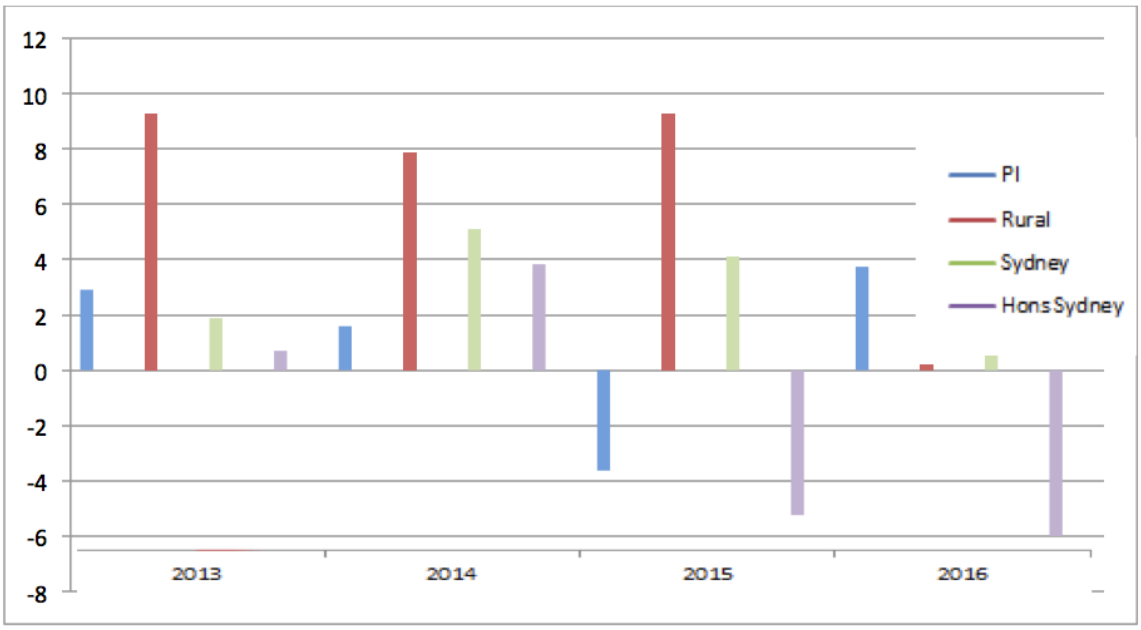

Figure 2. Differences in 3rd/4th year average marks before and after placement (2013-2016)

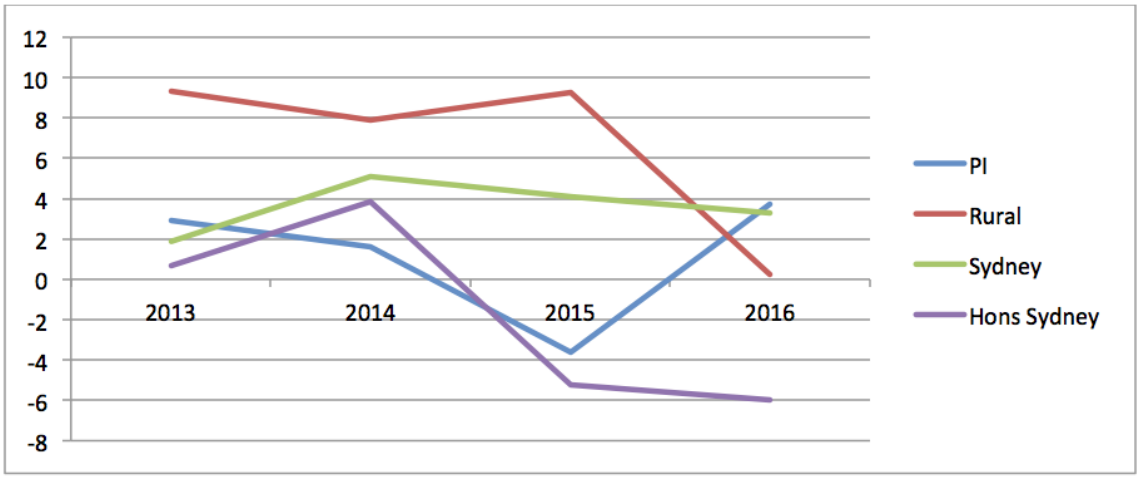

Figure 3. Difference in 3rd/4th year average marks over time

Of the Sydney-based cohorts, the differences in average marks do not vary as greatly, but apart from 2016 the marks are higher than the Pacific Islands cohort. It can also been seen that the differences for the Honours students are higher increases in 2013 and 2014, but decreases in both 2015 and 2016.

The patterns in the data here that show that, in general, a remote placement in rural NSW greatly increased students' average marks and that a remote placement in the Pacific Islands

provided the least likelihood of increasing marks. One of the questions raised by this data was whether the students who undertook placement in rural NSW were higher performing academically to start with, but as the average pre-placement marks and average third year marks (shown in Table 2) demonstrate, there is no evidence to suggest that this is a factor. Nor does the motivation level of students seem to be any different between the rural NSW and PI cohorts, as they both were required to submit quite extensive applications – to assess suitability and to access funding (the rural placements involving FACS scholarships and the PI placements involving OS Help loans).

When looking at the range of difference in individual student average marks, as shown in Figure 4, it can be seen how one large change, particularly in the smaller cohorts, can alter the average mark for the whole cohort. While the intention of this article is not necessarily to analyse the changing patterns in the Sydney-based and Honours cohorts, the inclusion of Honours students in the remote cohorts in 2015 and 2016 does influence the trends to some degree. As smaller cohorts, one big change in an Honours mark can have a significant effect on calculation of averages. Therefore, in the 2016 PI cohort, one Honours student's sharp increase in mark could be what led the PI cohort to have the biggest gain in 2016, and one Honours student's steep decline in mark in the 2015 cohort could be what led to that cohort dropping into a negative difference. Taking out the outliers of the Honours students would see the trend of the other years repeated. The inclusion of an Honours student in the 2015 rural NSW cohort, however, did not seem to have the same impact.

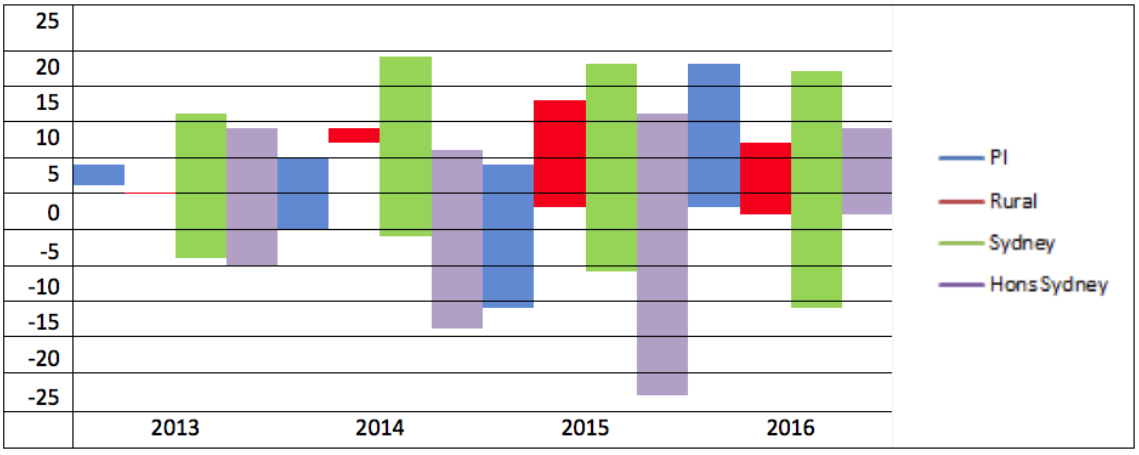

Figure 4. Differences in student average marks (low to high)

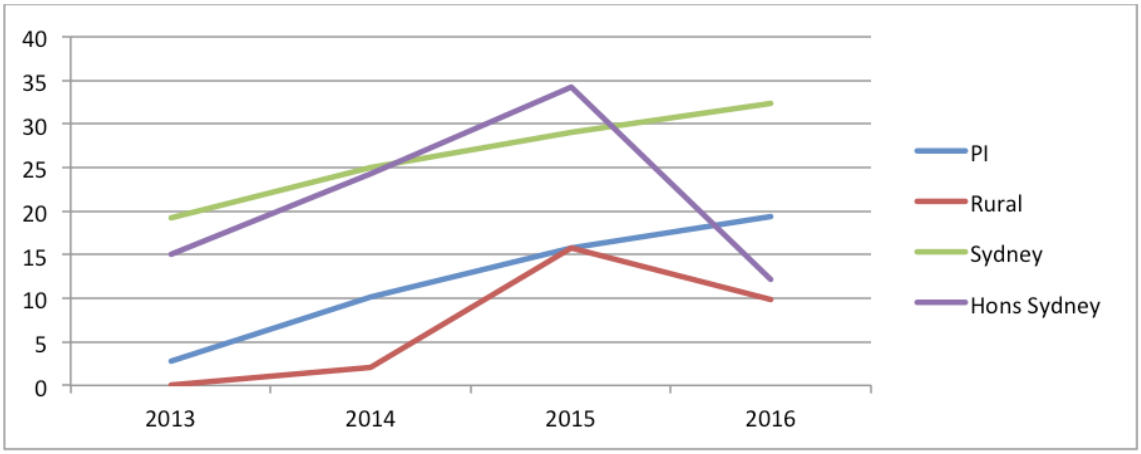

Figure 5. Range in difference of cohort average marks

The patterns for each cohort over time, as shown above in Figure 5, indicate that the gap in average marks increased for the Sydney-based students, but that it has closed for the other three cohorts. Further exploration is required to see whether the delivery of unit content in the integrated curriculum is a factor in this trend. In trying to further understand what might be contributing to some of these differences, it was hoped that an analysis of the frequency of communication and use of online teaching resources might provide some insight. The two units undertaken whilst on placement were not designed for online/ distance, but efforts have been made in reconfiguring delivery to make it possible for students to complete the units from remote locations. It is therefore possible that student actions/behaviours in relation to use of teaching resources may contribute to academic performance.

Table 4. Usage of FE2 Teaching Materials, Communication & Online Processes (Placement Related)

Cohort	Direct contact with teaching staff June-Dec average per student (max poss 14 sessions)	Direct contact hours with SW sup - either onsite or external - average weekly per student (max poss 1.5hr)	No. email contacts with Unit coord June-Dec average per student	No. phone calls with teaching staff June-Dec average per student	Face-to-face hours with peer group June-Dec average per student (max poss 12hrs)	No. of weekly readings referred to in peer group report average per student (max poss 20)	No. weekly reflections posted online June-Dec average per student (max poss 10)	Online resources June-Dec average views per article per student
1	3.5	1.4	9	0.1	11	8	4.5	Data not available[1]
2	2	1	12	3	6	9	3	
3	10.5	1.2	6.5	0.5	10.5	11	0	
4	8.4	1	7.5	0.8	8.4	11	0	
5	1.5	1.5	6	0.1	12	7	1.5	
6	5	1.1	20	4	3	14	6.25	
7	10.6	1.2	7.5	1	10.6	15	0	
8	9.8	1.4	10.5	1.2	9.8	12	0	
9	0.5	1.5	3.6	0.6	10	6	5.6	3.2
10	4.6	1.3	11.5	3.5	12	12.5	5.5	3.71
11	9.1	1.1	6.25	1.5	9.1	12	0.84	4.78
12	7.7	1.1	8.5	2.2	7.7	13.5	1.2	7.55
13	8.5[2]	1.5	6	2	12	8	3.85	5.5
14	5.5[3]	1.5	7.24	3	10	6	2.24	4.82
15	10.1	1.1	4.89	0.5	9.3	13	0.08	5.39
16	7.25	1.25	4.25	1.25	9	9	0	3.67

1. Statistics tracking for these articles was not enabled on the website until 2015.
2. Includes online tutorials held in 2016 for the first time.
3. Includes online tutorials held in 2016 for the first time

Table 4 represents the comparative use of these resources across each cohort, with data drawn from emails and phone calls logged by the unit coordinator, face-to-face hours monitored by the SW supervisor and classroom tutor, and statistics tracking downloaded from the Field Education unit website. Unfortunately, data from the other fourth year unit (Contemporary Social Work Practice) was unavailable for inclusion, but it is suspected that it might follow similar patterns.

The first area for comment is related to direct hours with teaching staff. These contact hours included on-campus class attendance, teleconferences and – as a trial in 2016 – online real-time video tutorials (using *Zoom* technology). A very clear and obvious pattern that emerged was that the students in remote locations had less direct contact with staff than the Sydney-based students. With a maximum of 14 sessions available, Figure 6 shows these stark differences from 2013–2015. In 2016 an online tutorial was piloted that covered material in both the fourth year units in which students were enrolled. There was therefore very little difference in direct contact time between the cohorts in that year, which suggests that the increased numbers of contact hours for the PI cohort could possibly have contributed to the improvement in average marks in 2016. However, the rural cohort engaged only marginally less in this way, and so that that does not really indicate a reason for the rural cohort's negligible difference in average mark in 2016.

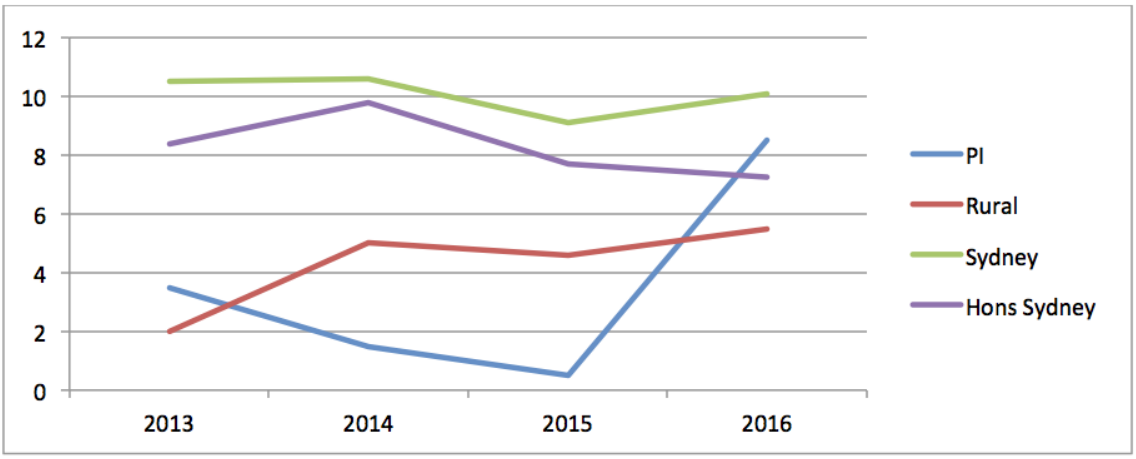

Figure 6. Direct contact with staff - average per student

Satisfyingly, as Table 4 demonstrates, the average weekly direct contact with social work supervisors was equal across the cohorts in every year of data collection, with students receiving between 1 and 1.5 hours of supervision per 28 hours of placement. What did vary more significantly was the average numbers of individual contacts made to the unit coordinator, shown below in Figure 7. (These data do not include teleconferences which were part of the contact teaching hours.)

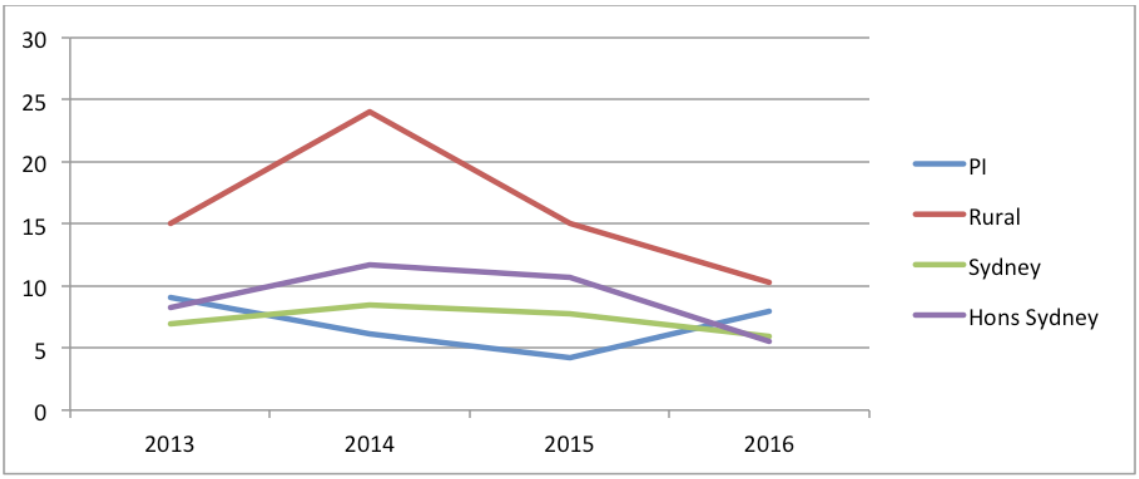

Figure 7. Contacts (phone/email) with Unit Coordinator - average per student

It is very clear that the rural NSW cohort has been in more regular contact with the unit coordinator from 2013 to 2016. These contacts were often for the purpose of confirming what students can and cannot do on placement, organising supervision arrangements and clarifying expectations around assessment items. The content of these contacts may be a better indicator of student motivation and engagement in the learning process and therefore a factor in the improved academic performance for that cohort across the first three years, although it would be expected that level of engagement to be also represented in data showing the use of weekly readings in students' final reports and the number for weekly reflections posted online. Figure 8, however, does not provide such an indication, and there seems to be very little correlation between references to the weekly readings in the final report and changes in average marks.

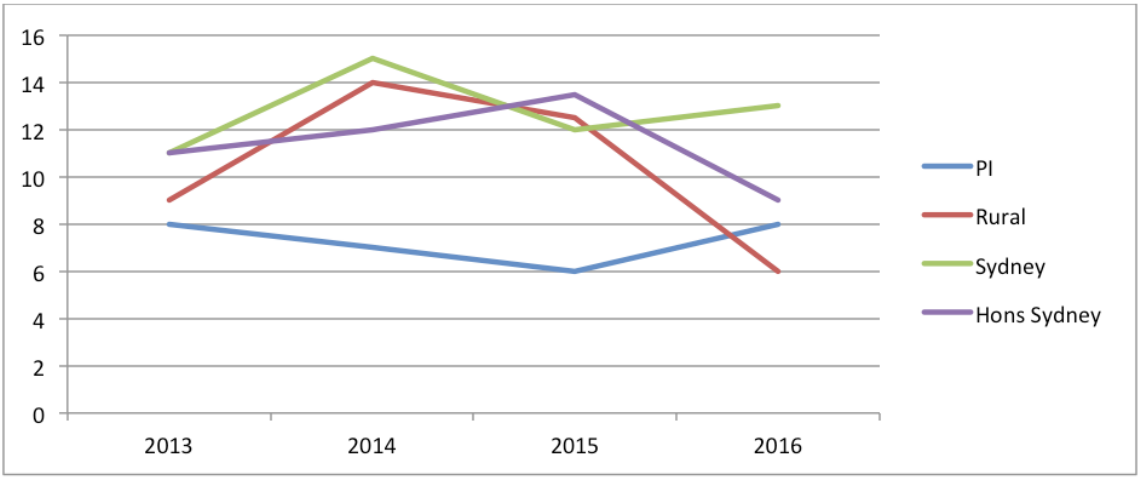

Figure 8. Weekly readings used in final report - average per student

Table 4 (above) shows very little difference between the two remote cohorts in terms of weekly reflections posted online (apart from 204), but there is a slightly closer correlation with the students' download patterns of online resources as shown below in Figure 9. Even though there are only two years' worth of data to draw from, it can be seen that the increased use of online resources does increase for the PI cohort in 2016 at the same time that their average mark increased. A similar correlation follows for the Honours cohort

(in their decrease in average mark paralleled with decrease in use of resources) and the negligible difference for the Sydney-based cohort on both variables. However, the pattern does not follow for the rural NSW cohort.

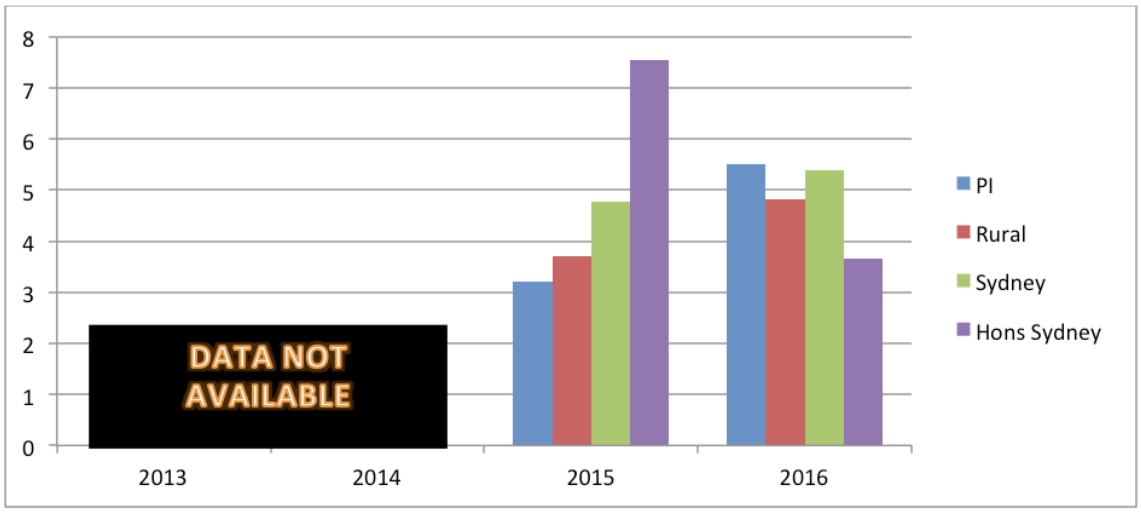

Figure 9. Online resources accessed - average views per article per student

The statistical analysis has provided some useful information for understanding the impact of student actions/behaviours on academic performance whilst undertaking remote placements, but it is not giving the full picture. To add to an understanding around this question, the inclusion of qualitative data from student experiences may prove to be illuminating, especially in terms of moving beyond measurable actions to exploring students' perspectives on the factors that might impact grades.

Qualitative data from students

Mining data from placement-related open Facebook sites provided a critical array of experiences that provides some insight into the impact of placement on academic performances. There was a broad collection of Facebook posts and email comments that go beyond the question raised in this article, and so the relevant data have been grouped into themes. Themes generally reflect the issues discussed in the existing literature but also provide some nuances in relation to their effect on studying. Quotes used in the following section are attributed to pseudonyms.

Contact with other students and academic staff

The physical isolation of the placement experience has been a common phenomenon over each successive year. In circumstances where students were both alone or co-located in remote placements, they found the separation from regular social/support networks to be a factor influencing their motivation levels for engaging in university work. As the numbers of students participating in remote placements grew enabling students to be placed in pairs or more, so did the number of locations and so the isolation of the experience was only marginally lessened. In the Pacific Islands for example, what started with two students in Fiji in 2013 became eight students in 2016 placed across three different island nations (Fiji, Samoa and Tonga).

Students' posts/messages indicate a couple of particular aspects of their experience in relation to contact with teaching staff. They generally expressed frustration about the accessibility and reliability of phones and internet in the Pacific Islands, making it more difficult to access online materials for their subjects. The frequency of daily Facebook posts each trip might actually contradict this sentiment but the clarification is that there are peak times in each different country when internet is reliable and other times when it is not.

After 5pm I just gave up trying to do anything online – it felt a bit like waiting for someone to crank up a generator just to get power. (Matty, PI)

Availability also related to whether the students were at the agency or at their accommodation. This aspect of the experience was also reported by rural NSW students, who had reliable internet services through the FACS office but not necessarily at their accommodation where, at times, students resorted to utilising handheld devices rather than computers.

Even though I learnt so much from this placement, you've no idea how hard it is to access material or submit online assignments with your mobile phone! (Calinda, rural NSW)

This level of difficulty in communication also emerged in overseas students managing the time differences, so that even though students reported that they felt supported by the teaching staff back in Australia, the speed at which they were able to have questions clarified, concerns addressed or points clarified had an impact on their learning experience.

2) Quality of supervision

Student experiences followed similar lines as reported in previous literature: that the quality of supervision varied. Poor supervision generally meant that students increased their contact with teaching staff which – if you put it in the context of the quantitative data analysis earlier in the article – may have had an unintended consequence of contributing to better academic performance. Good supervision was celebrated and fed back to university staff with the purpose of encouraging the next year's students to return to that agency for placement.

Cultural immersion

The converse of these challenges was the depth of learning related to their immersion in a different culture. Every student who posted/messaged from both the rural NSW and PI cohorts indicated that their experience had taught them so much more than they felt they would learned had they been on placement in Sydney. These benefits, according to student report, outweighed the factors that made it difficult or sometimes sapped them of motivation.

Every activity inside and outside of placement was a learning opportunity. (Raelene, PI)

Working and living in the same community also produced challenges, not the least of which was lack of privacy characterised by Mary-Anne (rural NSW student) commenting that "everybody knows your business". Another challenge that more particularly may have impacted on students' ability to put energy into university work was the number of distractions provided by being in an unfamiliar area. This issue was more particularly related to placements in tourist spots in the Pacific Islands or the snowfields in rural NSW.

I just packed in as much as I could – even if I meant I let uni work go. (My-Lyn, PI)

The snow was always calling to me!! (Paolo, Rural NSW)

This level of distraction may have had a negative impact on commitment to study and the resulting academic performance but, as an exercise in developing cultural competence through immersion, it is irreplaceable. This was particularly the case for skills development for working in communities with cultural and religious diversity.

I learned a lot about working in cultural diversity, even though I'm Middle Eastern and live in a culturally diverse area of Sydney. A big thing for me was learning to listen, like really stop and listen to people. Another big area of learning was around spirituality. People connect with spirituality and you know I'm Muslim, but whether it's Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Traditional Pacific religions there was a way to connect with people over their understanding and connection with a higher power. (Hasam, PI)

This immersion in the culture provided significant learning opportunities in terms of "being thrown out of my comfort zone" (Serena, rural NSW student), working in cultural diversity, understanding of Indigenous issues (in both Australia and Pacific Islands), and represented both professional and personal growth.

It helped me build my confidence, understanding what it is really like in the real world and it confirmed for me that Child Protection was something that I wanted to do. It also gives you the opportunity to put those frameworks and theories into practice. (Don, rural NSW)

I think my placement was definitely a life changing experience. I felt it was beneficial on a personal level as well as professionally. (Sandra, PI)

This holistic nature of learning, as alluded to in the previous literature, may not have necessarily improved academic performance but it did contribute to what many students referred to as "life-changing." That this learning through remote placement also helped students prepare for the workforce was consistently reported by students upon their return. Employability, though not necessarily solely dependent on academic performance, is an enduring issue for social work students in the current political–economic climate. It is certainly a major part of the placement construct and so it is gratifying that the bulk of students who undertook remote placements also managed to find jobs in the sector within four months of returning.

CONCLUSION

Academic performance is only one aspect of many in evaluating social work learning and competence in students; nevertheless it is an important one. It can be seen that the data explored in this article do not provide any straightforward explanations into the impact of remote placement on students' academic performance. Indeed, to try to draw firm conclusions is fraught with the dangers of making sweeping generalisations. However, there are some overall trends and patterns that can provide insight.

Clearly, all students' academic performances have improved over the four years of the BSW, and by removing the Honours' outliers from the remote placement cohorts it can be said that there has been a general trend in average marks:

1. All cohorts' average marks increase whilst on final placement, regardless of them being remote or local.

2. Rural NSW placement students' average marks improve the most whilst on placement.

3. PI placement students' average marks improve the least whilst on placement.

4. The Sydney-based students average marks fall in between the two remote cohorts.

Some of the factors that impact on these trends might include:

- amount of contact that remote students have with academic staff including the use of online tutorials, telephone and email communication;

- student use of online resources;

- broader issues experienced by students whilst on placement such as quality of supervision and capacity for managing the associated isolation of a remote placement and any localised "distractions" from being away from home.

Consideration of these trends and their possible causes leads to four key questions as a consequence of seeking to provide opportunity for students to achieve equitable academic results. Firstly, is this pattern a phenomenon repeated across the whole university social work sector? Secondly, do academic subjects need to be further reconfigured to ensure equity of delivery and equity of opportunity for students to achieve optimum results? Thirdly, should the universities that maintain an integrated curriculum (placement and academic subjects running concurrently) continue to do so or will students benefit more academically from separating placement and other units? And lastly, do the benefits experienced by students from remote placements still sufficiently outweigh any disadvantages for universities to continue with these types of learning opportunities? More research into the phenomena should be strongly encouraged in order to better understand the implications across the whole university sector for student academic performance whilst undertaking remote placements.

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