## New Voices

# Field Education: Strengthening the Evidence Base

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**ABSTRACT**

Field education is integral to the professional education of social work students preparing to enter the profession. Despite its importance, and the emphasis on evidence-informed practice in the wider social work curriculum, the evidence base that informs the quality and effectiveness of this core component of training is varied. This brief article describes the beginning stages of a program of research to utilise anonymised administrative data to better understand student experiences, pathways, progress and performance in social work field education. It is argued that informing the evidence base through better utilisation of administrative data has the potential to strengthen program and curriculum development.
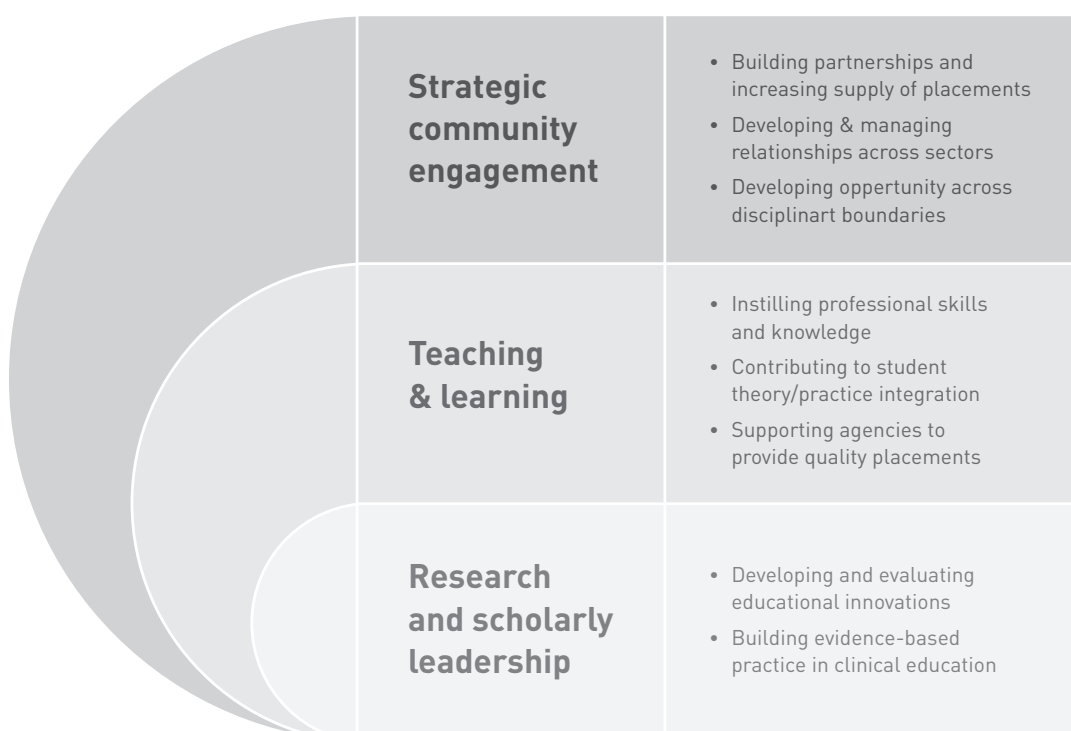
## INTRODUCTION

The significance of field education in the social work curriculum is undisputed (Bogo, 2015; CSWE, 2008; Domakin, 2014; Gursanski & LeSueur, 2011; Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011; Wayne, Bogo & Raskin, 2010). Similar to other professions (such as medicine, nursing, law), field education provides students with an opportunity to practise the skills they learn in the classroom and socializes them to the many complexities of the profession. In a very real way, fieldwork is the primary vehicle that the social work profession has for establishing and testing the competence of its graduates.

Organizations and practitioners that establish field placements also benefit substantially by providing fieldwork opportunities for students. The partnership that develops between organizations and the University can result in significant support and expertise on research and professional development activities. Placements can also be a cost-effective mechanism for future workforce recruitment. For the individual practitioner, it offers a pathway for skills development and experiential learning in the areas of professional supervision and leadership, both of which are critical skill sets for individual career advancement and for building organizational capability.

A high quality and effective fieldwork program has at least three key components: strategic community engagement; teaching and learning; and research and scholarly leadership (see Figure 1). Whilst many schools of social work focus a great deal of energy and might excel in operational aspects of the field education program (particularly in the first and second components of strategic engagement and teaching), there is often too little strategic focus placed on the research–practice nexus.

**Figure 1.** Components of a Fieldwork Program

| Strategic community engagement | • Building partnerships and increasing supply of placements<br>• Developing & managing relationships across sectors<br>• Developing oppertunity across disciplinart boundaries |
| --- | --- |
| Teaching & learning | • Instilling professional skills and knowledge<br>• Contributing to student theory/practice integration<br>• Supporting agencies to provide quality placements |
| Research and scholarly leadership | • Developing and evaluating educational innovations<br>• Building evidence-based practice in clinical education |

This is not to suggest that scholarly research is not occurring in field education. Indeed, it has been postulated that field education has consumed a greater research focus than any other aspect of the social work curriculum (Bogo, 2015). Despite this emerging evidence base, much of the research that has been undertaken is generally qualitative and exploratory in nature. While undoubtedly important to the development of knowledge in field education, qualitative research however, provides only part of the picture of social work education. Furthermore, many of these research studies have been undertaken by individual programs or report on individual projects (Bogo, 2015). In comparison, relatively little systematic research, including cross-institutional work, has been undertaken. In turn, the profession's capacity to generalize these findings and enhance the empirical base with which to improve its quality and effectiveness to inform future program and curriculum development has been limited (Bogo, 2015; Holden et al., 2011).

This places limitations on the development of innovation within field education programs and creates a poor evidence base for the review of educational practice standards in this area. Karger (2012) discusses these dilemmas as they relate more broadly to social work education, stating that, as a result of the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) not collating or releasing data on social work education to the public domain, institutions lack empirical data on the status of social work education in Australia. They state "informed discussions about social work education cannot be made without hard data; nor can the profession adapt to changing trends without valid data on social work education" (Karger, 2012, p. 323).

Additionally, social work field education programs are facing an uncertain future in terms of the sustainability of current placement arrangements. Faced with competing demands of increasing student enrolments and increasing workforce demand pressures that affect place-ment offerings (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Karger, 2012), evidence-based practices are required to maximize the efficiency and sustainability of social work field education programs. Historically, there has been paucity and a lack of emphasis on evidence-informed practice in field education in Australia. With the formation in recent years of the National Field Education Network (NFEN), this context of evidence-informed practice is changing. While still in its infancy, the Network has identified and actioned a number of research priorities to further advance the professional and pedagogical evidence base of field education (Rollins et al., in press).

This brief article describes the beginning stages of a program of research to utilise anonymised administrative data to better understand student experiences, pathways, progress and performance in social work field education. It is argued that informing the evidence base through strategic utilisation of existing administrative data has the potential to strengthen program and curriculum development, while overcoming some of the commonly reported barriers to evidence-implementation (Mullen, Shlonsky, Bledsoe, & Bellamy, 2005).

**Administrative Datasets as Quality Improvement Strategy in Field Education Research**
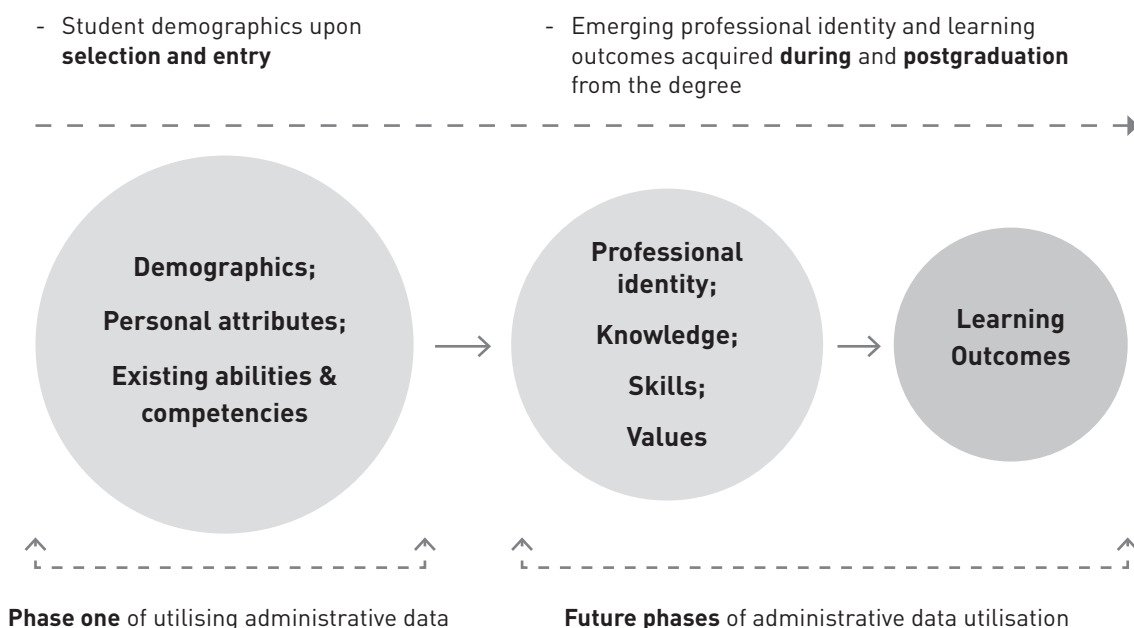Continuous quality improvement has been defined by Lorch and Pollak as "an iterative process of: planning to improve a product or process, plan implementation, analyzing and comparing results against those expected, and corrective action on difference between actual and expected results" (2014, pp. e97066). Simultaneous advances in computer science and engineering have led to the institution of information management systems

in social care, medicine, education, crime and justice, and virtually every other human services sector. Applying an information management system, as a continuous quality improvement strategy that utilises existing field education administrative datasets would offer unprecedented opportunities to both better understand student learning pathways, and identify the factors and processes in field education that either support or inhibit positive student learning outcomes.

Motivated by these possibilities, in 2014, the University of Melbourne hosted an international workshop to discuss the development of a dynamic, outcome-focused, longitudinal database that would enable within- and across-systems research in social work field education. Field academics from five countries congregated at the University and engaged in two days of collaborative research discussions.

The first day was focused on introducing participants to the contextual background of this program of research, and collectively brainstorming the benefits and uses for such a collaborative database in field education. The second day was dedicated to developing a research prototype that would have international applicability and relevance across field education programs, while simultaneously giving consideration to the challenges this work would likely incur.

The energy and enthusiasm that academic participants exhibited for this workshop were immense. Participants clearly wanted to know more about what students bring to placement, what they experience and what learning outcomes they achieve. Inevitably, tensions existed with respect to whether aggregated administrative data can actually provide answers to some of these questions. Working within the scope of what a research database can realistically achieve, as a first phase, it was agreed that students' demographic data and understanding what we can through existing administrative records was a realistic place to start. Figure 2 presents a visual representation of this phased planned approach to utilising administrative data in field education research.

**Figure 2.** A Phased Approach to Utilising Administrative Data in Field Education Research

**Utilising administrative data to analyse:**

- Student demographics upon **selection and entry**

- Emerging professional identity and learning outcomes acquired **during** and **postgraduation** from the degree

Demographics;

Personal attributes;

Existing abilities & competencies

→

Professional identity;

Knowledge;

Skills;

Values

→

Learning Outcomes

**Phase one** of utilising administrative data

**Future phases** of administrative data utilisation

Moving beyond demographic data, discussions regarding other ways in which administrative data could potentially be utilised in field education research focused on specific aspects of the field education curriculum and the processes through which this curriculum is delivered. These were grouped into the following discrete information categories:

- field educator related information (e.g., years of experience in role; years of experience in providing field education supervision, details of supervision training received; demographics; and perhaps preferred theoretical orientation);

- placement agency related information (e.g., field of practice, type and size of agency, metro/rurally based; target client group; services provided);

- academic performance related student information (e.g., academic achievements; academic progress issues; break in studies such as leave of absence); and

- student placement profile and placement allocation-related information (e.g., first or final placement student; learning goals; type of supervision received; full-time/part-time status).

Some of these foci, such as student placement profile and placement-allocation-relation information are planned for inclusion in the first phase of the research design. The other areas will be planned for inclusion in future phases of the research program. During these discussions, there was an increasing awareness and consensus among the workshop participants that utilising administrative data held by universities has the potential to expand our understanding of student demographics, their educational journey, and the inter-relationship of students' skills and knowledge acquisition with specific curriculum component and learning activities.

**Challenges with Administrative Data in Field Education Research**

A number of challenges became readily apparent as the workshops' discussions progressed; three primary challenges were articulated by the majority of participants. Firstly, while all field education programs keep administrative data, the type of data and the methods by which it is recorded differed quite significantly between participants' institutions. For example, some participants reported their programs used specialized placement software programs that guided their administrative records (e.g., InPlace or Sonia) while other participants' programs used manual data recording via Excel. Different legislations and registration requirements between countries also inform what data must be recorded.

Secondly, the degree of effort to advance a research agenda in field education is often compromised by the operational demands of a busy placement program. In such a resource-intensive part of the curriculum, typically any additional resources allocated to field programs are invested in the operational running of the program as opposed to being prioritized for research or scholarly endeavours. Thirdly, logistical issues were raised regarding the most effective way to communicate and hold together a diverse group of field programs in a collaborative research program such as this.

Finally, a number of ethical challenges were discussed during the workshop: primarily these related to intellectual property; privacy and security issues of sharing and storing data; and the process by which student and institutional program data would be de-identified to a level that was appropriate to share, but remain relevant to the topic under study. Issues of consent were also discussed, at both an individual student level of consent and institutional level to share and use their data for research purposes. Notwithstanding some of the challenges in undertaking collaborative research, there was a high level of enthusiasm to engage across international borders and to advance knowledge using administrative data.

**Phase One: A Proof of Concept**

The planning and facilitation of the two-day workshop constituted the primary origins of this program of research. Since the workshop, the project team has continued to work through the challenges associated with the project. As part of the first research phase, a proof of concept study is under way to ascertain if, indeed, the challenges associated with using administrative data and sharing program placement and student-related data within and across institutions can be resolved.

This proof of concept study is being undertaken in Victoria, and is focused on research questions relating to placement allocation and supervisory arrangements across various fields of practice. Simplistic in its design, i.e., data-mining existing administrative records of field education programs across one calendar year, the outcomes of this study will have relevance to a number of stakeholders involved in the placement process:

• It will provide information to each field education program on where their placements were sourced in a one-year period; and budgetary information relating to practice settings that require external supervision arrangements or payment for clinical placements.

- It will provide information regarding what types of supervisory and reflective practice models operate for students in different practice settings.

- It will provide, to the AASW, information and evidence regarding the many varied supervision models that operate across placement practice settings, thus challenging the traditional sole requirement of face-to-face supervision.

Once this concept has been tested in the local context, precedents will have been established that will guide the ethical protocols of using and sharing institutional administrative data for research purposes. Testing these ideas first at the local level will support collaborations that can be safely and effectively established nationally and then internationally as the project develops. It is the spirit of cross-institutional collaboration and a shared vision of enhancing the empirical evidence base of field education that will permit the future phases of administrative data utilisation planned in this program of research to be realized.

## CONCLUSION

In an era where the sustainability of current social work field education program placement arrangements are being questioned, a dearth of evidence exists as to what actually constitutes an effective model to maximize the efficiency and sustainability of social work field education programs. Alongside this increasing instability of placement arrangements are the competing operational demands of pressured field education programs that can compromise the capacity of field education staff to engage in research practices.

This program of research promotes a way forward that seeks to bridge these competing demands – that is to strengthen the evidence base by utilising existing field education administrative datasets. The proof of concept study being undertaken in phase one will establish precedents around data sharing and privacy protocols, and will pave the way for future collaboration. Utilising existing datasets in this way as a method of continuous quality improvement within field education offers unprecedented opportunities to enhance the empirical base and inform future program and curriculum development.

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