Field Education Supervisors' Experiences of Social Work Student Placements in the COVID-19 Context

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Abstract

The COVID 19 pandemic significantly impacted the ability of universities to provide social work student placements. During 2020, Victoria, Australia, experienced stringent public health measures, including social distancing measures. This created uncertainty in relation to the provision of social work student placements, as health and human service sector agencies struggled to adapt their service delivery models. Where possible, agencies were still able to provide placement opportunities to student, although they looked different. This article reports on findings from research undertaken with placement supervisors who supported student placements during 2020 for one Victorian based university. A mixed-method research design was used to explore supervisors' experiences of placement in the COVID-19 context. Data are drawn from 96 responses to an on-line survey and 12 people who participated in focus groups. The findings suggest that, although there were some challenges experienced by supervisors, they found creative ways to deliver supervision and support student learning, highlighting that it is possible to 'do' placements in other ways than what has been considered traditional for many years.

Keywords: *COVID-19; Field education; Placement; Social work; Supervisors*

Introduction

Social work field education is an integral part of Australian social work degrees. Students participate in 1000 hours of work experience (placement) in workplace settings where they expand on their self-awareness, develop social work skills and put their academic knowledge into practice (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2021). Students are supported by a Field Educator (FE), an experienced social worker whose role is to ensure students have access to quality learning experiences and to provide regular supervision which typically involves practice and theory-based discussions; the building of enthusiasm, knowledge and skills; applying critical reflection; and other skills and experiences that promote professional competencies (Domakin, 2014). FEs are typically based in the placement agency, however where there is no social work supervisor available, students are assigned an "external" FE and an internal agency-based co-supervisor (Gardner et al., 2018). Co-supervisors are typically not social work trained; however, they are experienced human service workers who provide regular task-orientated and general support (AASW, 2021). FEs and co-supervisors will henceforth be referred to as "supervisors".

Despite a heavy reliance on supervisors to furnish quality placements, little is known about their experiences of placement (Ketner et al., 2017; Zuchowski, 2014). A recent Australian study (Loos & Kostecki, 2018) indicated that supervisors found their role rewarding, but also acknowledged organisational challenges and difficulties associated with students' performance. In particular, time constraints meant that work tasks were prioritised over students' learning needs; and some supervisors raised concerns about students diminished professionalism and skills. Their findings also illustrated the importance of support provided by universities. Some mentioned the usefulness of the pre-placement FE seminars; however, a number of supervisors expressed an interest in more professional training and greater accessibility to university staff. Social work field education relies on the willingness of agency staff and external FEs to provide supervision (Gardner et al., 2018). As such, understanding their experiences and how best to support supervisors is an important aspect of sustaining social work field education programs.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has rapidly changed the social work agency environment (World Health Organization, 2020). The pandemic, and concomitant measures put in place to manage it (such as school, health, and business closures), created unprecedented health, economic, and social challenges across the world (Nicola et al., 2020). Australia adopted a conservative approach, applying a stringent set of social distancing protocols across personal and work settings. As such, most organisations were required to abandon "normal" work practices, replacing them with new ways of delivering their service with minimal or no physical contact.

The measures applied to manage the pandemic created both challenges and opportunities in the tertiary education and health and human services sectors, resulting in placement experiences that were very different to previous years (Crisp et al., 2021; McFadden et al., 2020). Prior to 2020, placements were most often provided in person, with students inhabiting agency space and experiencing practice-based work alongside staff in the workplace setting.

However, due to government-enforced social distancing rules, many organisations were prohibited from having physical human contact. Some agencies offered placements that were the same as previous years, some developed alternative models that met social distancing requirements while still meeting the AASW placement requirements, and others were unable to offer placements because they did not think they could offer suitable learning conditions (Crisp et al., 2021). Many agencies developed ways for employees to conduct their work from home, leaving supervisors and students working separately from each other and sometimes the service users as well. Consequently, supervision and many other activities transitioned to an online or tele-based platform (Sanders, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020).

The pandemic created challenges, but alongside these are stories of adaption, creativity, and success (Crisp et al., 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Supervisors and students across multiple disciplines were able to experiment and explore new ways of offering their service to clients and students. For example, Whittall et al. (2020) explained the way a student on placement was able to develop more skills and confidence in delivering therapy across varied modalities, which would otherwise not be available to them. Psychologists and nurses noted that supervising or mentoring a student/trainee during the pandemic has developed their own skills in supervision, telehealth and other online platforms (Whittall et al., 2020).

While changed work conditions fostered creative practice and resilience building, some challenges have been difficult to overcome. For example, communication, technology, and sourcing appropriate online placements became difficult (Morris et al., 2020; Pelden & Banham, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020; Whittall et al., 2020). Moreover, detecting non-verbal cues via tele-communication and the impact that has on emotional connectedness can be difficult and hinder positive supervisory relationships (Morris et al., 2020. Positive connections between student and supervisor help students reach the competencies or expectations of a graduate social worker, so it is important to foster this relationship and other responsive support networks via online forums (Morris et al., 2020). Fatigue, associated with increased online work, loss of jobs, and other personal issues related to COVID-19 made placements more difficult for some people (Whittall et al., 2020).

As social workers, we are aware that our personal selves impact upon our professional selves and self-awareness and self-care are important to help manage this. The pandemic and the impact on both our professional and personal selves is a prime example of this. Placements were also impacted by people's personal lives. Individual's life circumstances (for example if they were a carer, or immune suppressed or living with anxiety that was exacerbated) had much broader implications on student placements, which required a greater need for empathy, flexibility and resilience from both staff and students (McFadden et al., 2020). The pandemic led to an overall decline in people's mental wellbeing (McFadden et al., 2020; Pelden & Banham, 2020) associated with fear of the pandemic, social isolation and loneliness, loss of support and family connections (Morris et al., 2020). In addition, reduced activity that once fostered mental wellbeing (such as incidental exercise) was also limited. As such, both students and staff have heightened levels of poor mental health (Chen & Lucock, 2022).

COVID-19 led to significant changes in the way social work placements were shaped in 2020. It is likely that these changes will affect the experience of supervisors who are key to supporting students in their development during placement. The aim of the research was to explore supervisors' experiences of providing social work placements to students during the pandemic and examine the impact that COVID-19 had on supervisors' experiences. Though the pandemic has given rise to a unique and perhaps one-off global experience, we consider it important to capture supervisors' experiences of placement – the challenges and successes – to learn from them, to improve and develop practice as work returns to "normal", and to ensure we are more prepared should a similar incident arise in the future. As such, the research question being posed is: What are the experiences of field educators and co-supervisors who are supervising social work student placements in the COVID-19 context?

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods exploratory design, including both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore supervisors' experiences of placement in the COVID-19 context. The study population included all professionals who were employed as supervisors for social work student placements in 2020 at La Trobe University (LTU). LTU is based in Victoria, Australia. It has five campuses, one in Melbourne (metropolitan), two in regional centres (Albury/Wodonga, Bendigo) and two in large rural towns (Mildura and Shepparton) (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021). Data were collected from November to December 2020. The study protocol and method were approved by LTU`s Human Research Ethics Committee.

Quantitative survey

An online questionnaire was developed and managed using REDcap (Harris et al., 2019). The survey consisted of 20 items focusing on supervisors' characteristics and experiences of delivering supervision before and during the pandemic as detailed below.

Supervisor characteristics

Participants were asked to report on their role (internal or external supervisor, co-supervisor) their years of experience (first time supervisor, 2-4 years of experience, over five years of experience) their location (university campus) and their mode of supervisory communication before and during pandemic (online, face-to-face, blended).

Satisfaction with support supervisor offered to students

Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the support they were able to offer students on placement before pandemic (retrospective self-report) and during the pandemic. Response rated from 1 – Not satisfied at all to 5 – Extremely satisfied.

Supervisor satisfaction with support received from LTU

Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the support they had received from the university and from their agencies before and during the pandemic. Response rated from 1 – Not satisfied at all to 5 – Extremely satisfied.

Changes to supervision during COVID-19

Participants were presented with a list of 10 potential changes and five personal and environmental barriers they may have encountered when delivering supervision to students. For each item presented, participants were asked to report whether the change applied to them (Yes/No). The final question included a free text response option to "Is there anything else you think is important to share about your experience as a field educator or co-supervisor supporting social work students throughout the COVID-19 context?"

Qualitative focus groups

A semi-structured focus group interview guide was developed by the authors. The guide comprised open-ended questions that sought supervisors' perspectives on the changes, challenges, barriers and innovations to placement during COVID-19 times.

Recruitment

A recruitment email, including information about the study, consent information and a link to the survey, was sent to the entire cohort (N = 251) of supervisors who were supervising social work students on placement in 2020. Participants completed the survey voluntarily and annonymously, with consent being assumed upon opening and completing the survey. At the end of the online survey, participants were invited to leave their details if they also wanted to participate in a focus group. Those participants who provided an email were emailed information about the focus group aim, method and consent form.

Of the 251 supervisors employed by LTU to provide social work placement supervision in 2020, 109 logged on to the online survey and 96 completed the survey (response rate of 37%). Their characteristics are presented in Table 1. Twenty-three supervisors showed an initial interest in participating in a focus group; however, 10 withdrew their interest (citing lack of time as the reason for their withdrawal) or did not arrange a time to meet. Due to availablity of participants, two focus groups consisted of three participants, two focus groups had two participants, and three focus groups had sole participants (Table 2). The focus groups were jointly facilitated by a lead researcher (NL, RS), and a student (EG, CW). All focus groups were conducted via Zoom.

Table 1

Supervisor Characteristics for the Survey (n = 96)

	Valid %
Supervisor role	
Internal Field Educator	64.6
External Field Educator	12.5
Co-Supervisor	22.9
Location	
Rural/regional	65.6
Metropolitan	34.4

	Valid %
Supervision delivery mode	
Face-to-face	34.4
Online	28
Blended	37.6
Years of experience	
First time	27.1
2-4 years	28.1
5+ years	44.8

Table 2

Supervisor Characteristics for the Focus Groups (n = 13)

Focus Group	Location	Number of participants	Gender
FG1	Metropolitan	1	1 female
FG2	Metropolitan	2	1 female, 1 male
FG3	Metropolitan	3	2 female, 1 male
FG4	Metropolitan	1	1 female
FG5	Rural/Regional	2	1 female, 1 male
FG6	Rural/Regional	1	1 female
FG7	Rural/Regional	3	2 females, 1 male

Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics were calculated to map the circumstances of the supervisors. Preliminary analysis of the chi-square test and one-way ANOVA found no significant differences between subgroups (metropolitan versus regional campuses) in relation to research variables. Therefore, all subsequent analysis was conducted on the entire sample ($n = 96$). Descriptive statistics were calculated to map the characteristics of supervisors and frequencies of factors related to the research questions. For experienced supervisors ($n = 70$), Paired t-test analyses were conducted to examine reported change levels of satisfaction and types of support before (retrospective self-report) and during the time of the pandemic.

Qualitative data from both the surveys and focus groups were analysed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The focus group audio recordings were transcribed and the data were inserted into NViVO for inductive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were applied. Two researchers (NL, RS) read the responses carefully, coded for meaning units, and identified preliminary themes separately and then came together to discuss and compare their interpretations to deepen the interpretive process, and finally establish substantive themes. The data from the qualitative component of the survey were examined within the context of these themes. Quotations are used to support the findings and identified by study site – metropolitan versus rural/regional versus survey data.

Findings

Quantitative results

Supervisor characteristics and placement delivery mode

A total of 96 supervisors completed the online survey. Table 1 shows that most participants (72.9%) were experienced supervisors and most (65.6%) were associated with the rural/regional campuses. Surprisingly, in relation to delivery mode in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, only 28% of supervisors reported providing only online supervision, the rest managed to rely on face-to-face supervision (34.4%) or a blend of the two (37.6%). Of the experienced supervisors who were able to compare supervision delivery mode before and during the pandemic, just over a quarter (28%) reported that placement was offered in the same way as previous years (these were mostly the face-to-face placements). Some 25% had changed their delivery mode in the context of the pandemic and were completely reliant on online formats and 46% delivered supervision in a blended way combining face-to-face and online methods.

Support supervisors were able to offer students

The majority (86.1%) of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to offer support and professional development opportunities for students throughout 2020 placement. Supervisors who had also provided one or more placements prior to 2020 were asked the same questions as a way of comparing their ability to offer support/opportunities pre- and post-COVID-19. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the level of satisfaction before and during the pandemic (Table 3). As indicated in Table 3, while there was no significant change in the supervisors' level of satisfaction with the support they were able to provide to their students before and during the pandemic ($t(69) = 0.44$, NS), there was a significant decrease in supervisors' satisfaction with the opportunities for professional development they could offer their students during placement in the context of COVID-19 ($t(69) = 2.56$, $p < .05$). Although the majority of supervisors remained satisfied when comparing their satisfaction level across the years, the prevalence of supervisor rating reporting being very satisfied dropped from 44.3% in previous years to only 27.4% in 2020.

Table 3

Satisfaction with Offering Support Before and During COVID-19 (N= 70)

	Before COVID-19 %	During COVID-19 %	Before COVID-19 M(SD)	During COVID-19 M(SD)	T(df)
How satisfied are you with your ability to offer support to students throughout their placements					
Very unsatisfied	5.7	3.1	4.20 (1.03)	4.16 (0.86)	0.44 (69); ns
Unsatisfied	1.4	3.1			
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	5.7	3.1			
Satisfied	41.4	57.3			
Very satisfied	45.7	33.3			

	Before COVID-19 %	During COVID-19 %	Before COVID-19 M(SD)	During COVID-19 M(SD)	T(df)
How satisfied are you with your ability to offer support to students throughout their placements					
Very unsatisfied	4.3	2.1	4.25 (0.94)	4.01 (0.86)	2.56 (68)*
Unsatisfied	1.4	6.3			
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	4.3	5.7			
Satisfied	45.7	58.9			
Very satisfied	44.3	27.4			

* p < .05.

Support from LTU and placement agencies

Supervisors were asked to report on their level of satisfaction with the support they had received from LTU and from their agencies before and during the pandemic. Participant responses are presented in Table 4. Three quarters of supervisors (75.4%) reported they were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with the level of support they received from LTU and 82.4% reported a high level of satisfaction from the agencies in which they were employed. No statistical differences were found between support received in 2020 and previous years. Even though there were no statistically significant differences in their overall satisfaction between 2020 and previous years, the data show a slight decrease in the number of participants who were very satisfied with the support they received from LTU (29% before and 19.8% during the COVID-19) and their employers (47.1% before and 31% during 2020).

Table 4

Frequencies and Paired t-test Comparisons of Supervisor Satisfaction with Support Received Before and During COVID-19 (n = 70)

	Before COVID-19 %	During COVID-19 %	Before COVID-19 M(SD)	During COVID-19 M(SD)	T(df)
How satisfied were you with the support you received from the University					
Very unsatisfied	8.7	3.1	3.81 (1.17)	3.91 (0.95)	-1.00 (69); ns
Unsatisfied	5.8	4.2			
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	10.1	13.5			
Satisfied	46.4	54.4			
Very satisfied	29	19.8			
How satisfied were you with the support you received from the agency in which you were employed					
Very unsatisfied	5.9	4.3	4.18 (1.05)	4.06 (0.96)	1.42 (68); ns
Unsatisfied	11.8	3.2			
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	4.3	13.8			
Satisfied	35.3	45.7			
Very satisfied	47.1	31			

Strengths and barriers associated with supervision in the context of COVID-19

Supervisors were asked to report what, if any, changes they experienced when providing supervision in 2020 compared with previous years. Only 5.2% of participants reported that they did not experience any changes. Most participants reported a wide array of positive changes they experienced in 2020. Nearly half (49%) of participants reported on the development of new skills, training and accessibility to an online environment, and an increased ability to network with other professionals and agencies. Interestingly, experienced supervisors felt that in the current context, students had more opportunity to engage in reflective and creative practice compared with previous years (20.8% and 31.3%, respectively). Supervisors were asked to identify barriers they experienced in providing support to students during the pandemic. Surprisingly, more than a third of participants (36.8%) reported that they had not experienced any barriers. However, the most frequent barriers were difficulty to access and operate space and equipment, such as poor Internet connection or appropriate environment (24%) and the ability to manage work–life balance in light of the demands of working from home (22.9%). Other barriers reported were lack of training to help guide the supervision role (10.4%) and difficulties to build rapport and support student engagement (14.6%).

Finally, when participants were asked to rate their overall feelings of being a social work supervisor in 2020, the overwhelming majority (82%) rated their overall experience as positive, 15.7% neutral and 2.2% reported their experience to be negative.

Qualitative results

Discussions with supervisors revealed information considered relevant for placements generally, but also information that will be useful for any future globalised events that disrupt the regular placement process. The key themes that came from these discussions include the importance of relationships, the challenges and opportunities that arose during this period, and how this became apparent within the context of self-care. While these are separated into distinct themes for the purposes of containment, we note that they are very much inter-related. For example, opportunities were born out of challenges, and these were sometimes associated with relationship factors.

As part of the survey, participants were asked if there was anything else they thought was important to share about their experience as a supervisor in the COVID-19 context. A total of 42 participants answered this qualitative question, presenting similar ideas to those discussed in the focus groups. Interestingly, most responses related to regular placement processes and experiences rather than COVID-related issues. We have only included responses that related to COVID and will take the others on board for quality assurance.

Relationships – the need for intentionality

At the heart of many challenges faced by supervisors and students was the disruption to typical relationship building and maintenance activities. Some supervisors thought about this ahead of time, intentionally making it a focus from the start to help overcome the lack of in-person interaction and to manage any extra placement-related challenges.

Others came to realise this throughout the placement. It became an important part of supervision to help students shed some of the general worries they were experiencing as global citizens so they could focus on the task at hand. Participants also noted that they had to adapt to new ways of building rapport with students because it did not occur as readily as previous years with some students. This was a shared experience for supervisors in-person and for those delivering supervision by Zoom.

> It wasn't about making it easy, but it was about thinking about creating ways of building rapport [on zoom]. (Regional)

Part of the disruption to relationship building was reduced time spent together. In-person placements often have incidental opportunities for students to engage with staff, such as car rides to and from appointments, or conversations across shared working areas. These opportunities were less available when meeting virtually and had various implications including either less access to supervisors/other staff for learning, boredom, and blurring of work–life boundaries which was found to be both helpful and unhelpful. This meant that some supervisors had to make themselves more available, be very intentional about being available, and allocate time for students that would otherwise have occurred organically, and potentially with other staff members as well.

> I miss those kinda face to face incidental conversations that you have with students which might take you off into another trajectory. (Regional)

> Early on in the placement I'd make regular times to catch up with them during the week but you don't have any of the more informal check ins and catch-ups, it all becomes much more structured and formal so you really lose something there. (Metropolitan)

Placement challenges stemming from the pandemic

Managing restricted opportunities

Despite concerns that placements would not go ahead, most students were provided with an appropriate placement. Most placements were altered in some way to meet social distancing requirements and, as such, one of the most talked about topics on the survey and in focus groups, particularly from Melbourne-based supervisors (because they were most impacted by lockdowns), was the reduced opportunities for students to work directly with clients, to undertake typical social work activities, and to do so with a variety of workers that provides a greater breadth of perspectives and approaches. Students were more reliant on their supervisor for learning opportunities and for some supervisors this added a layer of pressure that had not been experienced in previous years.

> I think it has most definitely restricted access to usual client assessments, particularly as my regular role was impacted (not allowed to enter schools). Have had to rely on other clinicians to help students with learnings and client work … Students lack of physical presence to others meant it's not as easy to access spontaneous opportunities. (Survey)

> One of the big things that I really notice if I compare my experience this year with previous years is ... they would be involved in other meetings, discussion forums ... so they wouldn't just be tied to me. They would be meeting a range of other staff and a range of other disciplines, they would be attending social work meetings, clinical review meetings, maybe family strategy meetings, recovery meetings and they'd be exposed to a range of opportunities and that didn't happen this year by zoom. So I think it made for a narrower focus for the placement. (Metropolitan)

To help combat limited opportunities and boredom, supervisors encouraged students to engage in professional development courses/training. These were mostly held virtually which made them more accessible, particularly for regional students given these were typically held in metropolitan areas. While this filled time and provided additional learning, some students felt like they were back at university doing more "book learning" which did not necessarily meet their expectations or practical learning needs.

> I think that normally I would have really encouraged PD during final placement and I'm always like - just take any opportunity you can to do it - but I think it was understandable that some of the students were just loaded with that by their organisation. They were kind of like, if anything, it feels like I'm just doing more uni and I was like yeah fair call like you know you want the practice, you want the hands on. ... You know, I think sometimes it was used as a bit of babysitter. (Metropolitan)

Given most placements were going to be different in some way, and to varying degrees, it is unsurprising that students expressed concerns about whether there would be adequate learning opportunities to meet their needs. This was an issue that needed to be addressed at multiple levels, from LTU staff who sourced and managed placements, to the supervisors and liaison people. The Melbourne supervisors mostly just acknowledged reduced opportunities, whereas the regional and rural supervisors framed this more in terms of their need to help manage the student's expectations and emotions.

> So, for me there is a bit of that stuff around supervising and also managing student's anxiety or at least increased anxiety around what they are missing out on because they are on this placement that they have to do from home. (Regional)

Managing students' mental and emotional states

One of the most notable differences for the experienced supervisors was the presence of students' mental and emotional upset, fatigue and boredom. Overall, students appeared to have lowered emotional resilience, which impacted on their engagement with activities and embracing the challenges associated with placement. Three of the long-standing supervisors noted that 2020 students displayed increased levels of uncertainty, worry and anxiety throughout the placement experience. They noted that this is almost always present, particularly for first placements, but over time it settles, or even dissipates, as students come to understand what is expected of them and get to know their supervisors and agencies, but this did not happen as readily in 2020.

Supervisors were required to make judgements about how to manage this in supervision sessions as well as the expectations they had of students in their everyday activities. They sometimes had to strike a balance between nurturing the students' emotional response to life circumstances and ensuring that they met competency standards.

> As the time progressed that fatigue kind of set in and the ability to recognise not only what was happening in the clinical situation, but what was happening in their personal lives, and how that was all compounding on each other and were not able to unpack that, nor felt prepared or safe to unpack, I thought. (Regional)

> I feel that due to the students concern or uncertainty around whether placement would take place in 2020, the ongoing nature of the pandemic meant they continued to experience a hyper-vigilance throughout placement of an interruption or termination of their placement. I felt the consuming nature of the pandemic on the personal self was a significant challenge for the student to navigate as they attempt to develop their professional identity and navigating boundaries between the personal and professional self was an all-encompassing and enduring theme throughout the placement. (Survey)

Opportunities cultivated by obstacles

Challenges and adversity are often accompanied by innovation and opportunity. Some agencies did not offer placements because they could not foresee how they could offer students a quality placement given the pandemic restrictions, whereas others developed creative ways of working around this.

Using the pandemic as a social work learning opportunity

Some supervisors used the students' experiences of living and working in a pandemic as a way of demonstrating social work values and theories. Even though these experiences may not have been directly related to the field of practice or type of work they were undertaking, it provided excellent opportunities for conversations about self-awareness, reflection, othering, social disadvantage, issues of power, ethics and so on. While these conversations may have been particularly pertinent during the pandemic, it is a shared global experience that supervisors and educators may find to be a useful illustration of these social work values and skills in the future as well.

> [Learn] how you can develop a practice that allows for people whose worlds exist in uncertainty. Which is so much of what we were doing, so that was ... really good and I think as well probably a lot more like self-development work around emotional intelligence and self-management, which hopefully I think will be really intangible skills going forward at times of crisis ... it was almost like - use this as the most incredible experience ever to really like yeah, have the greatest empathy. (Regional)

So one of the opportunities, … in spite of COVID-19 students can say I did a really good job and I adapted. So it is a chance to celebrate and acknowledge resilience, determination, focus, in spite of all these challenges. I think building a story around resilience and change is a real opportunity to come out of it. You can often build that for a lot of students on placement but this year in particular I think it is a good opportunity to kinda demonstrate that… and kind of create more of those stories about what social work does and how we do that. [Regional]

New work practices – the virtual world

Supervisors were confronted with new ways of working, particularly with the introduction of virtual interactions (mostly Zoom and Microsoft Teams). While this brought challenges, it appears to have brought, in equal measure, positive changes to organisational processes and learning opportunities for both student and supervisor. It also offered students a glimpse at observing a social worker learning a new system or approach and how they coped with that.

The good thing that has come out of this is that people are much more accepting of this telehealth or tele-counselling or tele-supervision. And I think it has some advantages, in terms of you don't have to travel long distances… (Regional)

One positive is that we've had a lot more training available to us because they've presented it online, so whereas previous years trainings may have meant that you drive to Melbourne and you attend for the two or so hours and you drive back. I mean it almost sounds a complete waste of time doesn't it now that you think that's how we used to do it and that's probably what we want to get back to. But yesterday I attended a workshop online, 2 hours at the click of a button from [regional town name], so that's been really helpful I think. (Regional)

To counteract various challenges and barriers, supervisors and students developed innovative ways of working. For some supervisors, the changed working environment and circumstances were seen as an opportunity for future practice as well.

I think students coming through this are going to be a lot more experienced. A lot more skills to offer than students ordinarily coming through would be able to offer. (Metropolitan)

I think going forward it will allow for a greater variety of options with student placement in future years. I think we might find that not all student placements are going to be done in the dirt world. Some of them will be done in the virtual world going forward and I think having that flexibility will be a good thing. (Metropolitan)

… the opportunity is really to learn new skills, how do we engage students, how to be reflective myself in terms of providing supervision over zoom because you do have to use different skills you have to be far more creative to engage students. (Metropolitan)

Self-care

Self-care is always an important concept in social work practice and placement, but some supervisors expressed an extra level of thought around this issue during COVID times. This is perhaps unsurprising given the overarching storyline in everyone's life at the time was the "threat" of the pandemic and becoming unwell. The broader social narrative about wellbeing may have influenced some supervisors focus on wellbeing within the work setting.

> We've managed that both the student and myself and the wider team have an increased awareness of self-care and a real vigilance around that, and like kind of vigilance around the workload as well. (Metropolitan)

> Yeah, for me I think there was a lot more of a focus this time around on individual wellbeing and self-care. [regional]

Blurring of boundaries/work–home life balance

To compensate for some of the challenges described above (such as reduced time together, less variety of tasks and the emotional upset of students), some supervisors found themselves working outside of their traditional hours to accommodate students' needs. This was found to be a double-edged sword with some supervisors seeing it as important to be flexible by working at different times of the day and night, which may also have suited their own needs, but could also be problematic as it contravened their self-care boundaries.

> I think working from home it adds an extra pressure to us individually because we can't necessarily physically separate work from home … and I think it's about making sure as supervisors that we have to be more conscious of our self-care and setting boundaries and respecting boundaries of others and promoting, you know, being positive role models in that space because it's easy to still be sitting at your computer screen at six o'clock when you should be sitting down with your family having dinner because your home life was your work space. So I think keeping in mind all of those things and setting the boundaries and being more conscious and more present has definitely been needed. (Regional)

Discussion

It was apparent from the outset of the 2020 placement process that both challenges and opportunities would present themselves in the tertiary education and health and human services sectors (Ketner et al., 2020). Prior to 2020, field education was typically provided in person with students inhabiting the agencies' space and experiencing practice-based work alongside staff (Gardner, 2018). While some agencies were able to offer similar placements in 2020, others developed alternative models that met social distancing requirements while also meeting placement expectations, and some were unable to offer placements because they did not think they could provide suitable learning conditions (Morris et al., 2020).

For those placements that were able to go ahead, the majority of supervisors were faced with disruptions and challenges. Both the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that one of the biggest challenges was supervisors' belief that they were able to provide students with an adequate level of social work opportunities and, for the regional supervisors in particular, how they managed student concerns around that. The AASW temporarily adjusted its accreditation requirements to minimise the disruption of COVID-19 on student progression, allowing non-standard placements, such as reduced placement hours, changes to on-site requirements and non-traditional student projects (AASW, 2020). This may have alleviated the universities' concerns; however, for those supervisors and students on the ground, it was an ongoing issue to manage and come to terms with. Experienced supervisors noted there was a need to change their relationship-building practices. Reduced or no time in the same physical space meant some interactions were via online platforms and this made relationship building become a longer process, as did some students' reluctance to open up and reveal themselves in ways previous students had done.

Despite the challenges, supervisors mostly felt supported by their agencies and LTU – however, they did report feeling less supported than previous years. While this may be inevitable during a global upheaval, we do not know if this indicates that the level of support was reduced or whether their needs were higher and therefore the same level of support was no longer adequate – or both. This highlights the importance of universities checking in with supervisors and asking them what their support needs are.

The challenges brought with them innovation, creativity, reflection, skill building and self-awareness, all of which adds to supervisors' skills to draw upon in future experiences. An important insight gleaned is that social work supervisors were able to identify challenges arising from altered work environments/practices and adapt the placement opportunities to counter these barriers. This highlights supervisors' abilities to reflect on the student experience, identify what adds to a positive experience and create opportunities to fill the gaps that were created by social distancing. Experienced supervisors were able to draw on previous experience to identify this missing element, but new supervisors are more reliant on other resources, such as the university or their peers to offer a range of ideas. All supervisors, however, displayed a level of creativity and ingenuity in tackling uncharted waters in a student-centred way. An important, and seemingly lasting, positive change that has come from this episode is the improved accessibility to training, conferences and workshops for practitioners and students. The use of videoconferencing has become normative since the onset of the pandemic and provides more opportunity for rural and remote practitioners to attend a variety of professional development activities and networking. While this has implications on social work practice more broadly, it has the potential to improve supervision practices in ways experienced by the 2020 supervisors as well as broadening the scope of professional development for supervisors in the future.

Prior to placement in the COVID context, educators like Cleak and Wilson (2019), Davys and Beddoe (2010), Loos and Kostecki (2018) were exploring what constituted best practice for student supervision, with limited consensus about supervisory content, processes and practices.

A recent study by Loos and Kostecki (2018) found that field educators experienced similar challenges to those reported by supervisors during 2020. While the majority of respondents were satisfied with the support they received from LTU during the 2020 placements, most of those who said that they received little to no support were first-time supervisors, indicating the need for greater effort being put into supporting this group. This highlights the importance of providing sufficient support to supervisors in general, as well as under extreme circumstances like a pandemic. It is worthwhile using the pandemic as a catalyst, for not only being prepared for similar disruptions to our normal, but to embrace diverse ways of thinking about how placements are offered and the support that supervisors might need to do that successfully.

While a strength of this study is that it captures supervisors' experiences across multiple locations, it also has some limitations. Firstly, this study reports on experiences of supervisors from one university in Victoria, with the metropolitan campus undoubtedly experiencing more lockdown restrictions than most during the period of the study and therefore, potentially, unique. Secondly, the focus groups were co-facilitated by students on placement, hence supervisors may have self-edited some of their responses.

Conclusion

The supervisors in this study demonstrated how they were challenged by, and adapted to, social work student supervision during the midst of the pandemic. The findings highlighted that it is possible to "do" placements in other ways than those considered traditional for many years. Although these ideas are born out of an adverse event, it is important the learnings are not squandered, but rather embedded in future ways of providing social work placements and supporting both supervisors and students. Built into social work philosophy are notions of flexibility, creativity, reflection and radical ideas – as such, supervisors and placement agencies stepped up with that spirit and the spirit of humanistic care to provide students with a placement despite their own challenges and worries. It is this spirit and innovative drive that continue beyond the pandemic and will promote new ways of working that serve clients, workers and students better into the future.

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