

Challenges to Practicum: The Neo- Liberal Context

Reflective Narrative

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Abstract

This article outlines some of the challenges facing educators, professional bodies, and tertiary institutions in providing professional placement opportunities for students seeking to work in the human services, primarily focusing on social work. The article reflects on how these challenges, while not solely a function of neoliberal rationalities and the gendered nature of placement, have been exacerbated by the marketisation of human service delivery over the past several decades. The article reflects on the need to rethink the structure and requirements of social work. field placement considering a rapidly changing student demographic.

Key words: *Social work; Field Placement; Neo- liberalism; Challenges*

Introduction

A range of professions including social work, education, nursing, and law require practice experience in industry settings as part of their program. This is generally viewed as a positive experience by students and a pivotal component of their development as a professional (Maidment, 2003; Hemy et al., 2016). Despite this, the changing profile of students and broader socio- economic changes associated with neoliberal thinking that impact on higher education, present significant challenges to current models of practicum (Hodge et al., 2022). While this reflection focuses on social work, the issues raised, and challenges faced to a greater or less degree pertain to all programs which have a field placement.

Practicum is promoted as the signature pedagogy of social work education (Egan et al., 2018; AASW, 2020). The aim is to enhance field education as a key vehicle of practice-based learning recognised by regulatory and professional bodies. (Neden et al., 2018). In university social work programs field education or practicum occupies at least 25% of Bachelor of Social Work and up to 50% of Master's in Social Work courses (Neden et al., 2018). We argue that it is a necessary, relevant, and indeed vital experience for social work students gaining first-hand knowledge of the professional world they are entering. Some observers highlight that despite the stated importance of practice experience it occupies a marginalised position in academic social work departments (Egan et al., 2016; Neden et al., 2018). This would seem to be part of a broader discussion on what should constitute social work education and indeed the purpose of social work in a neoliberal era. Aside from this there are significant constraints on meeting the requirements of social work practicums arising from contemporary pressures from policy, government, regulatory and professional bodies (Neden et al. 2018; Cleak & Zuchowski, 2020). These combined pressures raise fundamental questions about the sustainability of the current model of social work placements and provide an impetus for both rethinking the structure of placements and reconsideration of resource use (Bogo, 2015). Neden et al., (2018) highlight the existing model of field education in social work is experiencing strain from several sources including increased demand for placements, increased number of programs and questionable assumptions regarding the relationship between learning activities that are offered and the requirements of professional and regulatory bodies.

Supervised practice experience is aimed at preparing students for professional practice and status. The aims of practice experience vary across professions, but in social work it aims to integrate theoretical knowledge developed in the classroom in applied settings. The integration of theoretical learning with professional practice is seen to be a key outcome of placement and delivering on the employability agenda (Hemy et al., 2016).

Projections for employment in the human services field suggest a significant increase in demand for all human service workers (ABS, 2018) This has contributed to an increase in programs across Australia and an increase in demand for social work placements.

Anecdotal evidence from the authors of this article confirms these observations. Increased numbers of students and a decreasing number of agencies offering placements contributes to a situation where placement officers are forced to source placements in non- traditional settings that often are not familiar with or cannot offer the type of learning opportunities required to meet professional and regulatory standards.

Contemporary social work field education is accountable to a range of stakeholders including universities, employers, and professional bodies, often with competing interests. Aside from this, educational institutions and content are increasingly subject to the impact of neoliberal and neo conservative views regarding the content and purpose of education. This has resulted in a discourse that prioritises knowledge and practices that are subject to the neoliberal demands of the market.

The Neoliberal Context

While neoliberalism is a contested concept (Harman, 2008; Garrett, 2010; Peck, 2010; Venugopal, 2015) and there are varying forms of neoliberal rationalities (Garrett, 2018; Peck, 2010), at a minimum neoliberalism is concerned with the extension of market logic to all social and political relationships (Harvey, 2005). The impact of neoliberalism on human services includes contracting out of services, competitive tendering, and the introduction of key performance indicators for organisations and individual aligned with market principles (Parton 2016). Despite significant differences between European, North American, and Australian contexts there is consensus that neoliberalism is concerned to prioritise the superiority of economic logic as the basis for public and private decision making (Gilbert, 2015). The effect is to marketise all relationships and practices in society, with the aim of promoting market compliance in the behaviour of as many of the citizenry as possible. The impact of neoliberal rationalities on social work and social work education has been extensively documented (Garrett, 2010; Gylim, 2018; Hanesworth, 2017; Morley, 2016; Parton, 2016; Morley et al., 2017). These include a focus on working with individuals to achieve measurable outcomes that align with a responsabilisation agenda rather than advocacy for structural change (Garrett, 2010; Gylim, 2018; Butler-Warke et al., 2020), and an increasing trend towards the bureau-cratism of the profession (Butler-Warke et al., 2020). The focus in the following comments is on the implications of the neoliberal restructuring of social services on social work practicum and the constraints placed on field education being a shared site for addressing the core ethical principle of social justice.

Current requirements

The Australian Association of Social Workers sets the standards for field education in Australia. Currently requirements are for students to undertake a minimum of 1000 hours in at least two separate settings with at least one placement involving direct work with service users (AASW, 2020). The AASW requires the full 1000 hours be completed and while credit is given for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) the conditions upon which RPL is granted are constricting.

Social work placements are unpaid, and while there are opportunities to undertake work-based placements these are highly regulated (Morley et al., 2017; Maidment (2003) identified key issues facing students on social work student placements including: significant levels of anxiety, lack of clarity regarding expectations, integration of theory and practice and preparedness to deal with exposure to emotional and physical abuse. More recently Hemy et al., (2016) have highlighted the significant challenges facing students with multiple responsibilities including family obligations, financial stressors, and employment. Findings from this research focus on the varying strategies students use to juggle what are experienced as competing priorities. While one might argue using problem solving strategies, engaging support, and reframing to address these is part of the professional development of social workers, lower or insufficient income of students mediated through key axes of gender, age, disability, and ethnicity has a significant impact on study success (Hodge et al., 2021). In the contemporary setting meeting professional and organisational requirements for placement is proving challenging to many students, including international full fee-paying students who are faced not only with full tuition fees, but often need to work in poorly paid casual positions to afford rental accommodation in an increasingly discriminating rental market (Morris et al., 2021), with increased risk of poor health outcomes (Skromanis et al., 2018).

A recent study by Hodge et al. (2021) highlights the gendered nature of the social work profession. A key finding in this study was the difficulties students (overwhelmingly female) experienced in completing the number of placement hours required combined with work and other study commitments of the social work program. Essentially unpaid placement amplified pre-existing financial stressors and associated impact on mental health and well-being which would seem in direct contrast to core social work values regarding personal well-being and social justice. As noted by Pelech et al. (2009), other male dominated professions including law, medicine and engineering do not require unpaid practicum, raising significant questions regarding the gendered nature of requirements for social work practicum. While the requirements of unpaid social work field placement predates the introduction of neo-liberal principles, these requirements align closely with contemporary neo-liberal about lifelong learning. Given the gendered nature of the social work profession (Pease, 2011), and the multiple roles of carer, student and worker that in particular many female students need to negotiate, failure to be more flexible regarding paid placement opportunities arguably reinforces neoliberal agendas (Pease, 2011; Gouthro, 2009).

Conclusion – A Reimagined Practicum

Despite the professional need for, and the importance of field placement as part of their learning, this reflective piece highlights some key issues facing professional bodies and universities in designing appropriate standards for contemporary practicum for social work students. Many of these relate to the unpaid nature and the length of placement ... As this reflection has highlighted, the issues discussed here are gendered, but as Australian universities continue to explore and depend on the international student market, the financial and health related issues highlighted are more than likely to be exacerbated in the future. This reflection argues the need for more research into the financial and associated pressures associated with current models of social work practicum, particularly for the growing international student cohort and the possibilities of alternative models of social work practicum.

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