

# Reducing Stress and Improving Learning: Adapting Courses to Support Students on Fieldwork Placement

## Teaching Note

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## Abstract

Fieldwork placement is essential for social work education. It serves to connect theory and practice, enabling the development of student professional identity. However, unpaid placements can negatively impact students, particularly students who are carers, women, and live rurally. This reflective case study describes how an undergraduate social work course in Australia adapted its curriculum and assessments to support students during their placements. The changes were made in response to placement stressors, while utilising best-practice principles for online pedagogy. These adaptations allowed students to engage with the course at their own pace, and with accessible and flexible course materials. Assessments were directly aligned with placement experiences and due dates and late penalties were removed to promote autonomy and respect student discretion. This case study presents reflections from the teaching team, alongside student feedback, to explore strategies for supporting social work students during placements. Although unpaid placements are likely to continue due to accreditation standards and requirements in many countries, educators can be active in supporting student wellbeing during this time.

**Keywords:** *Social work education; Fieldwork placement; Student wellbeing; Australia*

## Introduction

The purpose of this reflective case study is to examine the effectiveness of changes made to an undergraduate social work course – SWRK3007: Ethics (referred to as “the course”). The course runs alongside the first fieldwork placement students undertake during their undergraduate studies, specifically during semester one of their third year of the program. The course, which is delivered via online methods, is taken by social work students at a regional university which has a high proportion of first-in-family students, and students with parental and caring responsibilities. In 2022, the authors of this paper made changes to the structure and pedagogical principles of the course due to their concerns about the stressors facing students concurrently engaging with placement responsibilities. We aim to reflect on how these adaptations can support students during their placement, taking into consideration the various stressors they may face, such as financial burdens, caring responsibilities and mental health concerns (Hodge et al., 2020).

The conversation around student wellbeing while on placement has been increasing in volume and scope, with news outlets reporting on the financial burden of students in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis (Wang, 2023) and reports of high rates of deferrals and withdrawals within social work cohorts (Morley, 2023). If social work education is going to promote social justice values within its curriculum and “address national and international issues in social policy and social work that impact upon social work education” (Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education, 2023), then it needs to consider all available options to support students on placement in the current socio-economic-political climate.

Field education is a central part of social work education (Bogo, 2010; Cleak & Smith, 2012; Egan et al., 2021). However, for students who juggle multiple responsibilities, completing field placements can be particularly challenging. A literature review conducted in 2016 to investigate the experience of students with multiple responsibilities while on placement suggests that these challenges can negatively impact their learning and future practice (Hemy et al., 2016), while more recent reports indicate that the issue of high rates of student withdrawals, income deficits and hidden costs and negative impacts on mental health are still prevalent for social work students on placement (Morley, 2023). It is crucial to address these challenges to prevent students from abandoning their social work career aspirations and to support their wellbeing, particularly in light of the shortage of trained social workers and projected staffing shortfalls within Australia (Morley, 2023).

In Australia, social work education requires students to complete 1000 hours of field education across two placements to align with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) accreditation standards. This means that full-time social work placements, which typically last 14 to 15 weeks, can result in significant stressors for students (Hodge, 2020). Having multiple responsibilities and obligations makes it challenging for students to attend traditional full-time unpaid placements, which can negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing (Gair & Baglow, 2018a, 2018b). Additional considerations are required to deal with the anxiety and stress experienced by students during placement, both in and outside of the classroom (Gair & Baglow, 2018b; Hodge, 2020).

This highlights the need for Hodge's call for a "collaborative response from universities, professional bodies and placement agencies" to address the impact of lengthy unpaid placements on student wellbeing (2020, pp. 798).

To support this goal, we used pedagogical styles based on developmental and nurturing perspectives to guide the redevelopment of the course. Developmental pedagogical styles emphasise that "effective teaching must be planned and conducted 'from the learner's point of view,'" while educators should utilise effective questioning that challenges learners to move from simple to complex forms of thinking and develop examples of 'bridging knowledge' that provide meaningful examples to the learner (Pratt & Collins, 2020, para. 4). Supporting this perspective, nurturing pedagogical styles are based on the notion that "effective teaching assumes that long-term, hard, persistent effort to achieve comes from the heart, not the head," and that learners can be nurtured by knowing that they can succeed in learning if they try; that their achievements are a by-product of their own efforts; and that their learning will be supported by both their educators and their peers (Pratt & Collins, 2020, para. 5).

### **Case study**

In 2022, one of the authors of this paper became the coordinator of the undergraduate social work course discussed, which runs alongside the first placement. Several changes were made to the course to enhance student comprehension of ethical principles and decision-making models, as well as their ability to apply this knowledge in practical settings. The course was redesigned, utilising student feedback, with an awareness of the growing stressors facing social work students on placement (Hodge, 2020).

Due to university-wide adjustments in resourcing, the course recently transitioned from its previous blended format of face-to-face workshops alongside supplementary online material to a fully online delivery. Consequently, the course was modified in how course content was presented and the methods by which students engaged with it, to align with the principles of online pedagogy (Goldingay et al., 2020; Meseguer-Martinez et al., 2017). The course delivery method was modified to incorporate small, targeted pre-recorded online videos, to give students more control and independence when accessing course content. We felt compelled to give students as much autonomy as possible in how, and when, they engaged with the course content. The course was restructured to include fortnightly modules, emphasising specific elements of social work ethics in relation to practice, with corresponding activities and assessments tied to student placement experiences.

Additionally, an 'anytime submission and return of grades' policy was implemented, removing penalties for late submissions and allowing students to complete course assessments at their own pace, similar to the usual process of field education requirements. Our focus on removing due dates and emphasising flexibility, support and autonomy was from a growing assertion that social work education in Australia should avoid using authoritarian pedagogical strategies that do not recognise or accommodate the stressors of placement, or the reality of completing higher education in 2023.

This strategy aligned with our pedagogical style, one based on developmental and nurturing perspectives towards teaching (Pratt & Collins, 2020). These perspectives highlight the importance of planning and conducting effective teaching with consideration for the learner's perspective. Furthermore, they suggest that individuals are more motivated and productive learners when they are supported to work on issues or problems without the fear of failure (Pratt & Collins, 2020).

## Findings and reflections

The motivation behind redesigning the course was to promote student autonomy, flexibility and to reject authoritarian pedagogical methods that failed to acknowledge the stress experienced by students due to the demands of placement. Feedback on the changes were collected via the Course Experience Survey (CES), which assigned a score out of 5, and included qualitative feedback. Although the reliability of CES results in higher education is contested (Gelber et al., 2022), it can still serve as a valuable metric with careful interpretation and reflection.

In 2019, 2020, and 2021, the CES results for SWRK3007 ranged from 2.57 to 2.71. However, after implementing these changes to the course, the CES score for 2022 was 4.80, with a high response rate of 69%, or 56 out of the 81 enrolled students. This demonstrates the positive impact of the course re-design. Qualitative comments on the course were equally positive, with many highlighting the benefits of the flexible, self-paced approach:

Flexibility around completing modules and learning: we could hand them in any time before they were due, which was easier for me to manage my learning time during placement. There weren't set classes, we could watch the learning module videos in our own time, which is very helpful.

I really appreciated the accessibility of the content. It was super helpful having the pre-recorded videos to go back and access at any time. The discussion pages were also really great to use as the module activities and learn about the different experiences of other students on placement. It's really evident that the teaching staff were aware of the stresses of placement and kept the content concise, while still feeling like I could engage in the content.

While other students directly commented on the workload and stressors they felt while on placement:

[Author] tailored the course in a way that was complementing our placement but also not putting immense stress and pressure on us with the workload, which has made a really huge difference when balancing my placement workload as well.

I appreciate how flexible [Author] made this course, to complement our work load with our first professional placement.

The self-paced aspect of the learning modules alleviated a lot of stress this semester, and he was consistently on top of marking everyone's work towards these. The learning during this course has really complimented (sic) my learning on placement and has been extremely helpful.

I was worried that I would not be able to juggle the course with placement but it was very manageable and achievable. I appreciated that the content was very valuable and enhanced my learning while on placement.

While there were areas for improvement identified in the feedback – including a desire for more content on macro-level ethical issues and ethical dilemmas that were not focused on service-user interaction – these comments were more content-oriented and did not relate to the concerns of social work students while on placement. On reflection, we believe that this feedback supports the effectiveness of the re-design in promoting student autonomy and flexibility on placement, while promoting pedagogical styles that emphasise developmental and nurturing perspectives towards teaching (Pratt & Collins, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This case study indicates that redesigning social work courses that sit alongside placement to emphasise student flexibility, personal engagement and accessible course materials can be an effective first-step in addressing student stressors during placement. The elements we focused on in this case study included the use of short, targeted, online videos as the primary delivery method of content. This approach allows students the flexibility to engage with the course material at their own pace, while managing some of the practical challenges of placement. Additionally, we adopted the strategies of removing late penalties and offering early and flexible marking of assignments, which reduced student stress and promoted student motivation during their studies (Pratt & Collins, 2020).

The implications of the case study are significant for reducing stress on placement and keeping students engaged with undergraduate learning. Additionally, these findings can help make undergraduate academic courses more aligned with the realities of placement in 2023, particularly for students who are women, carers, live rurally and have other responsibilities in their personal lives. While the changes made to this course cannot fundamentally alter the situation many social work students find themselves in while completing placements, they can reduce the stress and burden on students. Educators are striving to advocate for changes in social work education. These changes include potentially reducing placement hours or redesigning the current undergraduate structure for social work degrees. Until that time however, the alterations we have described here can help alleviate the burden on students and promote their learning during placements. Ultimately, adapting education to better support students during placement is essential in establishing a supportive and equitable learning environment for all social work students.



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