

# A Model for a Social Justice Hub for Social Work Education

## Reflective Narrative

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## Abstract

Social justice is a foundational principle in global social work, underpinning its professional identity. Amidst global challenges rooted in neoliberal capitalism and colonial legacies, social work's commitment to justice is vital. While social work students typically learn about social (in)justice theories, developing advanced skills in social justice practice requires an integrated and experiential curriculum, such as field education. The Social Justice Hub at Curtin University serves as a conduit for engagement with university resources, aiming to drive transformative change towards a more just society. Social work students on field placement codesigned the Social Justice Hub to create projects and innovations that are collaborative responses to enduring social justice problems. The placement model addresses a gap in learning about community building, project management and co-designing projects for social justice outcomes. This paper describes the Social Justice Hub and its development as a field placement opportunity for learning about social justice practice.

**Keywords:** *Experiential curriculum; social justice; social work education; field education; community development*

## Social Justice and Social Work

Social justice is a core value of social work internationally (International Federation of Social Workers, 2023) that has its roots in philosophy and political theory (Barry, 2005). It has found expression in various social movements and activist traditions concerned with labour rights, women's equality, sovereignty and justice for First Nations people, mental health and disabled persons consumer movements, LGBTQI movements, and other movements for justice and equality (Thompson, 2002; Watts & Hodgson, 2019)—many of which align with social work concerns and practice contexts. Social justice movements have international reach, such as recent calls for climate justice by the International Federation of Social Workers (2022), and greater involvement of social workers in the global Black Lives Matter movement in the UK (Reid, 2020). In the US, for example, the National Association of Social Workers has set five social justice priorities, which include “voting rights, criminal justice reforms, juvenile justice, immigration reform and economic justice and equity” (NASW, 2024, online).

Marsh states that social justice gives social work its professional coherence (2005), hence the centrality of a strong social justice grounding for social work cannot be understated (Austin, 2014; Kam, 2014). The world is experiencing global challenges and crises, such as climate change, economic inequality, displacement, complex and entrenched intersectional disadvantages, violence, oppression and discrimination—many of which have their roots in neoliberal capitalism and the ongoing legacies of colonisation (Watts & Hodgson, 2019; Watts & Hodgson, 2021). Neoliberalism is an economic and political orthodoxy concerned with minimal government, cuts to social welfare, privatisation and social and institutional transformation towards the values of profit, efficiency and self-entrepreneurial (Watts & Hodgson, 2019). Colonisation is defined as a “persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous people that are there” (Arvin et al. 2013, p. 12). Together, these forces create myriad social injustices, such as exploitation, racism, structural violence, inequality and disadvantage of the most vulnerable.

Practising social work from a social justice perspective requires understanding the historical and contextual antecedents of injustice, and a deep ethical commitment to social work ethics and values. Social workers require advanced skills and knowledge of social and political advocacy, organisations and institutions and how to influence them, community organising, networking and lobbying, activism, power sharing and empowerment, respectful and inclusive communication skills, critical reflection, including people in decision-making, participatory and cooperative approaches to research and knowledge building (see Watts & Hodgson, 2019, pp. 174-179). For students learning about the discipline and practice of social work from a social justice perspective, there is much to learn.

## The Social Justice Hub at Curtin University

### *Field Education Curriculum and Pedagogy*

Social work is typically taught in a university over several years, where students learn foundational ideas from psychology, sociology, law, ethics, culture and society, as well as theories and methods of social work practice, such as visiting, casework, group work, community work, advocacy and policy work (Watts & Hodgson, 2019). Social work students also study fields of practice such as child protection, health and mental health, disability, social work with older adults and social work with groups and families (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015).

A social work curriculum of such wide scope is effective when it is coherently organised and designed from a whole curriculum perspective (Heggen & Terum, 2013; Watts & Hodgson, 2015). Field education is a core part of this curriculum design (Wayne et al., 2010), and the establishment of signature pedagogy for social justice practice requires a supported social and relational experience that is concerned with the acquisition of professional competencies, as well as transformative intellectual and personal growth (Wallengren Lynch et al., 2018). A pedagogy of experiential learning is key to the ability to combine theory with practice (Juneau et al., 2022) because it develops students' abilities to engage in reflective and reflexive practice (Watts, 2019). Furthermore, the Social Justice Hub addresses a particular gap in field education learning opportunities, insofar as it emphasises community building and group work skills as foundational to macro social work practice. These skills themselves address the neoliberal push for case management and individualised practice, and placements that offer community, group and macro theory learning opportunities are important to maintain as a predominant format for promoting social justice practice.

### *Approach and Methodology*

This paper is co-authored by social work educators at Curtin University and students, now social work graduates, who completed their field placement in the Social Justice Hub in 2023. The Social Justice Hub was established as a field placement opportunity for social work students to work with other students, university staff, partners and communities to engage with the Curtin University resources and expertise to work for social justice. Students in the hub are drawn from either Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or Master of Social Work Qualifying (MSWQ) courses and may be first or second-placement students. Students are selected based on their interest in developing community-based projects based on social justice principles.

The hub aligns with the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) in all aspects of the requirements for field education, but particularly aligned with practice standards concerning advocacy for socially just policy, working with diversity, practicing from a social work framework, and contributing to social work professional identity as a social justice profession (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2023). Students are supported with direct regular contact with academic staff and have external supervision and liaison just as they would for field placement learning. An office space is available on campus for students to meet and work, and they complete their placement on campus, but with regular engagement with the community and other local organisations.

The Social Justice Hub aims to promote transformational change towards a more socially just society. It seeks to make a modest contribution to social justice by engaging in projects aimed at a range of social justice issues and by providing a learning experience rich in opportunities for critical reflection and conscientisation of students, academics and community members depending on the projects developed. Projects emerge from the problem-solving process characteristic of Freirean critical pedagogy, which emphasises a critical but humanistic approach to learning; for example, creating conditions for student autonomy, creativity, and curiosity (Davis & Harrison, 2013; Freire, 1972). The existence of the Social Justice Hub is a small bid to work collectively inside a neoliberal organisation.

The inaugural students of the Social Justice Hub developed its foundations, outlining through a co-design process its core values, purposes, knowledge (theories) and skills. The Hub's principles are underpinned by social justice thinking (Watts & Hodgson, 2019), the Sustainable Development Goals (Ashwini, 2021), a person-in-environment perspective, and literature from eco-social work (Reu & Jarldorn, 2023). A community asset map of local organisations and community development initiatives was used by the students and academic staff to initiate engagement with various organisations for collaboration on social justice projects. Students worked together with academic staff and supervisors, as well as community members to create an asset map. This process supported students in learning skills in researching policies to support fairness, supporting active participation and shared decision-making, building inclusive communities, and facilitating awareness and learning of systemic inequalities. Thus, the work of the Social Justice Hub requires students to critically examine values and ethical principles of natural rights, dignity, and respect for persons and the natural environment, to address domination, oppression, and structural disadvantages, by analysing and criticising the use of power and knowledge (Watts & Hodgson, 2019).

## Two Examples of Social Justice Projects

### *Aboriginal Voice to Parliament Project*

In Australia, the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament referendum was held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2023 (Reconciliation Australia, 2024). In anticipation of this, the Social Justice Hub undertook a project to raise awareness of 'The Voice', and advocate for the 'Yes' vote. During the formative phase of the project, meetings with academic staff, university administrators, and the student guild were held to discuss 'The Voice' campaign and explore the feasibility of providing support to this campaign through educative actions with students on campus. These meetings and scoping activities were initiated by the students in the Social Justice Hub.

Kitchen table conversations with other social work students, inspired by 'Together, Yes' (2023), drew on anti-oppressive methods of education to undertake critical conversations about 'The Voice', and what this means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition, in an ongoing context of colonisation and contested sovereignty. Conversations involved noticing, naming, discussing and reflecting on power, colonisation, democracy and representation.

Discussions explored practical ways to encourage social action in the form of speaking to others about voting yes. Students in the Social Justice Hub initiated and ran this project, and they developed skills in project planning, research into the Voice to Parliament, preparation of resources, skills in participatory, dialogical group facilitation, and evaluation.

The learning and skills developed in this project included policy research, project planning, fact-checking, group facilitation and managing participatory deliberations over contested issues. These skills are important for any social justice project, where matters of fact and opinion may be contested, and social workers require excellent skills in facilitating informed conversations where divided opinions occur. Participants in the discussions about 'The Voice' felt they had a safe space to explore the different view-points being circulated in the public discourse and reported improved confidence to hold an informed ethical conversation about 'The Voice' elsewhere.

### *Criminal Record Reform Project*

A criminal record is a comprehensive record of an individual's encounters with the criminal justice system, including arrests, charges, convictions, and releases (Legal Aid Western Australia, 2018). Criminal records, once created, cast a long-lasting shadow over the lives of individuals, which may result in discrimination, limited employment opportunities, housing difficulties, and restricted access to education (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2004). As an institutionalised practice, criminal records disproportionately impact marginalised communities, including racial and ethnic minorities, reinforcing pre-existing disparities in employment and income (Solomon, 2012).

During the formative phase of this project, meetings with academic staff were initiated by students, to explore the curriculum potentials for learning about criminal record reform as part of a social work education. That is, a curriculum analysis was conducted to locate this project in relation to other aspects of social work curricula, such as law, social policy, advocacy and activism. As part of this project, a comprehensive policy paper has been developed, with a focus on the Western Australian context. The paper presents a comparative law and policy analysis of national and international criminal record reforms and proposes recommendations for reform in the Western Australian legal jurisdiction. Accompanying the policy paper is an animated video that succinctly explains key points from the paper, making the information more engaging and easily understandable. Finally, an educational workshop for social work students was created to help students and practitioners understand and advocate for changes in the criminal record system.

The skills developed in this project are policy research and analysis, report writing, argumentation and communication skills of legal reform for social justice, and skills in developing social work curricula and pedagogy to teach about criminal record reform and the role of policy advocacy for social work practice.



## Conclusion

Social justice is a philosophical and ethical value in social work, and therefore learning about social justice is an exercise in bridging theory with practice. Field education is a pedagogical space where students can test and develop theoretical ideas and concepts in real-world practice situations (Wayne et al., 2010), making it an ideal opportunity to develop social justice practice. One of the challenges of the Social Justice Hub concerns the time it takes to develop, initiate and carry out a project within the scope of a single field placement. Some projects were explored, but later abandoned as it quickly became apparent that they would require a much longer lead-in time to develop. There is scope to create projects that exist on a rolling basis, with students coming into projects that have been established and developed by previous students. A strength of the Social Justice Hub, however, is that an explicit focus on social justice in a field education placement can help create coherence in the learning experience, supporting the acquisition of a social justice identity for social work practice (Heggen & Terum, 2013). The Social Justice Hub at Curtin University has created a way for an academic program in a university to make a difference in the community, whilst also providing students with a way to integrate social justice theory with practice learning.

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