Social Work Field Education in Australia: Sharing Practice Wisdom and Reflection

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights current issues relevant for Australian social work field education preparation and delivery, and shares some of the challenges that impact on schools of social work in rural, regional and urban settings. Topics discussed include the neoliberal context of social work education, its impact, and issues for rural and remote, international and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student placements. The paper explores some existing models that have emerged as responses to current challenges and environments. It also stresses that, despite economic rationalism and the neoliberal context, Australian social work educators still need to provide quality experiences for social work students, their field educator and the field. The importance of engagement in discussions about the future of Australian social work field education is emphasised.

Keywords: *Field education; Neoliberalism; Diversity; International students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; External supervision, Use of technology*

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the collective reflections and practice wisdom from four social work and welfare educators involved in field education teaching across a number of Australian tertiary education institutions. While discussing current concerns in field education the authors find that many of the issues impacting on the student field education experience are linked to the current neoliberal context of social work and social work education in Australia. Stakeholders in field education include students, university field education professional and academic staff, agency staff and field educators. Here we seek to engage these stakeholders and interested others in discussions about the possibilities, challenges and environment for field education in Australia.

Social work practice

Social work and human service workers are currently operating in a sector that is under pressure. The Australian welfare state is in the process of restructure and reform (Healy, 2004). The emphasis of these reforms focuses on economic market principles that put organisations into competition for funding with the aim of achieving lean, cost-effective services and there is a preference for user-pays systems (Healy, 2004). Increasingly, organisations focus on efficiencies rather than effectiveness, and consequently workers in these environments feel less supported, have higher case loads, leading to stress and low staff retention (Chiller & Crisp, 2012). The context of social work practice is framed by workplace ideologies and neoliberal market principles that are alien to professional social work values (Healy, 2004) and put strain on social workers in practice (Agllias, 2010). Social workers face dilemmas in reconciling the pressure to achieve outcomes with the ethics of social work, such as the right to self-determination (Healy, 2004). Concurrently, increasingly social workers work in positions that require particular skills and competencies rather than professional qualifications (Agllias, 2010). This challenges social work's ethics and commitments to social justice, but it also puts social workers in competition for service-delivery roles that are deregulated and de-professionalised (Healy, 2004). In this environment there are pressures on universities to implement task-focused competency-based learning and assessment.

ISSUES FOR SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION

Context of field education

Neoliberal thinking is impacting on social work field education. Within the university sector the effects are that field education is viewed as a resource-intensive activity not in keeping with the university's core business of teaching and research (Morely & Dunston, 2013). As a result, fewer academic staff are involved in field education and their place is taken by professional staff. What this means for field education in the longer term is not yet clear, however, the consequences of reduced academic involvement in field education have to be considered. In Australia, field education takes up a quarter of the academic Bachelor of Social Work degree, and slightly more than one third of the qualifying Masters of Social Work degree. If field education is supported primarily by professional staff, there is the risk that field education will not be informed by research and that, within the academic environment, it will continue to be viewed as secondary to real academic teaching and learning.

The additional pressures that neoliberalism places on the human services industry, the devaluing of social work and loss of meaningful social work identity that is linked to emancipatory change (Morley & Dunstan, 2013) also changes the service field and environments students enter for their practice education. Social workers who are supporting field education often need to combine heavy workloads with their responsibilities as supervisors of social work students (Moriarty et al., 2009). Barton, Bell, and Bowles (2005) found that agencies were focused heavily on constraints and efficiencies and viewed the time spent on student supervision as costly. At the same time, from the field educators' perspective, the responsibilities of supervising, teaching and assessing a student were neither recognised nor planned for by agencies (Parker, 2007). Consequently, it is becoming more difficult to provide placement opportunities that are supported by qualified social worker supervisors on site (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000; Unger, 2003). This places inordinate pressure on field education staff and imposes financial costs on universities to provide external supervisors when social work supervisors on site are not available or are unwilling to provide this supervision to students.

Social work education in Australia is regulated by the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) which sets down the requirements for field education; for example, the requirement that students receive a minimum of 90 minutes of formal supervision per week of full-time placement from a qualified social worker who has a minimum of two years' postgraduate experience. Other requirements include that the student has adequate access to resources and space within the agency, and is provided with a broad range of learning opportunities (AASW, 2012). Field educators must have demonstrated a commitment to professional development and undertake training for the field education role before or during their first experience in the field educator role (AASW, 2012). An increasing number of schools of social work find that time restraints often influence field educators' decisions to attend this training and other forms of continuing education that would better prepare them to develop supervisory skills.

Field education in rural and remote areas

The impact of neoliberalism on field education is felt particularly in rural and remote areas where the difficulty in finding appropriate, accessible placements which meet the needs of students and agencies is well recognised in the literature (Alston, 2007; Hicks & Swain, 2007; Brown & Green, 2009). The situation is exacerbated by the constant struggle to attract and retain qualified social workers to regional, rural and remote areas and is particularly true for smaller non-government human service organisations (Barton et al., 2005; Lonne & Cheers, 2000; Munn & Munn, 2003). Nevertheless, there are benefits for agencies hosting placements. In particular, agencies can use placements as an informal recruiting process (Barton et al., 2005; Brown & Green, 2009) and as a professional development opportunity by those staff taking the role of supervisor. Accessing training and development can be costly and time consuming for those outside metropolitan areas with Murphy and McDonald (2004, p. 130) finding that, "as rurality increased, access to resources and professional development decreased". Students also need to be properly prepared for and supported during the challenges of regional, rural and remote placements which can include isolation, negotiating community gossip, high visibility and the overlapping roles involving family, friends and colleagues (Brownlee, Halverson, & Chassie,

2012). Universities have also been challenged to find ways to provide consistent support to supervisors and students in regional, rural and remote settings (Brown & Green, 2009).

International students and field education

Neoliberal thinking and policies are also impacting universities and students in other ways: the recruitment of international students, for example, is a revenue source. International education has become big business; it is one of Australia's largest export industries, generating $18 billion in exports in 2009 (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010). Higher education has changed from being a public service driven by academics to a market-driven service driven by purchasers and customers (Chan, 2004) with knowledge and qualifications viewed as products (Brydon, 2011). Approximately 22.3% of all students in the higher education sector are international students (Australian Education Network [AEN], 2013). In 1995 there were 111,300 international students in Australia. In 2013 this number more than doubled to 233,099 (AEN, 2013). Whilst the numbers of international students enrolling in social work courses in Australia has remained low (Australian Education International [AEI], 2013) the new Australian Federal Government has projected future increases in the numbers of international students to be recruited to the higher education sector with proposed visa changes to assist with the process (Liberal/National Party, 2013). In 1997 international students enrolled in social work programs in Australia represented 1.2% (Taylor, Craft, Murray, & Rowley, 2000) of the total; by 2012 the number of international students enrolled in social work is less precise as the Australian Bureau of Statistics records these students under the broad field of education of "society and culture" at 5.2%. Of particular concern is that universities may not always put enough strategies in place to appropriately support international students in field education, leaving students struggling to make adjustments to local systems (Bartoli, Kennedy, & Tedam, 2008).

International and domestic students for whom English is a second language often share common concerns at university. One of these is language difficulties, particularly in written English. Another is discomfort with verbal interactive communication in tutorial classes (Krause, Hartley, James, McInnis, 2005). Rai (2004) argues that literacy policy within university social work programs needs to consider the social and cultural aspects of language and to encourage students to access the skills needed for writing for university and workplace settings. Agencies place keen emphasis on students' ability to communicate effectively, and some studies show that international students are more likely to fail field education (Bartoli et al., 2008). There have been some informal reports of resistance to hosting international students' field education placements. For example, a small number of agencies have reportedly requested payment for supervising students as some European countries provide funding for students to do placements abroad. Others prefer to offer placements only to those they could employ after placement. Changes in expectations of the field and a number of agencies viewing their particular area of work as highly complex, translate into some agencies expecting students to commence placement and to have similar levels of knowledge to employees within the agency. This attitude creates unrealistic expectations of students undertaking placement as this specific knowledge will be gained only as part of the learning on placement.

Importantly, international students about to undertake field education need support such as language programs (Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). Zhang and Mi (2010) recommended that, rather than look at deficiencies, academics need to look at what these students can do well and what skills are required for their studies. Literacy programs should reflect this and the unique cultural backgrounds of the students (Zhang & Mi, 2010) along with their preferred learning styles. Some students who struggle with language difficulties require a substantial amount of time, effort and resources from those involved in field education to locate, negotiate and support satisfactory placement experiences (Taylor et al., 2000).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experiences in field education

International students are not the only ones who find it challenging to adjust to university and field education requirements. The experiences of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds studying at university or on placement are often those of dissatisfaction and disengagement. This can relate to feelings of isolation, lack of support, and the devaluing of students' cultural identity. In particular, Gair, Thomson, and Savage (2005) and Zuchowski, Savage, Miles, and Gair (2013) highlight the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on placement as feeling undervalued, being misunderstood in both their cultures and cultural identities, and having their experiences, knowledge and ways of doing things unacknowledged. Students, moreover, describe traumatic experiences of racism that affect their ability to learn and to engage in supervision due to a lack of cultural safety within the learning environment (Green et al., 2013; Zuchowski et al., 2013). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experience in social work education is also one of multiple roles: student, educator and expert, placing pressures and responsibilities on them while at times putting them in vulnerable positions and limiting their learning opportunities (Green et al., 2013). In field education and social work learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students frequently discuss issues faced by their own people. This, potentially, exposes them to responses that minimise their expressed concerns (Green et al., 2013). It can also work to deny the importance of the lived experiences that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students bring to placement (Zuchowski et al., 2013).

The placement experience is heavily contingent on the supervisory relationship. The supervisory relationship significantly contributes to the development of the students' formation of professional social work identity and the ongoing sense of self and connectedness to culture and cultural identity and the validation of this (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Burkard et al. (2006) identify that, when supervision is culturally responsive and discussions of culture and cultural differences are prioritised, then supervisees of indigenous or CALD background have a much more positive experience of supervision. Client outcomes are more positive as well. Culturally appropriate supervision that recognises Aboriginal worldviews is important, and consideration has to be given to the cultural supervision that can only be provided by an Aboriginal person (Bessarab, 2013). External supervision models could be utilized to implement culturally appropriate supervision with specific expertise (Bessarab, 2013; Zuchowski, 2011). Schools of social work and human service work have yet to fully realise and acknowledge the imperative of cultural supervision within the context of field education.

Implications of diversity for social work and human services field placements

Globally, social work is operationalised in different contextual ways. In some countries strong emphasis is placed on community work and social development and this gives a structural approach for our understanding and interpretation of social competence, interpersonal relationships and wellbeing (Hugman, 2013). The focus on the individual and/or the environmental context can lead to debate over prioritising the individual over the community. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities) the strong sense of connectedness and community is central to the cultural identity and values inherent in these communities. Menzies and Gilbert (2013) point out that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers are deeply embedded in their communities and have strong cultural connections that can pose challenges, such as meeting protocol expectations and obligations, family commitments and having prior connections with clients. This impacts heavily on the students' experiences in field placement when the ethos of social work may not have such a strong focus on community relationships and ways of doing.

With increasing numbers of international students and issues of diversity amongst local students, increasing challenges for field placement learning become evident. The notion of traditional methods of social work relating specifically to counselling with a focus on individual work appears to be culturally irrelevant and therefore inappropriate for many culturally diverse communities (Wache & Zufferey, 2013). Often international students are expected to adapt to the Australian context rather than them being provided with culturally relevant experiences and literature for those studying social work in Australia. Taylor et al. (2000) argue that social work academics need to debate some of the ethical issues around professional "imperialism". A beginning point is to recognise that social work in Western countries has been based on the Judeo/Christian tradition and this is not worldwide (Brydon, 2011).

Some students who struggle with language difficulties require a substantial amount of time, effort and resources from those involved in field education in universities to locate, negotiate and support satisfactory placement experiences (Taylor et al., 2000). The International Office and Teaching and Learning Units at universities have been responsible for providing academic and social support to international students. They encourage the students to access support services that are available to the university-wide student population. There is recognition by some universities that additional support needs to be provided to international students by the individual bachelor and postgraduate programs.

REFLECTION ON CURRENT ISSUES

In summary, there are significant challenges facing academics and non-academic field education staff and field educators in the agencies in relation to managing field education placements. Field education programs in academia are often marginalized, partially as they are seen as a cost-intensive activity at times when universities have become income-driven (Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Currently, many agencies are experiencing shrinking resources and therefore their capability to host students and to provide a rich learning environment for the students are increasingly difficult. Increased workloads mean limited time for

supervision by a qualified social worker within the agency. This has huge implications for universities in provision of external supervision adding large financial costs to the management of field education programs within social work schools.

Increasingly, agency staff expect students to be able to demonstrate very fast uptake of knowledge so that they can rapidly assume the role of pseudo-employee in order to manage large caseloads. These are unrealistic expectations and also inappropriate demands to place on students undertaking a field education placement. In addition, large numbers of international students and a culturally diverse range of local students also mean that aspects of diversity impact significantly on the teaching and learning processes throughout the field education placement.

EMERGING RESPONSES

In this following section, emerging responses to some of the issues discussed above are presented. Three models are considered: one focusing on supporting international students in field education, one looking at the opportunities and challenges of external placements and one considering the use of technology in field education.

Supporting international students in field education

Challenges in field education placement planning and matching are growing with the diversity of students. Increasingly, we need to build our network of field placement agencies to support our students finding challenging placement opportunities with sound and relevant social work learning (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010).

In addition to addressing the issue at the university level, some schools have developed their own programs and revised their curriculum to meet challenges around writing and academic literacy that international students face (Daddow, Moraitis, & Carr, 2012). Waller recommends the development of "specialised writing assignments across the social work curriculum that will prepare students for the particular literacy requirements of the profession" (2000, p. 163). Rai (2004) identified three types of writing necessary for social work education. These include essay writing and writing for students on placement, such as reports, recording, and letters, and reflective writing. The third type requires students to integrate academic theories with reflections on their own practice which highlights the "powerful impact which individual identity has upon the writing process" (Rai, 2004, p. 153).

The mentoring program at University of South Australia (UniSA)

In an attempt to address some of these challenges The School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy (PSW School) at UniSA has developed a pre-placement mentoring program for international students to provide additional support to both students and the field educators providing supervision during the placement. This program has been trialled throughout the placement to assist with the orientation process and the navigating by international students of the welfare, health and education systems related to the agency placement.

Pilot Project–Model of mentoring for International Students Phase 1: The pre-placement mentoring–preparation for field practicum

The mentoring program was offered to all international students in the Masters in Social Work (Qualifying) program who would be soon commencing their first field practicum. Three staff members were involved in sharing the delivery of these sessions. The MSW Field practicum course coordinator assisted students to understand the social work purpose, roles and function, integration of social work theory with practice and orientation to the specific fields of practice. The sessional ESL (English as Second Language) staff member prepared students for the interview with prospective field educators. This staff member worked with students to role play and practise the articulation of relevant social work theories, social work identity, reasons for wanting that particular placement, and identifying key issues and needs for the client groups the agency serviced. A staff member from the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) focused on professional writing skills for social workers, including case noting, report writing, sentence construction, and grammar and spelling.

Feedback from this initial pre-placement mentoring program has been very positive, with students valuing this highly as an opportunity to revise and further consolidate the learning from the first semester's teaching. Feedback was obtained in class verbally as well as through distribution of a short questionnaire to 15 international students participating in the mentoring program. Eight students responded to the survey. These students found this mentoring program to be very helpful in preparing them for the placement and, in particular, the interview with a prospective agency field educator. They felt an increase in confidence and a higher level of competency in being able to "talk the social work talk" whilst articulating their learning needs and their social work purpose.

Continuing the mentoring program during placement: Phase 2

The PSW School recognised that an ongoing mentoring program would be beneficial in supporting international students adjusting to the Australian context of social work and to increase their understanding of the operationalisation of human services in this context. This strategy would provide additional support to field educators/supervisors responsible for international students as they face increasing challenges in managing their own workloads with shrinking resources.

A few specific agencies were targeted where the traditional role of social work was considered to be somewhat blurred and where a small cohort of international students was placed. An additional phase of the mentoring program was developed and implemented so that the sessional ESL staff member and the field education co-ordinator could visit the students in the agency fortnightly for the first half of the placement then make two more visits after the mid-placement assessment. The purpose was to provide additional support to the international students and the field educators supervising the students (Zunz & Oil, 2009). Host agencies are facing increasing workloads and are more frequently requesting that an external supervisor will be required if they are to accept a student on placement. Hence an incentive to host either a local or international student often requires the university to put into place additional support structures to encourage agencies to provide placement opportunities.

The staff members mentoring these students supported them through the placement milestones including orientation to the agency and understanding the field of practice, identifying relevant community resources and services for interagency work, preparing the learning contracts, portfolio documents, assessments and the exit interview.

Phase 3 of the mentoring model:

Based on feedback from current international students, a preparatory academic course is being developed which will include the integration and application of social work learning in preparation for the impending placement. Students will practise articulating their rationale for wanting to undertake a field placement in a specific agency and field of practice. As part of the assessment in this preparatory course, students will be required to write a rationale for wanting a placement in a particular field of practice. Students will also be required to identify and articulate relevant bodies of social work knowledge and practice skills they could bring to the placement and identify key issues in the field of practice.

Additionally, students will be given a case scenario and required to identify key issues and a plan of intervention that identifies relevant social work theories as a rationale for their professional judgements and decision-making processes. This is important preparation, as an increasing number of international students are being rejected at the interview with prospective supervisors due to their inability to respond satisfactorily to a case study example or due to their limited knowledge of local community resources.

Other topics to be covered include the organisational context of service delivery, social policy development and implementation, the knowledge base for social work practice, ethical decision making, the structure of the non-government sectors, governance structures within these organisations, and funding arrangements. This additional mentoring program will help prepare international students with a broader understanding of the specific community resources and structures of the social work sectors (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2012; O'Connor, Wilson, Setterlund, & Hughes, 2008).

External supervision

Traditionally social work field education has been based on the idea that students can learn from an experienced social worker who acts like a role model, an apprenticeship-type model (Camilleri, 2001; Cleak & Smith, 2012). Recent research has shown that students are familiar with this model and are generally "…more satisfied across all aspects of their placements where there is a strong onsite social work presence" (Cleak & Smith, 2012, p. 256). However, while placements with external supervision are often seen as a last resort (Abram et al., 2000), placements with internal social work supervision are increasingly more difficult to source (Barton et al., 2005; Unger, 2003).

Placements with external supervision can provide opportunities for students, social work supervisors and the field in many areas and thus enable students to benefit from exposure to multi-disciplinary work, increased job opportunities and experiences in non-traditional emergent fields (Abram et al., 2000), additionally preparing students to become flexible and employable graduates (Plath, 2003). External supervision can also be an approach to providing culturally appropriate supervision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

students (Bessarab, 2013). Placements with external supervision can open up new fields of practice, position social work graduates into areas where there are few social workers and can be used to provide culturally relevant support (Zuchowski, 2011). The social work and task supervisors share a load that is otherwise carried by just one supervisor (Henderson, 2010). External supervision offers students safe spaces and supports to explore issues away from power struggles and busy workplaces, and role model supervision as essential for future professional practice (Zuchowski, 2013).

Nevertheless, field education with external supervision has its own challenges and students may feel concerned about social work identity, learning opportunities on placements and feeling competent (Cleak & Smith, 2012). There may be a lack of clearly defined social work roles for students to observe, or an under-valuing of the skills of on-site supervisors (Plath, 2003). The four-way process of accessing and reporting on the placement, necessitated by external supervision arrangements is complex (Plath, 2003) and care needs to be taken to match supervisors and students appropriately (Zuchowski, 2013).

The literature reports many features which may lead to successful placements with external supervision, these include: the relationships between supervisors (Abram et al., 2000); information sharing, authenticity, rapport building and cooperation (Karban, 1999); discussion between the responsibilities and roles of supervisors (Karban, 1999; Maidment & Woodward, 2002) and provision of extra support for students, supervisors and task supervisors in the triad relationship (Abram et al., 2000; Clare, 2001; Henderson, 2010).

A point to ponder is who will bear the costs of external supervision? In light of demands for efficiencies and university programs that should bring income rather than expend it, external supervision is a costly endeavour. External supervisors are generally employed by universities to provide supervision, a cost that is otherwise born indirectly by service organisations. This can mean that the cost is directly, or indirectly, allocated to students or that wealthier institutions or those with access to external funds, such as workforce-building or other grants, can choose to bear the cost, potentially advancing their competitive position for students and placements. Ideally, to allow equitable access to good supervision for students across Australia, funds would be made available to universities to cover the cost of quality education for students, including covering the cost of supervision.

Another model of field education emerging is placements with group supervision. Placements with group supervision can take on various forms: for instance, a number of social workers might jointly supervise students, or the placements could be academic–agency partnerships, split placements or collaborative research arrangements (Cleak & Smith, 2012). This is an area where little research has been undertaken, however, a small trial suggests that group supervision for students on placement can work well when combined with peer support (Nickson, 2010). Cleak and Smith (2012) found that 55% of students had one-to-one-type supervision with a social work qualified field educator, and that this model generally had the highest student satisfaction rating.

Using technology

Access to training and development is particularly difficult for professionals located outside metropolitan areas. Murphy and McDonald (2004) suggest that inadequate technology infrastructure and staff shortages make it increasingly difficult for staff to access training opportunities. Creative use of technology, particularly video-conferencing may provide a solution to some of the professional development needs of field educators, the assessment needs of students or support of both (see Maidment, 2006; Roberts-DeGennaro, Brown, Won Min, & Siegel 2005; Brown & Green, 2009). However, technology has its limitations and many rural and remote areas do not have access to reliable internet connections to facilitate or promote reliance on the use of these technologies (Birden, & Page, 2005; Maidment, 2006; Moffatt & Eley, 2011). In other words, schools might have the technology but the students and field educators might not. These challenges could be overcome as better internet connectivity becomes available across Australia. However, in the interim it is important to establish and maintain regular contact using whatever means available. It is crucial that schools and field educators work together to provide social work placements for students (Agllias, 2010) and strong lines of communication are vital to that work.

At the University of South Australia Centre for Regional Engagement, desktop web-conferencing to include rural and remotely based students in field education tutorials has been used successfully. Feedback gathered from students has shown that a sense of connectedness is important for those who are based in remote and rural locations and the ability to communicate face-to-face in the virtual world fosters a sense of inclusion and reduces isolation. Students looked forward to seeing and interacting with their peers in this way. Staff involved in the field education tutorials found that these are not negatively impacted when using the technology, especially if phone contact can be used as a backup plan should the laptop connection fail. On campus students quickly adapted to including their remote peers in large and small group conversations and the use of laptops rather than desktop computers provided the flexibility to move equipment thereby maximising sound and picture quality. These web conferencing tools were used regularly to hold meetings with students and field educators throughout placements thus ensuring good lines of communication were maintained. Bower et al., (2012) report an increasing use of rich media collaborative tools including web conferencing, video conferencing and the use of virtual worlds. The positive experiences of University of South Australia Centre for Regional Engagement certainly support the use of technology and hopefully encourage other schools to persist in experimenting with its use to facilitate rural and remote placements.

CONCLUSION

Field education forms a significant part of social work education. The neoliberal context in which field education operates currently imposes many challenges on all stakeholders involved in providing quality learning experiences for a diverse group of students. This discussion has identified a number of positive strategies to address some of these challenges and schools of social work are encouraged to adopt these and share other ideas. There is a need to continue the work of developing and evaluating programs and strategies to better support diverse groups of students and field educators. Most importantly, knowledge must be shared, and this presents another challenge. As yet there is no nationally recognised,

active field education forum discussing and sharing information and ideas. An active forum of Australian field education must include the voices of field education staff, field educators and students. At a time when economic policies threaten to marginalise field education and organisational practices, tensions exist which could lead to under-resourcing and increased workloads on professional staff as academic staff focus on university core business tasks of teaching and research. The danger present in this scenario is a growing disconnect between the teaching–research nexus and field education. This paper has shown that field education work involves more than matching students with agencies and monitoring their progress. Field education must meet the learning needs of diverse groups of students, provide quality and innovative learning experiences and support students and field educators in line with AASW requirements. Students are being prepared for professional practice in an ever-changing world therefore it is vital that field education in Australia listen to the voices of stakeholders and to be informed by research if it is to maintain its high standards and be relevant to practice contexts.

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