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Evaluating the Field Practicum Experience in Social Work Fieldwork Programs Using an Online Survey Approach: Student and Supervisor Responses

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Introduction

The complex role of the field educator in attending to the learning needs of the student, includes attention to a range of factors, such as providing students with a safe, reflective place for learning and self-exploration, while safeguarding the welfare of clients. These two tensions: safety of supervisees, and the safety of the social service organisation offering the fieldwork placement and their clients, are key issues underlying all fieldwork supervision (Pack, 2015). The purpose of this article is to evaluate the experience and satisfaction levels of students and field supervisors working in a university social work program in master and bachelor level social work degrees, who daily navigate these tensions and issues as part of the wider student learning.

This article begins by reporting the aims of the study, its aims and objectives, informed and guided by the literature review undertaken. The research design, methodology and methods are then reported, concluding with the evaluation's key findings with implications for fieldwork education in social work.

1 Aims, Objectives

The initial aim of the evaluation was to identify the areas in which the practicum fieldwork experience was working well and where the research participants wished to see changes so that any areas of concern or dissatisfaction could be addressed. The research was aimed at gaining a fuller picture and understanding of the experiences of students and field supervisors who had completed the fieldwork practicum placement for the purposes of making any necessary improvements.

Rationale for the Evaluation of Fieldwork Programs

There are two central dilemmas common to much fieldwork education that needs to be factored into the planning of fieldwork education programmes. The first dilemma is how to provide a trusting, supportive relationship when the field supervisor may also be functioning as the student supervisee's line manager. Articulating the power differential that inevitably exists in the clinical supervisory relationship is a theme for clinical supervisees to be prepared for. In particular there is a need for supervisors to reveal areas of learning safely to avoid supervisees feeling exposed and causing a descent into withdrawal and shame (Yontef, 1995). Added to this tension in the clinical supervisory relationship in fieldwork programs, is the requirement to assess various competencies for the University on which the student may pass or fail degree level professional programs of study in social work (Pack, 2015).

External supervision where the supervisee has access to a clinical supervisor outside of their employing agency, across the professions is considered important to provide a critically

reflective forum not tied to performance management. However, in social work, usually supervision is provided on the job by line managers for both new or beginning practitioners and students completing their fieldwork requirements in social work education in Australasia. When supervisees see supervision as a "safe place" and supervisors see supervision as risk management for clients on behalf of the organisation, differing expectations can complicate the relationship, opening the potential for confusion and disappointing outcomes for each group (Clarkson & Aviram, 1995). The relationship is important in the literature on clinical supervision in social work education, with the final phase of termination of the placement considered to be paramount though a neglected area of attention (Baum, 2007) In past research on the fieldwork experience, a qualitative study found the field supervisors had issues with the abrupt ending of their relationship with supervisees once the assessment was completed with the learning institution (Baum, 2007).

One of the other conundrums faced by educators and directors of field education programs is how to deliver meaningful learning experiences in the field practicum. Two important pedagogical principles predominate in the learning method of supervised practice for social work students completing fieldwork– active learning and authentic learning (Bloomfield et al., 2013).   These pedagogical principles are embedded in an apprenticeship model of supervised practice, common to multidisciplinary disciplines in health, by which the student learns from a more experienced practitioner (MacDonald, 2002). Authentic learning relates to the ways in which educators and social work practitioners enact intellectual understandings and translate these to practice (Bloomfield et al., 2013).   Tasks for this important area of learning (fieldwork) are described by the professional association of social workers in Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), in much detail and it is up to social work practitioners, their agencies and the academic staff to make these detailed requirements work smoothly (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2014).

2   The Context of Australian Social Work Supervision of Practice

In the context of Australian Social Work, there are requirements for two field placements within the context of an AASW accredited programme, one direct placement (involving direct client contact) and one "indirect" or research/policy focused placement (AASW, 2012). Bridging the gap between theory and practice is one of the main purposes of supervised practice in this dimension of the social work education (Bogo & McKnight, 2005). Social Work supervision is referred to in Australia most frequently as "practice" or "field" supervision and is defined as a discussion about the supervisee's practice for the purposes of supporting worker well-being, developing skills, knowledge, professional identity, accountability and best practice with clients (Bateman, Henderson, & Hill, 2012). With such a broad range of roles leading to differing understandings and mixed agendas, the role of clinical supervisors is of necessity a complex one. The field work practicum supervision is complicated also as it is positioned between the University and the practice agencies which Cleak and Wilson (2013) point out make it vulnerable to changes and influences in the workplace such as organisational restructuring. This inherent instability in the organisations employing social workers is difficult for Universities and other training establishments to determine in advance, for planning purposes. As the social service industry is facing retrenchment, putting existing social workers under additional pressures is another factor to include in the fieldwork planning process (Bateman, Henderson, & Hill, 2012). The tertiary education sector itself is undergoing change, thus compounding this uncertainty about the future of social work education (Cleak & Wilson, 2012). The popularity of the Masters qualifying and four year Bachelor degree programmes in Social Work in Australia has

increased in recent years placing greater pressure on the Universities to compete for high quality field placements (Cleak & Wilson, 2012). In the urban context of Sydney which is the largest city in Australia, the competition is so great for placements that the search for appropriate field agencies outstrips the supply of placements. The competition among university programmes for field opportunities intensifies the demand furthermore (Cleak & Wilson, 2012). This competition for appropriate placements coupled with restructuring and retrenchment in the public social service and non-government organisations (NGO) sectors intensifies the search for creative solutions to the need to offer authentic learning experiences for students. The changes occurring within the social services industry makes it difficult for social workers to commit to supervising social work students. In summary, these pressures combined with the Association of Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) for social work education require field supervisors to teach effectively as well as to supervise and mentor (AASW, 2012). Many practitioners who take on the role of field supervisors now feel they need a programme themselves of ongoing professional development to fulfil the role (Bloomfield et al., 2013).

Factors supporting successful experiences in assessment in field education include good relationships and connection between social work practitioners, agencies and the social work academic supervision at University which enables the field experience to be assessed more holistically and seamlessly (Bloomfield et al., 2013). Balancing detailed professional association practice standards and educator regulations with University assessment policies in social work education is another theme in assessing fieldwork in social work meaningfully. A critically reflective space is needed to assess the student's experience on field placement. How to find dedicated staff time to assist students to learn in their fieldwork practica within these pressures is an issue facing social work educators internationally.

3   Literature review

Mindful of the issues outlined above and as a preliminary step to undertaking the evaluation, a review of previous research was undertaken. This literature review can be found elsewhere but will be summarised to frame the evaluation and will be referred to as a framework for analysing its findings (Pack, 2009a). Three main themes from the earlier literature review emerged as: the differing meanings and roles of clinical supervision; the quality of relationship needed to make clinical supervision work; and navigating the relationship between supervisee and supervisor where an inevitable power imbalance exists, which can violate trust if unaddressed.

The emphasis in the literature review highlighted the mixed agenda for clinical supervision and the importance of the quality of the supervisor-student relationship (Pack, 2009a, 2009b). Whilst on the surface the relationship between clinical supervisor and student in clinical supervision does not appear to be the focus of this evaluation dealing with more pragmatic issues of the operation of a fieldwork program involving both bachelor and master of social work students, nonetheless it is important to understand that the quality of the relationship in the clinical supervisory forum is pivotal in what makes any field education work from the perspective of the supervisee (Clarkson & Aviram, 1995). Specifically the ending of the supervisory relationship is considered to be a neglected aspect of the fieldwork experience that impacts both supervisee and supervisor (Baum, 2007). Therefore, it is the nature of the contact between the supervisee and supervisor that requires attention as it lies at the heart of any effective supervisory relationship whether in the field or in advanced practice contexts (Pack, 2015).

An effective supervisory relationship is conceptualised in the research literature as a relationship in which clinical dilemmas and ethical issues can be safely and openly discussed (Furlonger & Taylor, 2013). The context of such a relationship can be used to promote quality assurance of one's work as well as ongoing professional development (Furlonger & Taylor, 2013). Specifically it is important that this relationship, particularly for new supervisees, is non-shaming and affirming of the supervisee who is encouraged to talk about their practice without fear of censure and personal judgements (Yontef, 1996). The humanity of the supervisor is considered critical with limited self-disclosure cementing the rapport building (Yontef, 1996). Ironically, the power deferential of the supervisor inevitably conflicts with any assurance of "safety" as clinical supervisors have a mixed role with responsibility to ensure the welfare of clients and the employing organisation from a risk management perspective. These differing agendas in clinical supervision makes for many complications in the interpersonal relationship and for the relationship between the university and the field (Bateman Henderson, & Hill, 2012).

The majority of studies on clinical supervision acknowledge that trust and respect, in the supervisory relationship are necessary to provide the sense of safety and protection necessary for the depth of reflection and awareness to unfold (Cerinus, 2005). Trust and safety balanced with challenge are preconditions that are necessary for the supervisory relationship to work and to maximise its effectiveness from the supervisee's perspective (Cerinus, 2005). For example, in the first 12 months of practice, one action research study found that trust was seen by supervisees as being an essential component of empathy and if it was not present there was little chance of an effective working relationship (Cerinus, 2005). Without these preconditions of safety and trust, supervision is unable to be truly effective and becomes instead, "disabling and restrictive" (Cutliffe & McFeeley, 2001, p. 315). These findings mirror those meanings supervisors attribute to "effective" clinical supervision (Clarkson & Aviram, 1999).

Choice of supervisor and an environment of trust and confidence in the first year, are necessary prerequisites discovered in previous research for an effective supervisory relationship, with challenge being considered as being less important for newer supervisees (Cutliffe & McFeeley, 2001).

On a similar theme, another qualitative study of counselling supervision using a grounded theory methodology from the supervisee's view point, identifies the importance of "safety" or "a safe relationship" in which the supervisee's chosen model of working is understood by the supervisor (Weaks, 2002). The "equality" of relationship is considered enhanced by "shared beliefs and values" between supervisor and supervisee (Weaks, 2002, p.37). Within such a supervisory relationship, challenge is seen as being necessary for clinical supervision to be considered a meaningful experience by the supervisees interviewed (Weaks, 2002).

The cultural setting of the agency where the fieldwork supervision takes place is another important consideration. In Australia cultural sensitivity to working with local Aboriginal as well as recent migrant groups is sought in the field placement experience. Ensuring the diversity of cultural experience in the learning is difficult as it involves matching the students' needs whilst factoring in their learning goals alongside AASW requirements.

How to capture views that could inform future practice in the planning and administration of student placements in the field to meet all of these requirements is the challenge this

evaluation aimed to address. The design and methodology of this evaluation is described in the following section.

4   Research Approach

Mindful of these issues in the literature on clinical supervision and the context of Australian social work, ethical approval was sought from the university to evaluate the experience of the fieldwork practicum across the social work students who were undertaking fieldwork, and field supervisors who were supervising the field placement units at Bachelor and Masters level. A web link to a 20 question survey that had been earlier piloted and refined was sent to120 students and 73 field supervisors canvassing their views of the operation of the field programmes. The pilot questionnaire was developed by a meeting with the fieldwork staff working at the University and a focus group of one cohort of master and bachelor students to ask what questions to ask and the best way to structure the questionnaire. Comments made by both groups were integrated and trialled within the focus groups of staff and students.

Each group (students and field supervisors) was asked about their experiences in various areas or domains. By asking each group for their feedback the aim was to identify and to implement any improvements as a team, to align with each group's (supervisee and supervisor) experience aspects of the field practicum. Thus the aim of the evaluation was to make any necessary changes to benefit both students and practice partners acting as field supervisors whilst completing practicum placement.

5   Methodology and Methods

In this section, a survey approach to evaluate the experience of fieldwork is justified as the author had previously evaluated fieldwork using a qualitative research design and in-depth interviews with supervisors and supervisees (Pack, 2015). An online survey approach to evaluation differs greatly from the qualitative research model. The author had earlier used a qualitative methodology to evaluate the fieldwork practicum experience from supervisee and supervisor perspectives (Pack, 2011a, 2011b, 2015). This earlier evaluation had identified the need for paid, externally provided supervision offered as part of a postgraduate Allied Health programme. This earlier evaluation identified the need for tools to teach students how to proactively use the supervision forum to assist their learning as recent graduates. Therefore an online podcast series was developed to teach students about the differing uses of clinical supervision and its relationship to effective teamwork and clinical practice (Pack, 2011a, 2011b).

A recurring theme in the literature earlier reviewed on clinical supervision, was that supervision needed to be clearly distinguished from line management to enable sufficient trust to develop for full disclosure of on the job experiences from beginning supervisees (Pack, 2009a). The amount and nature of feedback given by the clinical supervisor was also critical to the success of the relationship from the supervisee perspective with a paced approach recommended (Bogo & McKnight, 2005). If the power dynamics inherent in the clinical supervisory relationship were not openly discussed, there was the potential for supervisees to feel exposed, prompting a descent into shame, withdrawal and if unresolved, an avoidance of clinical supervision. This was a theme highlighted in an earlier study of supervisor and supervisee perspectives of fieldwork in the New Zealand context (Pack, 2015). I wondered if these themes were also highlighted in the Australian context of field supervision of social work students and if so, how we could plan according to these issues to maximise student learning and supervisor satisfaction with the fieldwork program.

6   Research Design

In this section I discuss how the results from the pilot study were integrated into an online survey. The design of the evaluation for students and their fieldwork supervisors drew from a quantitative design were the sample size were potentially large enough to generalise within each group. The initial phase involved a consultation with a sample of students and field supervisors for the development of an online survey using the online questionnaire builder: Qualtrix. The structure and format for this survey was based in discussions with other fieldwork supervision in social work nationally at the annual head of schools of social work annual meeting. Based in these and subsequent discussions with staff, students and fieldwork supervisors, the surveys were further refined and piloted. Feedback was integrated at each phase of the pilot project. Therefore, prior to implementation, the author had gathered knowledge locally and nationally about what experienced social work educators had found valuable in their evaluation of the fieldwork education experience. By including a literature review and pilot questionnaire the design was informed by the international literature on clinical supervision (Pack, 2009a, 2009b). On the basis of this initial feedback, two the online questionnaires were formulated. One was designed for the field supervisors who were selected by the University to supervise the students on placement. All students in the bachelor and master level programmes (totalling 127 students), and 73 field supervisors were sent the questionnaire once trialled. The response rate was low for both groups. The field supervisors response rate was (18%) and the student response rate was similarly low (16%) which is a limitation of the study to be generalised.

7   Field Supervisors

In this section, the key topics addressed in each questionnaire are summarised. There were three main areas addressed to the field supervisors. These were around support and training, communication and information flow, and what they liked and didn't like about having a student on placement. The questionnaire began with asking some demographic questions about gender and the area in which the placement was offered to frame the other topics covered:

The following questions were asked of the fieldwork supervisors:

1. What are some of the positive aspects/difficulties of taking a student on placement?

2. How much time to you estimate is involved in taking a student on placement?

3. What kind of support do you get from your employing agency when you take a student on placement?

4. Did you obtain enough information about the placement requirements, details about the student?

5. Are there any ways in which communication between yourself and the University could be improved?

As there was feedback from the fieldwork supervisors about the large amount of detailed information required to assess the student, other questions posed concerned the amount and nature of the documentation. The fieldwork supervisors were asked to complete extensive reports in the pre-placement, mid placement and final placement visit from the University to assess progress towards achievement of the learning contract that had been individually

developed with each student. In terms of the assessment process field supervisors were asked about the documentation they were required to complete by the university, including the initial learning contract, mid placement and final placement report. Other areas inquired about included the adequacy and frequency of communication and information flow between the supervisor and the university. If there were areas of difficulty in communication, the supervisors as a group were asked for ideas as to how this could be improved.

The learning and support needs of fieldwork supervisors were addressed by asking the supervisors what they identified as their most important training needs, and what kind of training would they wish the university to either provide or fund to support them in their role. In some universities, field supervisors are provided with opportunities to undertake post graduate clinical supervision training which was a popular incentive to supervise (Bloomfield ET a., 2013).

8   Student Survey on Fieldwork Experiences

For students on placement, the questionnaire began with asking some demographic questions about gender and the area in which the placement was offered. The questionnaire offered a Likert scale with open text box for rating of experiences of the following areas:

1.   The Placement Agency

2.   Experience of the pre-placement process

3.   The Field Education experience

4.   The Liaison/ staff visit,

5.   The overall organisation of the field placement

In open text boxes, students were asked for feedback and / or suggestions on the worksheets and reflective journal/process recording which form part of the student assessment activities whilst on placement. Other areas of documentation were asked about, particularly surrounding the Assessment Document(s) on which the university grades their fieldwork.

Other areas inquired from the student experience about included:

- Would you attend a student pre/post placement training? If so can you please indicate the aspects you would find most/least helpful?

- Do you have any suggestions for future student placement preparation sessions?

Students and supervisors were given the option to return the questionnaire online or drop to the assignments box in hard copy. Follow up contact with the researcher was offered in the e mailed fact sheet if participants opted or preferred to speak about their placement experiences confidentially rather than choose to complete an online questionnaire.

9   Data analysis

The data from the two questionnaires (one designed for field supervisors, and one designed for students were compared within each group (students and field supervisors) and across the groups. These questions had been earlier piloted with groups of students and field supervisors to refine the questionnaire. Once the questionnaires were completed, the data was collated

under each of the questions by the administrator who de-identified the responses before they were sent for data analysis.

As the collated responses were read and analysed, similarities and differences were noted in the responses within each group (students as one group, and field supervisors another as 'pattern matching' (Yin, 2013).) The intention was to analyse the responses across each group, though due to the low response rates for both groups, there was insufficient numbers in each cohort to meaningfully generalise across the groups, however. Therefore, the themes reported are for the analysis within each group, i.e. field supervisors as one group and then students as the second group.

Thematic analysis was also applied to the data by looking for common experiences within and across the open text responses. Braun and Clarke (2006, pp.79-81) define "theme" in thematic analysis as "a patterned response or meaning within a data set" that "theorizes language as constitutive of meaning and meaning as social". Thus, themes and patterns within the data were sought, using the theoretical orientation of the clinical supervision literature as a starting point for understanding participants' experiences.

. Key words and responses were identified and highlighted from each of the questionnaire responses within and across each group (supervisees and field supervisors) and these were considered together as forming themes. The literature review earlier undertaken showed where there were connections with previous research studies, and these themes in common with earlier research were then highlighted.

10   Ethical issues

An ethics application had been approved by the University's research committee prior to the commencement of the evaluation. The boundaries between research and teaching were clearly defined by distributing the questionnaire once the students had completed the field placement or were close to finishing. Participation was advertised as voluntary and once students had indicated they wished to participate by email, the fact sheet and consent process advised that contributions could be withdrawn at any time. Debriefing and counselling services were offered if the completion of the questionnaire evoked any difficult feelings or unresolved issues.

There was one problem with ensuring anonymity, which was raised by a student. One student voiced concern about disclosing the area of the fieldwork placement which for that individual was felt to be potentially identifying. Therefore the decision was made to de-identify and code all survey data by the research assistant, using broad categories of practice agencies by a third party prior to the interpretation of data by the principal researcher. This step also ensured that potential bias was avoided by the researcher being the only person analysing and evaluating the data. The decision was made to de-identify all narrative contributions from open text box in the reporting rather than allocating a name to each participant.

11   Results

Characteristics of Field Supervisors Participating in the Evaluation

The online survey was sent electronically to a total of 73 field supervisors. Out of the questionnaires sent to field supervisors, 20 surveys were started and 14 were completed. Of the 14 fieldwork supervisors who responded, all were female and predominantly aged in the 35-54 age groups.

In terms of country of origin, 77% of the field supervisors identified as Australians and 23% indicated that they were from overseas. The predominant field of the supervisors' practice was in child protection and the health/disability in areas of direct practice involving face to face contact with clients.

Characteristics of Students Participating in the Evaluation

The sample size included the total student numbers for Semester Two, 2014. The numbers comprising each programme were for the Masters of Social Work (N=56) and BSW (N= 71). Therefore questionnaires were sent to all in this combined Bachelor and Master group. Students ranged in age with 67% being in the 18-25 year age group. 67% self-identified as being Australian and 33% indicated that they were from overseas. 46% of the sample stated that English was not their first language.

The response rate was low at 16% of the total student cohort, largely due to the fact that many students had finished placement and had already left to go on summer vacation when the web link was distributed. An additional limitation was that one person (the author) conducted the research, piloting the questions with students in semester one before placement began, and then analysed the data as the sole researcher. Ideally, a team approach to ensure that the researcher's worldview was not the only one informing the analysis, should have been implemented. As all staff were busy with their teaching, therefore, involving other academic staff was not realistic to expect at the busy time of the semester.

Of the 21 students who completed the online questionnaire, 71% (n=15) were enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work degree and 26% (n=6) in the Master of Social Work degree. For the majority of students who replied, 71% were engaged in their first placement and 29% were in their final placement. Seventeen were female (85% of participants) and three were male (15% of participants), reflecting the gender imbalance in the social work programmes being predominantly female in Australia. Eighty five percent of students were completing their fieldwork practicum on a full time basis.

There were three themes evident from the field supervisors' comments and responses. These were the positive aspect to having a student on placement involving growth in the student as having its own reward, career and professional development for the supervisor by having the experience, and the training available. The challenges identified by supervisors involved a lack of time and recognition from their employing agencies that supervising a student needed a readjustment of one's existing workload/case load to be possible. These themes are now reviewed in the following sections with de-identified comments from field supervisors.

Positive Aspects of taking a student on placement: Fieldwork Supervisors' Perspectives

There was consensus that supervising a student was a valuable and mutually fruitful learning experience as the following comments from field supervisors illustrates:

> It's a chance to update on current theories, their enthusiasm and energy, mentoring them and assisting in their professional development.

What was valued was the students' "enthusiasm" in breathing new life into the work team who began to see their own practice with a fresh perspective, as the following excerpt from a supervisor's comment, suggests:

> Students facilitate learning in the workplace and expose staff to new perspectives, new practices, contemporary issues and bring a broader perspective back to work.

Field supervisors found their own learning as well as their workplace was stimulated by having a student, a theme that was discovered in an earlier research undertaken in the New Zealand context (Pack, 2015):

> Field supervision encourages reflective practice for the supervisor, positive achievement from being part of student learning and development.

Fresh ideas, enthusiasm, idealism continues as the theme as illustrated in the following comments from three field supervisors who supervised a social work student on practicum placement:

> To have the team reflect and continually think about their own practice and to be able to articulate what they do with the student.

> Students have a good positive energy, good for supervisors to continue to reflect on their own practice.

> Students facilitate learning in the workplace and expose staff to new perspectives, new practices, contemporary issues and bring a broader perspective back to work.

For other field supervisors, assisting students to bridge the theory to practice divide was important as well as teaching the student to develop their own integrated models for practice:

> To assist the student to develop a practice model to take with them into full time employment.

> Facilitating someone's learning and integration of theory to practice. Contributing to the profession.).

Workforce development was a further goal along with organisational goals as these two fieldwork supervisors' comments suggest:

> It's rewarding to see growth, and to know that their knowledge will positively impact the community in their career.).

> Assistance in helping new social workers develop their skills, benefits to the students and the organisation.

The practicalities of having a student on placement opened the way to doing more of the strategic work such as research and policy projects which was seen as a benefit to the organisation as the following comment from a field educator suggests.

> It [the student placement] has introduced more projects, research at our organisation.

This comment aligns with the finding of the literature review where professional development, self-care and developing an integrated framework for one's practice has been discovered to be among the other motivations for becoming a field supervisor (Pack, 2009).

Challenges of having a student on placement

The following is a summary of comments made from open text invitations for field
supervisors who were asked to comment on the aspects of having a student on placement that
were challenging or difficult. In this area of the survey, time commitment, and balancing
competing work responsibilities were identified in the responses from field supervisors as the
following summary of the themes from field supervisors' interviews, outlines:

- time constraints particularly in the beginning
- time, particularly when challenges arise
- time management to provide sufficient mentoring of students
- too much supervision involved, too much paperwork
- Time, skill level of student
- Balancing clinical workload with student learning and making the judgement of when to allow students to practise independently with clients
- Time commitment is always an issue
- The time commitment, particularly when multitasking already
- Time, change management at organizations, (depending on student) attitude to placement and the organization.

In relation to the time taken to have a student on field placement, the following comment
encapsulated the dilemma facing field supervisors balancing various competing demands on
their time:

> Students require an investment of time and energy. In busy and competing work
> environments you need conscious effort to ensure that you are meeting student'' needs
> and not getting them [the students] to meet the agency needs. The documentation
> required from University is cumbersome and repetitive for supervisors. In large
> agencies time and effort is required to liaise with various sections to facilitate student's
> experience of different sections of the agency.

This theme was tied to organisational pressures including restructuring and the changing of
roles for fieldwork supervisors, coloured by such wider changes. This theme has been noted
in recent Australasian fieldwork research which documents some of the key challenges faced
by fieldwork supervisors and the fieldwork staff working at universities (Bloomfield et al,
2013; (Cleak and Wilson, 2013).

Support and Training Needed by Field supervisors

The support needed to take a student on placement was identified as time from the
supervisors' employing agency and the provision of increased clinical supervision and
debriefing opportunities from the University. The following comment from a field educator
neatly summarises the unboundedness of the role:

> There is an expectation of the agency that the placement supervisor will manage the
> student. Nil additional support.

Sharing access to clinical casework with students was a further theme identified from field
educator's responses as problematic as it meant negotiating between the practice agency and
University to align with professional Australian Association of Social Workers' requirements.
One direct or client contact placement is required and one indirect (policy of research)
placement is required by AASW.

In the direct or client-focused placements, the University expected the students would be engaged with client contact work which some of the agencies were not able to provide for a variety of reasons including client confidentiality.

Time taken to supervise student- Estimates from Field Supervisors

The following table summarises the hours needed to supervise a fieldwork student from estimates from the fieldwork educators:

#	Answer		Response	%
1	5 - 10 hours		4	31%
2	10 - 20 hours		3	23%
3	20+ hours		6	46%
	Total		13	100%

Table 1: Estimates of time commitment to supervise a social work student on field placement

Communication between the University and the Field

Eighty-two percent of fieldwork supervisors who participated were happy with the level of communication between them and the University. The fulsome and detailed nature of the reporting and documentation of student progress for assessment was criticised as being time-consuming in an already full workload adding to the burden of field supervisors. The impressions of the learning agreement and other assessment documents varied considerably among the field supervisors who responded. Comments ranged that the documentation from the University was "too complex" to "too simplistic". Overall, most considered the amount of documentation served its purpose and the quantity was "about right". As the following comment illustrates, there were suggestions that did not align with the written documentation requirements of the professional association which uses descriptions of social work practitioner competencies at various levels (AASW, 2014):

Use pass/fail and abandon the ranking system of assessment.

Most fieldwork supervisors, ninety one percent said they had sufficient information from the University about the placement requirements and about the background of the student. The availability of the fieldwork co-ordinator based at the University was seen as being "inconsistent". This was due to a change of person in the role with a short term contractor ending her contract and another permanent fieldwork co-ordinator being appointed and being new in the role.

An interesting comment from one of the fieldwork supervisors was that she would have found it helpful to know more about the course structure to ascertain what the students had been studying in their programs (Bachelor or Master of Social Work Degree) and how the curriculum design and content stimulated an interest in the field of practice to develop, from the students' perspectives.

Training Needed by Field supervisors

Those who responded wished to have more knowledge of the social work curriculum and content as part of their training/induction into the role. Seventy-eight percent wished to have more formal training in the field supervision of practice provided by the University free of charge leading to formal qualification. This finding aligns with Bloomfield et al. (2013) who

found in their research that the major motivation for becoming involved as a field supervisor was to promote their wider learning and professional development.

Student Responses

A similar range of questions were addressed to students about aspects that were like and disliked, the administration requirements and the communication between the university and the field. The major themes identified were that students thought their field supervisors went 'the extra mile' [student comment] to meet their needs whilst they were aware that the supervisors' roles went largely unrecognised within their employing agency. Therefore they saw their supervisors as engaged in a heroic struggle of taking on the additional role, leading to their being under work stress. This finding mirrors the findings of Bloomfield et al's (2013) evaluation, which discovered similar pressures operating on field supervisors. Other themes included the benefits of having contact with the supervisors' colleagues and learning opportunities within the agency. Less positive aspects of the fieldwork practicum, involved lack of role or task clarity for some students, and having a placement that did not align with their identified learning objectives. A lack of role clarity in the student experience is a common dilemma that was highlighted by the earlier literature review (Pack, 2009).Other themes included the difficulties for University staff accurately matching student to placement which is a perennial dilemma in the field literature (Pack, 2009a). Lastly there were comments made about the university processes and practices that led to an ongoing dialogue about how improvements could be made by the fieldwork team of university educators.

'Going the Extra Mile' for Students

Eighty four percent of students who participated recommended that the University use the same placement agencies they had been placed within again in the future. There was some very positive feedback about both the fieldwork agencies and the learning opportunities provided. As well as this feedback there were positive comments expressed about the field supervisor and team at the fieldwork agency as the following comments clearly illustrate. For example the following comments from students were made about the placement as offering both support tempered with challenges for learning:

> I have enjoyed the entire placement and gained benefits from the organisation's generosity and flexibility.

> The organisation gave me lots of opportunities to get involved with various programs.

And:

> Supportive environment that facilitated many learning opportunities. (De-identified student comment).

> Numerous opportunities, welcoming and supportive staff, flexible, overall an amazing experience.

Opportunities for learning on placement

What students particularly liked about placements was the combination of community and case work focus, allowing for multiple sources of learning in one agency:

> This placement has been especially good as it has offered both community development and direct casework experience. I would definitely recommend it to other students.

The personal support offered by the supervisor was mentioned in relation to what was good about placement; however this was related to whole teams of colleagues as the following student comment illustrates:

> Great support from all workers not just supervisor. Always something to do.

> Amazing supervisor, amazing colleagues, great structure, amazing supervision. (De-identified student comment).

"Good" experiences in clinical supervision varies, as it does in all relationships. The literature suggests that positive experiences are associated with connection that invites curiosity, an openness to experimentation, and a tolerance of complexity. The supervisory relationship provides an active two-way process and dialogue. How the supervisory relationship allows for a quality of interaction between supervisor and supervisee, is unclear, however (Pack, 2009a, p.659).

Placements not fitting students' Self-identified Learning Needs.

Other comments from students about placement were not as positive. These comments were related to the students' needs not fitting the learning opportunities offered by the placement, or being related to a field they were not particularly interested in as the following excerpts from interviews illustrate:

> It was not a social work placement as it was more of a Youth Work setting. It was very hard to relate the practice to a social work organisation, especially since that most of the workers were youth workers and there was only one social worker who was not skilled enough.

> Hard to relate the practice to a social work organisation, especially since that most of the workers were youth workers and there was only one social worker who was not skilled enough.

Lack of Role and Task Clarity on Placement

Another theme was that the students felt used as a "volunteer" or given a task that did not align with their expectations of what "social work" was.

> I was treated more like a volunteer than a student in this placement.

> I had a really good experience but it was hard to relate social work to a lot of the task.).

Sometimes responsibilities were not explained so boundaries of responsibility in projects that students were allocated on placement were unclear:

> I was given a specific project and when it was finishing up; I was not permitted to sign off. I was trusted to do the work but not "own" it.

Mainly students wished to have direct client contact but found they ended up doing different tasks than they preferred. This is a perennial dilemma for the University to find agencies who allow students to do direct casework under supervision. Many fieldwork agencies have a preference not to offer direct client case work, due to concerns about risk yet the students crave the direct client contact as the following comment illustrates:

It would have been better to have client interaction with the research.

The supervisory process and the need for field supervisors to "judge" the students conduct both on behalf of the university and to assess for beginning competency for the University was mentioned. This theme is mentioned in the literature on fieldwork supervision (Pack, 2009a). Exposing the student's ignorance about aspects of practice before the relationship is developed or robust enough to take negative feedback without rupture of trust is a balancing act for field supervisors. A critical comment made too soon by a supervisor can lead to the supervisee's descent into shame, anger and withdrawal if the relationship and process between the supervisor and supervisee is unaddressed (Pack, 2009a, 2009b). This theme as illustrated in the following student comment on what was difficult on field placement:

> Everything in life can be a great experience however, a supervisor's comments can be experienced as judgements.

The following table summarises how the students participating in the survey rated the placement agencies. The placement matching happen with by the field team in liaison with student preferences although not all student preferences can be accommodated due to the lack of availability of some kinds of practicum placements:

#	Question	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	Total Responses	Mean
1	How would you rate the placement agency?	1	1	5	6	7	20	3.85

Table 2: Rating of the Placement Agencies by Students

Other Challenges from the Student View: The Matching Process

The matching process of student to placement based in learning needs was generally found by students to have provided useful learning experiences. Placement early in the academic year was recommended by students to pace the learning and enable sufficient time for reflection. An online reflective journal completed while the students were on placement was also thought to be useful for developing critical reflection.

There were some complaints about seeing relevance of theory to practice and to have "real life" experiences in the placement by which the students felt trusted to take on social work tasks. Bridging the theory to practice divide was a further theme arising internationally in the research literature on fieldwork for social workers.

Deficits in Supervision and Supervisor Knowledge

Deficits in the supervision and the knowledge of the supervisor of social work were highlighted by a few students:

> Initially I was placed with community development agency. The field educator was a good lady but I felt she has no idea about the requirement of social work training. I was treated as a TAFE student. This experience made me think what professional social work is.

Organisational ferment and change in the placement agency impacted the student's learning experience and the availability of the supervisor.

Feedback to the University Fieldwork Team

From the students' perspective, there needed to be more preparation for the field pre-placement. Students are prepared for placement by attending seminars before they go out and as they complete their fieldwork placement. However, there was a mixed review of the pre-placement and integrative seminars aiming to link theory to practice during the placement itself. Other comments from students about their placement experiences were:

> The pre-placement lecture can be better.

> The integrative seminars: they were a waste of time where you could be spending at placement actually learning. If integrative seminars were actually useful they would have made placement experience a lot better.

The amount of paperwork to complete and signatures from the supervisor and liaison visitor was considered time consuming and difficult by students:

> The placement forms are designed for a direct placement, they do not cater well to research or to non-direct practice. This makes it very difficult to fill out the forms.

Some remedies were proposed by students to address this form filling and administrative requirements which were thought time-consuming and onerous:

> Make all liaison visits face to face, there's only three of them so make it compulsory. It's better for student having face to face for something important like liaison visits. Also so student can get each person's signature, I found having phone liaison visits made it REALLY difficult to get everyone's signatures together and had to ask different parties on several occasions for their signature so I can hand reports into university.

Liaison and Support of the University Field Team

There were a range of comments both positive and negative about the amount of liaison between the University and the field agency during the placement. One theme was the amount of contact between the field and the field educator. There were expectations of ongoing support from the academic staff when they were juggling delivery of the units at the University. Sometimes the contact from the University beyond the official three visits was seen as insufficient by some students as the following comment indicates:

> I didn't receive any support from university staff, not hard to send an email to each student to ask how they were doing and if they need support. Some people aren't comfortable asking for support and all staff being social work trained should know this and sending a quick email to everyone to ask how they were and if they need anything could have really helped students more. We need better support from university.

There was a disconnect between the final placement and the transition to full time employment that was seen as "not helpful":

> We were so discouraged to discuss and connect final placement and employment before the placement offer from the University which was not helpful.

Comments about the Field Supervisor (Students' Perspectives)

The student feedback about their fieldwork supervisor was largely positive and in some cases overwhelmingly so. The personal characteristics and supportive nature of the interaction between supervisor and supervisee were particularly valued, mirroring the literature on what supervisees' value about their clinical supervisors mirroring an early qualitative study of pairs of supervisees and supervisors on field placement (Pack, 2015). The following four comments from students demonstrated how important the personal characteristics of the supervisor and their knowledge of the field was from the student perspective:

> She listened with empathy to my struggles and I doubt whether I could have made it without her; she was so knowledgeable and helpful with feedback on my presentation and reports.

> She picked up when our other teacher left very smoothly and knew what she was talking about.

> My field educator was fantastic, definitely recommend again.

Generally a field educator who was a social worker by training, who actually worked in the agency as a social worker, was preferred. This theme was especially important for first year students rather than the supervision being externally provided as the following student comment illustrates:

> Ideally the final placement students should not be placed in an agency without social worker. It does not give a clear picture on professional social worker.

However, there were also positive comments about externally provided field supervisors who were not on site or employed as social workers at the practicum placement as the following comment from a student suggests:

> I had an external supervisor. She was very knowledgeable when it came to issues impacting the youth sector and her relaxed style made it easy to be open and discuss real issues.

12   Discussion: Implications for Fieldwork planning

The main limitation in this study is the low response rate for each participant group -students (16%), Field supervisors (18%), making representativeness and generalisability problematic. Due to the low response rate and very small sample size, the reported findings are not robust and therefore can only suggest themes that might generalize to the two different samples (students and field supervisors). However, as noted in the literature review, earlier studies evaluating the fieldwork experience in Australasia have reported similar themes which adds strength to the findings. Specifically the theme reported of fieldwork supervisors lacking both the resources and time to supervise students due to the demands of their primary job in the agency, aligns closely with Bloomfield et al's (2013) findings in the Australian context of social work education and Baum's findings about the lack of attention to the ending of the supervisory relationship from the field educator's perspectives.

The open ended questions from students elicited useful feedback to inform the ongoing quality assurance for the field programme within the Bachelor and Master of Social Work degrees. For example, the findings from previous research as the importance of relationship to the development of the student's growing confidence on practicum was a theme noted by

previous studies (Baum, 2007; Clarkson & Aviram, 1999). This importance of relationship in fieldwork supervision mirrors the comments made by the students in this evaluation.

Clearly the University has more to do in its relationship building with field supervisors to make them more equal partners in practice. However, as the field supervisors' comments indicate, mirroring the findings of Bloomfield et. al's (2013) research, further advocacy on behalf of field supervisors is needed to carve sufficient time out of an already overfull work schedule to enable sufficient space and time to supervise students. It would seem the university has a role in supporting the field supervisor in this way to facilitate the student learning on field practicum.

A further need is planning for the design and delivery of an ongoing training programme for field supervisors leading to formal qualification in clinical supervision. This is another need that has been previously identified (Bloomfield et al., 2013). Currently, fieldwork supervisors appear to lack the confidence in their own supervision as they are required to have a formal qualification and many have not. Only when fieldwork supervisors are confident about their own clinical supervisory experience will they pass on their practice knowledge and experience confidently and clearly. Through such modelling, students see the transition from theory to practice as being integrated and meaningful for their learning which is not as possible to model as directly by their academic professors in the lecture room setting.

Lastly, the amount of assessment documentation is another area of the fieldwork experience that needs to be adjusted to align with the feedback of each group and the regulations governing the fieldwork requirements of the Australian Association of Social Workers Australian Social

Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012). Re-structuring within the fieldwork agency context has been noted to diminish the availability of experienced practitioners to take on the role of fieldwork supervisor (Bloomfield et al., 2013). In some states such as Victoria, Australia, social service agencies will not agree to take on a student without payment being made available from the University adding a commercial dimension to the fieldwork experience. In Sydney, New South Wales, Australia the author and her team are facing similar pressures amongst competing universities for a finite pool of field placements which are pursued aggressively by fieldwork directors.

13   Conclusion

Thus as noted in evaluations of fieldwork in Australia, the search for authentic learning experiences in the fieldwork placement is itself being influenced by changes occurring both in the practice agencies and the tertiary education sectors (Bloomfield et al., 2013). The context in which professional education in social work is delivered is concurrently undergoing change and transformation. Consequently, the roles of field supervisor, mentor and university liaison and co-ordination functions also need to change to keep pace. Financial and budgetary pressures coupled with the retrenchment in the education sector, heightens these dilemmas for securing a quality placement experience on behalf of students. These challenges are compounded by the need to implement performance-based assessments for all social work students against the national professional standards that have been specified in detailed ways (AASW, 2012; AASW, 2013). In this climate, preparing and assessing students in the field and for their future practice is subject to this changing constellation of factors in the context surrounding both the educators, students and the university teaching staff. The manifold

tensions of the environment surrounding field work education need to be carefully considered in the forward planning in degree level programmes in social work.

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