



Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord

April 2023

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Summary

This submission from the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education focuses on our shared concern about the impact of poverty on social work students, particularly when undertaking compulsory placements, in a profession for which there is a shortage of qualified practitioners. Student poverty is resulting in students delaying taking placements, and in some cases withdrawing from their Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) courses. While the focus of this submission is social work students, the concerns noted in this submission are also issues affecting other vital allied health programs which also have substantial compulsory placement requirements, as discussed further below.

Recommendations:

- 1. The development of an outcomes-based field education model, that is properly funded within universities by government, is flexible in terms of delivery and structure, and tailored to the needs of students, who are financially supported by government (in the absence of paid organisational opportunities being available for students).***
- 2. That the AASW reduce the mandatory requirement for 1,000 placement hours in social work programs and grant flexibility (determined by higher education providers) based on demonstrated learning outcomes, instead of hours.***
- 3. The Australian Government's funding of higher education needs to include realistic financial support of students undertaking compulsory placements or funding for services that is earmarked for interns and placement students.***
- 4. That the Australian Government provide financial assistance to (both domestic and international) students undertaking field placements in the form of a bursary that is equivalent to the initial Jobseeker rate of payment.***
- 5. That the AASW adopt a more flexible policy around RPL for placements and that all higher education providers implement this policy for students who meet the AASW requirement for RPL.***
- 6. That the AASW adopt a more flexible policy around workplace placements and that all higher education providers implement this policy.***
- 7. That Australian Government funding of higher education includes the costs of childcare and transport incurred by students undertaking placements.***

- 8. *That higher education providers be funded at a level that they can waive the fees for students undertaking placements.***
- 9. *Higher education providers and placement providers need to develop strategies to ensure there are sufficient high quality placements to enable students to have a quality learning experience which equips them for professional employment.***
- 10. *Higher education funding needs to be able to provide financial incentives to potential placement organisations in order to secure sufficient numbers of placements which offer quality learning experiences.***
- 11. *An immediate restructure of how higher education student placements are conceptualised and funded in order to address significant mental health issues resulting from student poverty associated with compulsory unpaid placements. This needs to give priority attention to students who experience the highest levels of disadvantage, yet are the ones that higher education providers aspire to reach out to in an equitable manner, such as Indigenous students, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and rural students. International students who pay extremely high fees for the same education 'product' as domestic students need to be included in fee restructuring arrangements for placements.***

Introduction

The [Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work Education](#) is the national organisation of higher education providers (HEPs) teaching accredited social work programs in Australia. All 33 HEPs currently teaching social work are members of the Council. Our objectives are:

- the furtherance of social work education and research in Australia;
- the promotion of active cooperation of the institutions represented on the Council with one another, and with universities and other higher education institutions, professional and other learned bodies in Australia and elsewhere;
- consultation on matters of mutual concern to members of the institutions which they represent and, where appropriate, the adoption of common policies; and
- representation of social work education providers and their needs to Federal and State governments, higher education bodies, the social work profession and the wider community.

The Council and member universities subscribe to the [Global Definition of Social Work](#), which adheres to principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities.

In particular, this submission focuses on our shared concerns around financial support for students undertaking compulsory placements in professional qualifying degree programs. After providing a brief overview of social work education in Australia, the need for qualified social workers, and information about students accepted into social work degrees, this submission then addresses specific questions for which comment has been sought in the [Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper](#).

Social Work Education in Australia

Social work education commenced in Australia in 1929, as training for almoners, now known as hospital social workers. Social workers continue to be integral to Australian health and welfare service provision.

There are [33 higher education providers](#) that offer programs, which are accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), into which approximately 14,000 students are enrolled at any one time. One of the distinctive features of a Social Work degree is that graduates are considered fully qualified practitioners, with no requirement for additional experience or training to gain professional recognition.

A social work qualification, and eligibility for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), requires the completion of an accredited 4-year Bachelor of Social Work degree or a two-year Master of Social Work qualifying degree. In addition to the two-year Master of Social Work degree, students must have completed an undergraduate degree, which includes studies in the social and behavioural sciences. The requirements for qualifying as a Social Worker are detailed in the [Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards \(ASWEAS\) March 2020 V2.1 updated November 2021](#).

A key component of the ASWEAS is a requirement that students complete 1000 hours of supervised practice-based field education placements. Students must complete two or three placements in involve distinctly different practice learning experiences, with no placement being less than 250 hours. Typically, higher education providers require students to undertake two placements of around 500 hours each.

There is a provision in the ASWEAS for students who have extensive work experience to apply for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for up to 500 hours of placement time. While some higher education providers readily grant applications for RPL to students who meet the criteria, others are reluctant to make this concession to students with considerable prior experience.

Field education has historically been regarded as an essential learning opportunity; hence most placements are unpaid. As such, there is a considerable difference between social work and disciplines that routinely offer paid internships for students to undertake practical learning. There is however nothing in the *ASWEAS* to state that students cannot be paid, and there are occasional instances of placement providers paying students. For example, some students utilise the opportunity to undertake a placement for their employer in a role different to their usual role and with a different supervisor, but this is only an option for students employed in large organisations which offer a wide range of social work services. There are some organisations who have chosen to pay students on placement who were not prior employees, but this is quite rare.

Workforce Needs

The Australian Government's [2019 Employment Projections - for the five years to May 2024](#), released on 22 November 2019, showed a need for 29.3 percent more social workers between 2019 and 2024. This growth comes on top of growth 41.2 percent over the previous five years as reported in [Australian Jobs 2019](#) published by Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business. A shortage of social workers is also acknowledged by the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs, listing social work in all visa subclasses on the [Skilled Occupation List](#).

In 2018, the [NSW Health Social Work Workforce: Horizon Scanning and Scenario Generation Final Report](#) identified several key factors as contributing to this increasing demand for social workers. These included:

1. Increasingly complex health and social needs of the population, as well as an increase in social isolation in Australian society.
2. A reported lack of services and supports outside the health system, which can lead to a bottleneck of people at discharge, requiring Social Workers to spend considerable time ensuring that people are able to access essential services.
3. The role of social workers becoming more complex due to: an increase in demand for support with medico-legal matters; an increasing need to deliver culturally appropriate services; an increasing need to deliver trauma informed services; and an increasing need to utilise technology in the delivery of Social Work.
4. Changes to the social work role are due to changes in service provision caused by recent govt reforms (NDIS, MyAgedCare portal, NSW Govt. Domestic and Family Violence reforms – IT Stops Here).

The 2018 [Victorian Allied Health Workforce Research Program Social Work Workforce Report](#) also described both current and future demands across the sector:

According to the workforce survey and qualitative research findings,

Social work services are currently under pressure in the public system in Victoria [for example,] with social workers citing long waiting lists, large workloads and limited capacity. Demand is predicted to continue to rise with the ageing population, and increasing policy focus on family violence, disability and mental health support. Future areas of high demand include family violence, aged care, disability, mental health, child protection, and Indigenous mental health. There are existing service gaps in these areas and also in rural areas. There is also an important and growing role for social workers in emergency departments. (p.8)

At a time when there are already insufficient social workers, the Victorian [Royal Commission into Family Violence](#) called for the introduction of mandatory qualifications for specialist family violence practitioners. All new family violence practitioners are now required to hold a social work or equivalent degree.

Social Work Students and Graduates

Data about Australian social work students, provided by the Commonwealth of Australia Department of Education and Training, indicates that approximately one-quarter of Bachelor of Social Work students in 2015 were aged 25 or over (24 percent) and enrolled part-time in their studies (26 percent). Other research has found that [social work attracts a high proportion of female students](#), with 86 per cent of Social Work students being female and the average age of a social work student being 29.3 years, many of whom have caring responsibilities. Comparing students enrolled in [Bachelor of Social Work degrees](#) with [all undergraduate students in Australian universities](#) in 2015 revealed that social work students are more likely to have a disability and be the first in family to attend university.

Recent data from the [Australian Government Department of Education](#) found that 62% of domestic students complete bachelor degrees within six years of commencing studies, with 9 percent not returning after the first year. In comparison, less than half (48.3 percent) of social work students complete bachelor degrees within six years, and 14.5 percent do not return after their first year of studies. Poverty is often implicated in the slower completion and higher dropout rates of social work students compared to students in programs such as medicine and dentistry which have the highest completion rate (92.4 percent and 89.1 percent respectively) with fewer than 2 percent of students not proceeding after the first year of study.

Social work students who complete their studies are highly employable. The [2019 Graduate Outcomes Survey](#) found almost all (95.3 percent) of the 2018 graduates were involved in the Labour Force in May 2019 with 84.8 percent in employment. Although only 70.2 percent of graduates were employed full-time, this is consistent with patterns of enrolment by students who often have caring responsibilities. Employment rates for Social Workers also need to take into account that a

comparison of students enrolled in Bachelor of Social Work degrees with all undergraduate students in Australian universities in 2015 reveals that social work students are more likely to have a disability, and this often limits their participation in employment.

Poverty: An escalating problem for higher education

Although our main endeavours are with social work education, as is our remit, we note that student financial disadvantage is an extensive problem across disciplines. This impacts both the wellbeing of students and workforce shortages. Financial disadvantage is a consistent feature in students' responses to annual [Student Experience Surveys](#), particularly in respect of reasons for withdrawing from their courses of study.

It is worthy of note that advocacy is occurring to overcome disadvantage through structural reform. For example, as recently as 15 March 2023, the [Campus Morning Mail](#) referred to a bill before the Senate to raise the threshold for student loan repayments and to end the CPI indexation of debts. In response, the Australian Veterinary Association took the proposal further, arguing for a 'HELP Forgiveness Scheme' for 80 new vets each year who agree to work in remote and regional parts of Australia. Although it is beyond the scope of our submission to provide full details on the broad range of data sets and advocacy measures, we note that field education is increasingly documented as a significant problem in disciplines where this is required, and a number of discipline representatives have spoken publicly, particularly in the media. One example is a 2023 article in [The Guardian](#), referred to later in our submission, which mentioned that social work is among a range of vocational degrees, including nursing, teaching, counselling and psychology, that require hundreds of hours of mandatory unpaid placements.

Responses to the *Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper*

Our responses to the *Discussion Paper* are informed by a number of sources. Social work educators have been documenting and publishing their concerns about the impact of student poverty on education participation for some time. In particular there have been concerns raised in respect of placement requirements, which are contributing to many students leaving social work programs (problematic due to the shortage of social workers) or continuing to study while trying to manage this distress and hardship in order to qualify as a social worker and feeling disillusioned at the end of their studies (e.g. Baglow & Gair, 2018a, 2018b; Craik, 2019; Morley, et al., 2023).

Growing concerns about student poverty were among the reasons why the ACHSWE convened a National Summit on Social Work Field Education in February 2023 at Western Sydney University. The focus was to explore how we might address challenges through reimagining field education, its' requirements, and from those

directly involved in its administrative and pedagogical underpinnings. The further intent was to examine the conditions needed to support optimum learning experiences in social work field education, with a focus on enhancing sustainability and student well-being.

Participants at the summit included all of the other key groups involved in social work education in Australia, including the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), Australian and New Zealand Association of Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWWER) and the National Field Education Network (NFEN). To enable a breadth of discussion and ideas, the summit invited speakers from the many stakeholders involved in designing, administering, teaching, supervising, and experiencing Social Work field education programs, including current students and recent graduates. More than 100 invited stakeholders participated. As part of the preparation for the summit, a national online survey was commissioned by the ACHSWE and undertaken in late 2022 (Morley et al., 2023). The survey received 1,191 responses including from 701 social work students, as well as social work placement agencies and university-based field educators, academics, and field educators. Both the summit and the survey revealed unanimous support for change and 're-imagining'. This is consistent with a literature review that we amassed that provides research-based evidence on the need for structural change, as well as the rise in student activism that strongly questions compulsory unpaid placements and calls for fairness that alleviates the poverty plunge and its impact on a sustainable life and health and wellbeing.

In responding to the selection of questions relevant to field education, we recognise that introducing and implementing change is the responsibility of a range of interests, including government, professional associations, and higher education providers. As our recommendations are primarily addressed to the Australian Government and the Australian Association of Social Workers, we make this distinction in our recommendations.

Collaboration with Industry

Q 14. How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning (WIL) in higher education change in the decades ahead.

It is clear that current requirements for field education in social work, compounded by inadequate financial support for students, must change both for reasons of social justice and pragmatic sustainability for the sector to expand and be able to respond to growing need. Participants from the Council's survey were adamant about this:

We are stuck with inflexible field education model that was relevant for last century, but the nature of our students have changed. (Educator)

A re-imagined social work field education model would take into account the current context and how contemporary social work is different from 40 years ago. (Educator)

Need to get rid of the rigid way of thinking that dominates fieldwork and to bring it up to date with current realities that reflect a different social work world (Educator)

The current structure is too inflexible, particularly for those students who need to work to earn an income (Practitioner).

Across all participant cohorts, the clear and overwhelming theme for a re-imagined model of field education was a call for flexibility. This relates to flexibility in all aspects of how placements are conceptualised, delivered and structured into the future. The Council's survey collected data about students', practitioners' and educators' perspectives about strategies for change (to address the challenges facing field education) that had previously been posited by the research literature. These strategies included:

- paid placement options for students;
- increased provision for work-based placements;
- reduced required placement hours;
- designing outcomes-based placement models that emphasize learning outcomes, (instead on inputs such as minimum number of required hours);
- placements that are further tailored to students' needs;
- placements with flexible working arrangements (including working from home and working remotely options);
- reviewing the compulsory nature of placement (and considering alternative pathways to acquire required learning);
- increased provision for recognition of prior learning;
- placements with sick and personal leave options for students; and
- placements that occur over an extended period in a very part-time capacity; and;
- placements involving more simulated learning.

For further evidence see Gair & Baglow, 2018b; Hodge et al., 2021; 2016; Oke et al., 2022; and Morley et al., 2023. All of these strategies were strongly supported by the

overwhelming majority of participants across all population groups, which bodes well for implementation, but such changes have implications for both Federal Government and the National professional body.

In addition, in 2020, the AASW introduced changes to the ASWEAS including: a reduction of placement hours by up to 20% (i.e. 400 hour instead of 500 hour placements); allowing students to undertake two 'non-direct practice' placements; allowing student to undertake placements in their existing workplace; and allowing students for work remotely (including working from home), for example. The Council's survey data indicates that these changes that were trialled during 2020 and 2021 were also strongly supported across all three cohorts, especially by the students who responded. It is also clear however, that these changes did not go far enough in terms of mitigating the adverse mental health and effects and poverty associated with placement for students (Morley, 2023).

Recommendation:

The development of an outcomes-based field education model, that is properly funded within universities by government, is flexible in terms of delivery and structure, and tailored to the needs of students, who are financially supported by government (in the absence of paid organisational opportunities being are not available for students).

Addressing Barriers to Access

Social work degrees have been highly successful in recruiting students from diverse population groups who are targeted with a view to improving participation in higher education among under-represented groups. However, much more needs to be done in order to remove the barriers to higher education. These barriers may only become apparent to students after commencing their studies.

Q30. How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, provide wider opportunities, and remove barriers to higher education?

Three-quarters (74 percent) of students who participated in the Council's survey answered "Yes" to the question about whether they knew other students who had deferred or withdrawn from their social work degree due to placement requirements. As one student commented:

I am about to withdraw in my final year as I am not able to cease my employment to complete a placement (Student).

This is not a new issue, as noted by a survey participant from a placement provider:

When I was studying, several classmates (often from low-income backgrounds, or single parents) had to drop out of the degree due to

financial constraints. (Practitioner)

Most students (85.5 percent) who completed the Council's recent survey had to reduce or withdraw completely from paid employment in order to undertake placement. The length of time on placements is a key reason for this occurring:

Social work students experience significant marginalisation due to length of placement. How are we meant to meet learning competencies, support clients to the best of our abilities if we ourselves are suffering due to unfair, unrealistic placement expectations? To do unpaid work [is], having to choose between putting petrol in the car to get to placement or putting food on our stomachs? (Student)

As a fully independent university student, I have a part time job as my income, placement will majorly impact my hours and contracted shifts leaving me to rely on my Centrelink payment. This is terrible to put students through, and encourages more people to drop out instead of continue their studies due to a lack of income. (Student)

The findings of the Council's survey are unsurprising and concur with other recent research. For example, Oke, Hodge, McIntyre and Turner's (2022) quantitative and qualitative survey of students in an Australian university found that field education placements placed onerous restriction on students' engagement in the workforce. The expectation that students can afford to study full-time without working, and thus complete full-time placements, is difficult to sustain in Australia, where minimal financial support is provided by the government to meet students' living costs. The implication of such an expectation is to minimise the accessibility of the profession to students with caring responsibilities, who have limited financial means and/or greater pressures on their time.

During COVID-19, the AASW granted flexibility to higher education providers to reduce the length of placement time by up to 20 percent. Many students, practitioners and educators commented that the shorter placements did not necessarily compromise students' learning. Students' comments included:

Bring back flexibility and reduction in hours policy for all circumstances. (Student)

The completion of 500 hours ... is a structural barrier to completing the degree. It is vital that the social work profession applies its commitment to human rights and accessibility to its own practitioners. (Student)

Many practitioners agreed shorter placements would not have detrimental effects on student learning:

A permanent reduction of hours to 400 hours would seem fair.

(Practitioner)

*For me it became just getting the hours done, rather than learning;
Reduce poverty - shorten placements.* (Practitioner)

*Most of the students I supervise meet their learning outcomes just over
half way into a 500 hour placement. They don't need to be so long.*
(Practitioner)

There was also some support for shorter placements from staff of higher education providers:

*Reduce hours to 350-400 or so - with the option for students to do
additional hours if they haven't met learning outcomes yet.* (Educator)

Recommendation:

That the AASW reduce the mandatory requirement for 1,000 placement hours in social work programs and grant flexibility (determined by higher education providers) based on demonstrated learning outcomes, instead of hours.

Q31. How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

The cost of undertaking unpaid placements is incredibly high for some students. As one student who contributed to the Council's survey noted:

I will need to resign from my fulltime employment and relocate as I will not be able to afford my rent in the city. It is hard to imagine that after completing one 500 hour placement financially and logistically, I will then have to go through that entire process again. (Student)

Many students in the Council's survey called for placements to be paid, with the suggestion that this be at the level of an agreed minimum wage:

As a mature age student with two young children, it is impossible for me to be unpaid and undertake placement. I am passionate about social work, however I am struggling with providing basic needs for my family, such as childcare, mortgage. I would like to fulfill my dream to become a social worker. I suggest that paying student at least minimum wage for placement period. (Student)

Students need to be financially compensated for the work we do on placement. Even getting a minimum wage would allow students to fully immerse themselves in the experience and therefore it would help ensure they can reach their potential. (Student)

In addition to having an educational aim, the reality of workforce shortages is that students are critical to service provision in many agencies:

I was working 40 hours a week for my placement, without factoring in travel time, fuel, loss of income and had no financial support which really impacted my overall experience. While I understand we are students, we are still being expected to work, manage clients and assist in support roles (many of which are emotionally taxing and complex) so I believe being unpaid for this is unethical. (Student)

There was also considerable support for the payment of students from practitioners who participated in the Council's survey:

There should be some monetary compensation for the work they are doing. (Practitioner)

There should also be more... opportunities for fully or partially paid placements. (Practitioner)

[We need] Field education models that allow for rates of pay justified for the level of work done in a field education placement. (Practitioner)

Education providers concurred with the view that students on placement should be paid:

It is essential that students are financially compensated for placement. We can no longer justify unpaid labour. (Educator)

Increase paid internship/graduate year opportunities. (Educator)

Best outcome would be paid placements. (Educator)

Students being provided with a small wage (like apprenticeships in other professions) to ease the financial burden. (Educator)

Despite agreement that students on placements should be paid, the Council is aware that neither higher education providers nor many of the organisations that provide placements, have capacity to pay students for work undertaken on placements with current funding arrangements. Moreover, many placements currently available to students would cease to be offered if agencies were required to pay students from their current budgets.

Recommendation:

The Australian Government's funding of higher education needs to include realistic financial support of students undertaking compulsory placements or funding for services that is earmarked for interns and placement students.

The issue remains that students undertaking lengthy unpaid field education placements need financial support in order to gain vital skills and fill workforce shortages. The Council's survey also demonstrated strong support for students to receive (additional) Government financial assistance for students completing field placements.

A shift to paid placements where university fees and government financial support incorporate the cost of students getting an income via placement.

Students are financially supported in a range of ways but at a minimum they should qualify for job seeker while on placement..

I would like to students receive better financial support to complete placements. A payment equivalent to job-seeker would be appropriate to ensure that there was an adequate level of financial support.

This finding resonates with an ACOSS (2020) survey of 955 people who received the initial rate of JobSeeker and other allowances, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey found that this rate of financial support was necessary to provide a living wage. The report found that 93 percent of people were able to afford fresh fruit and vegetables and 83 percent were eating well and regularly, whereas previously 74 percent had regularly skipped meals and nearly a third were skipping more than one meal a day. The supplement meant that 69 percent could pay for essential medicine, 75 percent could pay their bills and 65 percent could more readily pay their rent. This rate of payment is essential for students undertaking field education placements.

Recommendation:

That the Australian Government provide financial assistance to (both domestic and international) students undertaking field placements in the form of a bursary that is equivalent to the initial Jobseeker rate of payment.

Another way of alleviating the costs of participation is to increase the availability of recognition of prior learning (RPL) to experienced practitioners. For example, one student in the Council's survey commented that:

I am withdrawing from social work as I... have 20 years experience working in mental health running groups and can't get any recognition for workplace experience. I've worked under supervision from a social worker and they are as frustrated as I am. This is absolute madness.
(Student)

It is unclear whether this student was not granted RPL due to not meeting the ASWEAS requirements for RPL, or because their higher education provider did not

award RPL for students with extensive experience. However, the outcome for this student is clear, they will now not graduate as a qualified social worker,.

One staff member from a placement provider, noted that inability to access RPL was actually the reason why they had not enrolled in a social work degree themselves:

Many potential students, including myself, are not able to formally study an undergraduate or postgraduate social work qualification because of the placement requirements. For someone already working f/t in the field, it is essentially requiring them to leave their position and their income to complete the qualification. This really needs to be addressed. (Practitioner)

One survey participant suggested that RPL be available for all of the placement requirements in a social work degree. While it is unknown how much support there would be for such a change, it is worth considering:

Students who have already worked in the human service industry should have this experience recognised as prior learning. This may mean considering RPL for both placements.

Recommendation:

That the AASW adopt a more flexible policy around RPL for placements and that all higher education providers implement this policy for students who meet the AASW requirement for RPL.

Increased opportunities around work-based placements should also be considered, particularly when students have paid employment in roles that would meet the criteria for a placement for other students:

My current role as a clinical lead would fit the criteria, if I were not already in the role. (Student)

I got RPL for one placement for prior experience and I could do a work-based placement, which is in a different field, but because I have been in the role for 4 years (and have all that extra experience), it's not allowed. (Student)

Placement providers and educators were also supportive of students being able to undertake a placement in their current role and place of work, if the work was deemed appropriate for a student from outside the organisation to undertake as a placement.

Recommendation:

That the AASW adopt a more flexible policy around workplace placements and

that all higher education providers implement this policy.

Not only does undertaking placement often lead to students having to forego employment, but can lead to additional living costs. Reasons for this include costs of travel to and from the placement provider, and for students with children, can lead to additional costs in child care. As one student commented in the Council's survey:

I had to increase my childcare attendance days to an additional 3 days per week at a cost of \$132/day, total \$396 per week. Over 17 weeks I paid an additional \$6732...Combine this with inflation... and the dramatic increases to petrol, and reduce capacity to earn income, is a potent hindrance on your financial stability and subsequent mental health. (Student)

Recommendation:

That Australian Government funding of higher education includes the costs of childcare and transport incurred by students undertaking placements.

Costs to students could be somewhat alleviated by increasing flexibility of work arrangements while on placement. Since COVID-19, many organisations now have staff working flexibly, including some work from off-site. Allowing students to do some of their placement off-site not only decreases the financial burden of being on placement, but may also be a more accurate depiction of how work is now undertaken in many organisations. As placement providers in the Council's survey commented:

It is not unusual for social workers to hold positions where they do a combination of remote work and in-field work. This should not be seen as a negative for students who need to adapt to the new directions that the field of social work is headed towards. (Practitioner)

Use of telehealth address poverty issues for transport and parking costs, etc. (Practitioner)

Educators also supported this:

[When] Students are able to tailor make their placement in accordance with flexible work practices...by the end of placement they are not burnt out. (Educator)

Some students also felt this would be beneficial to them:

Work from home options. Flexibility in logging hours if tasks completed outside of placement hours. (Student)

The Council notes that the ASWEAS does not currently require students to be

physically present at the organisation for their placement, and in fact does not disallow virtual placements. Rather, it is a matter of perception for education providers and placement providers that students be present at the placement site for their entire placement.

Recommendation:

That higher education providers and placement organisations enable students on placement to work flexibly in line with the working arrangements for staff in the organisation.

In addition to needing to reduce or withdraw from employment to undertake placement, students pay fees for the privilege of doing placements. While domestic students have the option of deferring their HECS debt until after graduation, international students are required to pay their fees upfront. As one participant in the Council's survey noted:

A lot of international students go through significant financial pressure during 14 weeks of unpaid placement... see are not able to focus on our mental health. Being in social work where we are advocating for social justice students themselves are facing major burnout and oppression before even starting to work as a social worker. (Student)

In 2022, students from Western Sydney University developed an online petition calling for the university to compensate social work students for their 1,000 hours field placement by offsetting fees. Over 760 responses were captured in the online responses where students identified the pressures this requirement placed on their ability to continue with the program, with one respondent saying that students should be able to study social work without being exposed to harm or additional burdens, created in large part by the onerous burden of the field education requirements. The aim of this and other similar student surveys was to draw attention to the inequalities and injustices of their experience of field placements to a wider audience as well as fellow social work students and university academics.

Recommendation:

That higher education providers be funded at a level that they can waive the fees for students undertaking placements.

Quality experience for students

It is not surprising the initial consultations for the [Australian Universities Accord](#) revealed many students experiencing challenges with their wellbeing and safety, including navigating mental health concerns. This is certainly the experience of the Council.

Q39. What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a

quality student experience?

Current challenges facing social work students in relation to poverty, hardship and mental health issue are not new but the urgency to address them is gaining momentum. The contemporary socio-economic context of tertiary study has exacerbated student poverty with many students experiencing mounting debt, increased mental health stress and vulnerability to withdrawal, despite the need for national graduates. The impact of the current economic, political, and social environment makes the education of social workers difficult, especially in offering a field education program that meets the current ASWEAS standards. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find suitable placements, supervisors, and to place students (especially as the complexity of the students' lives increase) and to adequately resource those placements (Craik, 2019; Hodge et al., 2021; Morley, et al. 2023). As the majority of placements for social work students are provided on a not-for-payment basis, placement providers experiencing stress may choose to forego offering student placements.

Recommendations:

Higher education providers and placement providers need to develop strategies to ensure there are sufficient high quality placements to enable students to have a quality learning experience which equips them for professional employment.

Higher education funding need to be able to provide financial incentives to potential placement organisations in order to secure sufficient numbers of placements which offer quality learning experiences.

Q40. What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?

Gair and Baglow (2018a) surveyed 2,320 Australian social work students and found that for many students a juggling act of core study requirements, paid work, family commitments and affording necessities impacted their health, wellbeing and study success.

The lack of quality placements means that for some students is not only financially costly, but is damaging their mental health. The Council's recent survey found that 92.4 percent of students reported placements impacting on their stress levels, with 78.9 percent indicating that placement had adversely affected their mental health with a similar proportion (77.9 percent) indicating their overall wellbeing was reduced while on placement. As one student commented in the Council's survey:

My mental health has never been so bad after doing placement and I have to do another one. I have no idea how I'm going to live on such little money for 6

months. Please change this! (Student)

This student is far from alone. A recent article in [The Guardian](#) included an interview with RMIT social work student Ruby Parland. Discussing the requirement for 1,000 hours of unpaid placements, she said:

It's not realistic. ... You're going to class and doing essays while on placement and working ... people really suffer and have breakdowns.

Many of my peers are struggling. People who didn't go part-time were completely burnt out and disillusioned and have to go into the workforce enthusiastic they're already exhausted.

A lot of them come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, their family don't have thousands to loan and they think 'maybe I'll just quit'.

Recommendation:

An immediate restructure of how higher education student placements are conceptualised and funded in order to address significant mental health issues resulting from student poverty associated with compulsory unpaid placements. This needs to give priority attention to students who experience the highest levels of disadvantage, yet are the ones that higher education providers aspire to reach out to in an equitable manner, such as Indigenous students, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and rural students. International students who pay extremely high fees for the same education 'product' as domestic students need to be included in fee restructuring arrangements for placements.

Conclusion and further work

The Council is continuing to work on student poverty and social work education. Following the highly successful summit, a full Council meeting agreed to support the work of a national working group¹ This group drafted this submission from the evidence gathered which has been subsequently endorsed by the whole Council. The working group includes academics who have developed stellar research on field education and student poverty. Members of the group would be willing to provide further information either in writing or in person to hearings held by the Accord panel. The group is now forging connections with other disciplines and professions who have shared concerns about field education/internships and student poverty and other forms of disadvantage. While recognising that the problems cross disciplinary

¹ comprising Professor Beth Crisp (Deakin University), Professor Christine Morley (QUT), Professor Linda Briskman (Western Sydney University), Dr Maree Higgins (University of New South Wales), Associate Professor Lisa Hodge (Charles Darwin University) and Associate Professor Bernadette Saunders (Victoria University).

boundaries, our submission is built on social work's leadership in this important area of public policy and social justice and specifically on our most recent work in our 2022 national survey and 2023 national summit.

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