

1 September 2023

Professor Mary O'Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel
Australian Government Department of Education

Dear Ms O'Kane,

RE: Financial impact of students' field education commitment

The University of Newcastle's External Social Work Industry Committee are aware of the stress many social work students are experiencing as they work to complete their field placements while attempting to maintain their casual employment to support themselves during their Social Work course. Our student cohort is from a predominantly low socio economic area, many are first in family to attend university and have a disability that they manage throughout their degree. The graduates of the Social Work Honours degree are sought after graduates, and enjoy high rates of employment in the Newcastle, Hunter and Central Coast region.

The membership of the committee includes senior social work practitioners employed with Government and Non-Government agencies and provide social work services to the Hunter, Central Coast and areas. We all provide social work placements to support the social work profession and are aware of the commitment required for students to complete their degree, and the financial impost on their lives and the disruption this causes to their families.

We are writing to add our voices to this important national discussion, and note the work being undertaken within the Australian Council of Heads of School of Social Work that has sort to understand, document and highlight the issues for students. Student poverty is exacerbated during the placement and often prolongs the length of degrees and stops some students completing their degrees. We therefore support the financial support of students on placement as an urgent priority, and more flexibility as to how they meet their placement requirements. These steps will help in ensuring social work graduates to meet the needs of Australia into the next few decades.

Most social work students hold down jobs to pay mortgages, rent, childcare costs, health, and daily living expenses. Many experience the full-time work experience on placement to be incompatible with work. The increasing cost of living and reduced housing affordability is contributing to this becoming more difficult for many of them.

The requirement to do two 500-hour blocks of field education where most placements are unpaid, poses significant challenges for our students. The

consequences of this are:

- Potential students are deterred from studying the course as they cannot afford to "take the time off work."
- Students on placement can risk losing employment if they cannot attend work while on placement.
- Other students try and hold down jobs in addition to doing placements, which can impact their family life and their overall health and wellbeing.

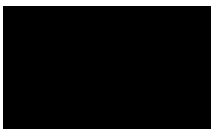
We refer to an article in the *Social Work Education* journal "The Unpaid Placement Makes you Poor: Australian social work students' experiences of the financial burden of field education" (Morley, Hodge, Clarke, McIntyre, Mays, Briese & KostECKI, 2023), that highlights the inherent problems of the current model of unpaid lengthy placements.

In our view the solution may lie in two areas:

- A government funded model where the student is paid a stipend while undertaking their placement. We note that a different funding model may be required for international students and domestic students. We would urge the consideration of financial support for international students as well as domestic students.
- Greater flexibility in field education expectations and models to enable students to continue working during their placement.

We request you to consider how these options can be considered. Our concern is that if this problem is not addressed, we may risk having an increased shortage of students enrolling in social work amidst an already increasing social worker shortage. Additionally, for those who do the course, there is a significant risk to their mental health and livelihoods if they cannot financially survive during placement times.

Kind regards,



Lindsay Ross
Social Worker
Member, University of Newcastle's External Social Work Industry Committee

References

Morley, C., Hodge, L., Clarke, J., McIntyre, H., Mays, J., Briese, J., & KostECKI, T. (2023). The Unpaid Placement Makes you Poor: Australian social work students' experiences of the financial burden of field education. *Social Work Education*, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2022.2161507.