

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

RE: Financial impact of students’ field education commitment

My name is Suzanne and I am a social work student undertaking a Bachelor of Social Work with honours at the University of Newcastle Ourimbah campus. I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the interim report provided by the Australian Universities Accord. I have been studying this degree since 2019, I have been a student representative since 2020, and I have undertaken the first of two 500 hour placements required of my degree.

As a mature age student, who is raising a family of 6, I see first-hand the impact that such large blocks of mostly unpaid field education has on students like myself. I have seen students who I believe will make wonderful, caring, impactful social workers, either defer or unenroll all together from their studies because of the financial, physical and emotional stress of undertaking such large blocks of field education. Students are trying to hold down employment, pay for mortgages, ever increasing rent, childcare fees, school fees and the list goes on. Ultimately such high levels of demand places students at increased risk of both physical and mental burnout.

I have completed only one of my two 500 hour placements, during which time I had to fit in a casual job, while raising my then three children, pay rent, move house due to the volatility of the housing market, and all other aspects of running a household and family. I have now had an additional child and I have no idea how I am going to complete the second placement whilst additionally needing to find and pay for child care for my youngest child. Deferring or the possibly of non-completion of my degree is something that is a real possibility purely as I cannot financially afford to complete an unpaid placement.

Additionally, during my first placement, I was often filling a role that would otherwise be a paid position. The administration assistant had the ability to take leave whilst I was there, something that the non-government organisation I was placed with would have struggled to do, if not for having a student social worker to fill the role. Many students have highlighted the role that student social workers play within organisations including, filling worker shortages. I was interviewed before my placement to make sure that I already had the skill set needed to work for the organisation I was placed with. I had peers that moved to different organisations because they didn’t fit the needs of the service, while others performed tasks/roles very similar to their current paid working positions. Services rely on having student social workers as an active part of their staff. Indicating that while I learnt so much during my first placement it is not solely a learning experience, it is often filling a role which the organisation would otherwise pay to fill or risk further increasing the population of vulnerable people whose needs go unmet.

I argue that social workers are vital to a healthy community and to the well-being of the most vulnerable of our population, our placements are long, and the demographics of the female dominated student population are often low socio-economic, first in their family to go to university, have a disability, are mature age, and/or raising a family. I 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).

In my view the solution may lie in two areas:

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

I request that you consider how these option can be considered and included in the final report. I worry that without these amendments, without adequate addressing of the problem, we risk further decreasing the number of social work students and social work graduates, whilst risking the mental, physical, and financial health of those who manage to undertake their placements. This would ultimately lead to an increase in the growing unmet needs, felt by whole communities of people.

Thank you for your consideration.

Warmly

Suzanne Andrews

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.