



National Field Education Network (NFEN)

**A sub-committee of the Australian & New Zealand Social Work and
Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWWER)**

Response to the Australian Universities Accord

Interim Report

September 2023

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The National Field Education Network (NFEN) is a sub-committee of the Australian and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWWER - an independent commentator on social work and welfare education). The purpose and functions of NFEN is to provide to Australian social work field education programs, and industry partners, a forum to:

- Collaborate in identifying, discussing, and responding to common social work field education issues,
- Contribute to building the knowledge base of social work field education through collaborative research,
- Advocate as a collective voice on social work field education issues.

Guided by the Network's principles of transparency, collaboration, and inclusivity, members were invited to contribute to this submission. Our Network consists of many voices, and this submission represents a collaborative Network submission. In-keeping with NFEN's remit, our response is scoped and bounded, focusing on aspects of the Interim Report that are relevant to Australian Social Work Field Education.

On behalf of the Network, we strongly recommend the following in relation to mandatory placements:

1. That principles of **social justice and equity** are embedded within any approach towards mandatory placements,
2. That **all social work students**, alongside nursing and teaching students, are **explicitly prioritised in receiving financial support via a stipend to afford costs of living** while undertaking mandatory placements,
3. That the **Accord works with professional regulatory bodies** to increase flexibilities in current processes, regulations, and standards, ensuring they are **informed by pedagogy** (as opposed to resource-driven changes) and **responsive to contemporary situations and stakeholder circumstances**.

We see these recommendations as a vital step towards alleviating student poverty and financial and psychological stress. Additionally, we envisage these will promote timely degree completions, enhance students' capacity to engage in learning, thus increasing the quality of the learning environment overall, building workforce capacity and addressing the skills shortage currently evidenced in the social work profession (Department of Education, 2021).

In advocating these **three recommendations**, we emphasise the following:

- All stakeholders must be **adequately resourced and supported** to deliver, and undertake, this integral part of the curriculum,
- **Social work is a profession in demand** with significant projected growth of 23.2% to 2026 (Department of Education, 2021), reinforcing the urgency for higher education providers to be adequately supported to enable students to achieve qualifications,
- The Department of Education (2021) report states that the social work profession is 84% female, and therefore consideration to reducing barriers to access and inclusion must be addressed,
- Largely missing from this Interim Report is **explicit mention of social work**. Emphasis has instead been placed on nursing and education students as priority groups, particularly regarding requiring financial support during placement. We request it be noted that similarly to these professions, the **health and human services (social work) sector is in crisis**; students are conducting placements in, broadly speaking, an under resourced and over worked sector.

The Centrality of Field Education in the Social Work Curriculum

The field education components of the curriculum are a critical component of professional social work education (IFSW, 2020). The International Federation of Social Work stipulates that:

‘Practice education should be well integrated in the curriculum in preparing students with knowledge, values and skills for ethical, competent and effective practice. Practice education must be sufficient in duration, and complexity of tasks and learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for professional practice’ (IFSW, 2020, p10).

Globally, this importance is recognised, with field education being described as the ‘signature pedagogy’ (Shulman, 2005; Wayne, Bogo & Raskin, 2010) and in Australia, described as a ‘distinctive pedagogy’ (Egan et al., 2018).

Currently, the requirement to undertake lengthy field education placements renders social work degrees inaccessible for many potential students (i.e., 1000 hours of unpaid placements, taken in 500-hour blocks). The majority of social work students hold down jobs to pay mortgages, rent, childcare costs, health, and daily living expenses. The increasing cost of living and reduced housing affordability exacerbates these barriers to professional learning.

The requirement to do two 500-hour blocks of unpaid placement, poses major challenges.

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**.
- There are also significant numbers of students who **commence social work degrees only to cease** their studies due to these requirements - exacerbating impacts of the cost-of-living crisis, precarious housing, and employment. This speaks to section 2.2.4.

The impacts of mandatory placements over such a protracted period (500 hours equating to 14 weeks full-time) are well evidenced; qualifying and quantifying the financial, psychological and physical burden this places on social work students (Gair & Baglow, 2018; Hodge et al., 2021; Oke et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2023). In preparing this submission, anecdotal reports from Network members have reinforced this burden, reporting multiple encounters with students, experiencing financial and psychological hardship because of the lengthy placement duration. These reports include students who have:

- returned home to survive the financial burden of a long placement,
- attended a placement part time (4 days a week) and worked the remainder of the week (3 days),
- had little or no money which impacted purchases food and petrol,
- had nothing to eat, and food has been purchased by the placement supervisor,
- been living in their car, to avoid accommodation costs, and manage the financial burden of placement,
- developed a ‘survival plan’ to assist them to cope with the combined demands of placement and employment.

These represent just a few of the many realities faced by social work students during the placement components of their degree.

NFEN is aware of several industry-based programs and scholarship initiatives proposed for 2024 that will begin to address some of the issues for social work students, as identified in our submission. Our concern remains regarding any such initiative or scheme that are competitive in nature as these perpetuate disadvantage.

In summary, we request that financial support identified in the Interim Report for nursing and education students, be extended to social work students, and be given urgent attention. A non-means tested government stipend should be **availed to all students** enrolled in social work degrees, as opposed to a loan scheme that will contribute to further debt. Such financial support is crucial in enabling social work students to engage in their learning more fully. While there are differing views as to whether this is a wage-subsidy for unpaid labour, or a cost-of-living payment, there is unequivocal support within the Network to financially support students during their placements.

Furthermore, **we request that the wording in Section 2.2.4 (p60) of the Interim Report be amended to reflect this urgency:**

Current wording: 'The Review will explore the possibility of requiring some form of financial support for students undertaking mandatory placements'.

Proposed wording: '**The review will identify strategies for financial support for students undertaking mandatory placements**'.

Finally, we strongly urge that the Accord works with professional regulatory bodies to increase flexibilities in current processes, regulations, and standards, ensuring they are responsive to contemporary situations and stakeholder circumstances. This could include consideration of simulation-based learning contributing to placement hours. Lessons can potentially be learned from other allied health professions, for example, occupational therapy, that similarly has 1000 hours of placement learning, with 200 of these hours being permitted for simulation.

To conclude, field education is distinctive within social work curriculum, and therefore any flexibilities that are implemented to support the delivery and undertaking of placements, must be informed by pedagogy, as opposed to reactive and resource-driven changes. Adequate resourcing to support placement delivery, in addition to supporting students as they undertake these placements, are vital steps towards alleviating student poverty and financial and psychological stress. To reiterate, we envisage these will promote timely degree completions, enhance students' capacity to engage in learning, thus increasing the quality of the learning environment overall, building workforce capacity and addressing the skills shortage currently facing the social work profession.

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