



# Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education Inc

## Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report September 2023

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Submission endorsed by ACHSWE.

The ACHSWE (The Council) is the leading body for social work education in Australia. It is comprised of the Heads of each social work program in Australia, who are responsible for delivering social work education, including field education. The ACHSWE welcomes the measures outlined in the Interim Report to overcome student placement poverty (particularly sections 2.2.4 and 2.3.3.2), and to enhancing and empowering student voice (3.2.4). In supporting these directions, we make the following recommendations, primarily derived from data from 2023 empirical research undertaken by the ACHSWE, which offer solutions to the problem of student placement poverty. The data from the research is consistent with the outcomes of a February 2023 National Summit on Re-imagining Field Education in Social Work hosted by the ACHSWE at Western Sydney University.

- **Recommendation 1: That the Australian Government include social work students (along with nursing and teaching students) as an urgent priority to receive financial support while undertaking compulsory, unpaid placement.**
- **Recommendation 2: That the Australian Government amend the Fair Work Act (2009) to ensure vocational placements do not remain lawfully unpaid.**

**Recommendation 3: That the Australian Government pay a stipend to social work students (and other students studying vital professions in which there are workforce shortages) at a rate of at least minimum wage per hour to compensate them for unpaid work they are doing while on placement thereby, reducing placement poverty.**

- **Recommendation 4: That the Australian Government ensure regulatory bodies adopt evidence-based, flexible, contextually responsive standards that reduce disparities in required placement hours between comparable professions, remove barriers that prevent students participating in university education, and maximise affordability of Commonwealth support for students on placement.**

### **Solution 1: Student poverty, placement poverty and the need for paid placements as a priority equity measure**

It is now well established that **unpaid compulsory placements cause great financial hardship for students**, act as an enabler for **attrition** and even **exclude students, particularly those from marginalised groups** from being able to study (See for example Gair & Baglow, 2018; Hodge et al., 2021; Oke et al., 2021; Morley et al., 2023). These barriers are especially problematic in vital professions, such as social work, nursing, and teaching for which there are current and increasing projected **workforce shortages** (Australian Government, 2021). 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% more social workers between 2019 and 2024.

Our research-informed, evidence-based submission highlights the need for **social work students to be included with nursing and teaching students as an urgent priority**. Like nursing and teaching, social work is a **feminised** profession, which attracts high numbers of **students from equity backgrounds**: students from low socio-economic backgrounds, First Nations students, students with a disability, and mature-aged students with caring responsibilities (Gair & Baglow, 2018; Morley et al., 2023). These students are particularly vulnerable to experiencing poverty during placement because intersectional disadvantage significantly reduces participation.

Social work students undertake 1000 hours of compulsory placements (which is comparatively more than nursing (800 hours) and teaching (80 days). Given that the 1000 hours is usually undertaken in 2 x 500 hours blocks, the placements reduce social work students' capacity to undertake paid work alongside placement. **A recent national study** undertaken by the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education (ACHSWE)<sup>1</sup> surveyed almost **1200 social work students, service providers and educators** and found more than **60% of social work students (n=421) had lost ¾ of their wage, and 25% (n=175) had to forgo their entire regular income** in order to do placement. Because of this, **96% of students (n=673) on placement reported struggling to find money for food, medication and clothes and travel** required for placement. **Over 92% (n=645) identified a lack of financial support as the major drawback** of placement (Morley et al, 2023).

**Recommendation 1: That the Australian Government include social work students (along with nursing and teaching students) as an urgent priority to receive financial support while undertaking compulsory, unpaid placement.**

### **Solution 2: Changes to the Fair Work Act**

We commend The Universities Accord interim report for exploring 'whether changes are required to provisions within the *Fair Work Act* relating to payment for vocational placements'. While vocational placements are vital for learning, **students** who responded to the ACHSWE survey indicated that they felt '**exploited**' by not being paid for the work they were doing. They also referred to regularly being **used to fill labour shortages in organisations** that are not adequately funded or staffed, as these quotes point out:

- ***Being exploited... i.e., doing real work for free for such an extended period; the org relies on free labour of students to deliver its services - this is WRONG.***

<sup>1</sup> Morley, C., Ryan, C., Briskman, L., Hodge, L., Higgins, M., Martin, R., Watts, L., & Hill, N., *National Survey: Reimagining Field Education*. First presented at the National Social Work Field Education Summit, Feb 6, 2023 Western Sydney University, Paramatta.

- *I was used as free labour...I spent the majority of my time cleaning out homes and transporting clients.*

In addition, 82% of educators had difficulty placing students, while 47% of service providers had declined to host a student placement in recent years. This is extremely troubling given the findings of the Aged Care and Disability Royal Commissions that demonstrated deep difficulty and distress for older people, people with disability, and children and young people across the country exacerbated by significant workforce issues and recommended improvements to skills training and the routine inclusion of social workers in decision making (Johns, 2015; McEwan & Mason, 2023; Pagone & Briggs, 2021). If placements were solely about learning (and not work), it would be reasonable to assume that placements would be an opportunity for students to develop required skills and knowledge. However, according to 51% of educators, **service providers declined to host student placements due to the student not having the required work skills for the placement setting**. A further 43% of educators indicated **organisations had declined taking a student due to the student's performance during a placement interview**. If learning was genuinely the main focus, arguably pre-placement skills and interview performance would not be reasons for placements to be declined. **It appears students are being screened to ensure they can perform unpaid work while on placement.**

**Recommendation 2: That the Australian Government amend the Fair Work Act (2009) to ensure vocational placements do not remain lawfully unpaid.**

### **Solution 3: Paid placements**

**Paid placements** were the most highly ranked solution in the ACHSWE survey across all 3 stakeholder groups (i.e., students, service providers, educators) for addressing placement poverty. 88% of students (n=620) indicated vigorous support. Qualitative data offered by students provides deeper insight into students' need to receive payment while on placement:

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

Students endorsed paid placements as a strategy to address existing financial hardship and support learning: **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.

In addition, **92% of educators (n=180) and 86% of practitioners (n=252) supported increasing paid placement options** for students.

- *It is essential that students are financially compensated for placement. We can no longer justify unpaid labour* (educator).
- *There should be some monetary compensation for the work they are doing* (practitioner)

Importantly, most qualitative data referred to financial compensation for work, rather than targeted, means-tested financial support. The research supports a universal approach to payment for students undertaking unpaid work during placements (including international students and part-time students), rather than a welfarist approach, which does not address the principle of unpaid work. Inequities are particularly evident for MSWQ students who are required to undertake the same number of hours – 1000 hours in their two-year degrees – as BSW students in their four-year programs. Combined with high international student fees, they are excessively financially burdened.

Research by Unions NSW suggests students should be paid a minimum wage for unpaid work undertaken during placement (Wang, 2023). For social work students, 1000 hours would cost approximately \$22,000. Unions NSW estimates Australian Government support that addresses the urgent needs of social work, nursing and teaching students would cost approximately \$60million annually. This modest amount would make a difference to addressing equity issues and industrial justice considerations, and we believe would not put significant pressure on the federal budget. In the immediate term, this would address workforce shortages and contribute to economic and social good. It is noteworthy that **social work students in the UK can apply for a bursary (not a loan) through the National Health Service** to cover their expenses while on placement (Gov.UK., n.d). There is also an **integrated degree apprenticeship model** for students working in the field who are **sponsored by an approved employer, which is funded through the Government's apprenticeship levy** (BASW, 2023), so the financial burden for students studying social work in England is considerably less.

**Recommendation 3: That the Australian Government pay a stipend to social work students (and other students studying vital professions in which there are workforce shortages) at a rate of at least minimum wage per hour to compensate them for unpaid work they are doing while on placement and reduce placement poverty.**

### **Solution 4: Additional measures to reduce placement poverty and enhance affordability to Australian Government support for social work students on placement**

The ACHSWE survey highlighted four evidence-based strategies to reduce student poverty that the regulatory body for social work in Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) could implement immediately (requiring no resources). These strategies are included here as their implementation would reduce the estimated costs of Australian Government supporting social work students on placement.

#### **Expanding flexibility for students to do a placement in an existing workplace**

Currently, the AASW prevents students from undertaking placement in a pre-existing workplace, even if the role is directly relevant to social work (AASW, 2021). **Increasing provision and flexibility for work-based placements was endorsed by 90% of students (n=631), and 84% of both educators (n=165) and practitioners (n=247).** Qualitative data highlights the urgency of this requirement to be changed for students already working in the human services sector, as noted in the following quotes:

- *I could do a work-based placement, but **because I have been in the role for four years (and have... extra experience), it's not allowed.***
- **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 [full time] in the field... is essentially require[ed]... to leave their position and their income to complete the qualification. This really needs to be addressed.

In addition, **84% of students who undertook a work-based placement** (during the 2020-21 COVID-19-modified placement requirements) **indicated it enhanced their wellbeing and reduced poverty.** For example: *I was able to complete my second placement in my workplace due to COVID relaxations. This meant the completion of my MSW wasn't unnecessarily delayed... I didn't have to experience unnecessary financial strain.* Moreover, **87% and practitioners and 76% of students who trialled work-based placements rated them as helpful for reducing placement poverty.** Enabling students to do a placement in a pre-existing workplace prevents students from being forced to relinquish a paid role in order to undertake unpaid placement work. Students who are already paid employees in relevant roles would not require financial support from the Australian Government for the work they are doing on placement. The AASW has withdrawn COVID-19 flexibility provisions, however, the evidence presented above reveals the benefits that would accrue from restoring the provisions through the accreditation standards.

### **Reducing placement hours by up to 20%**

Another evidence-based initiative to make Commonwealth financial support of social work students doing placement more affordable would be to reduce the number of placement hours required. A reduction of 20% would bring social work in line with the requirements of nursing students, and closer to comparable countries (e.g. The Canadian standards require only 700 hours of placement for their undergraduate programs (Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE],2021)

The ACHSWE survey indicates that **reducing placement hours (during 2020) was considered the most useful modification trialled for enhancing student wellbeing and reducing poverty** by 93% of students, 82% of educators, and 78% of practitioners.

- *The innovative models as well as reduced hours during COVID-19 showed that **students could achieve success in their placement and learning with less time and more flexibility*** (Educator).

Reducing the hours required for social work placements would reduce the unpaid work that students are currently not compensated for, and make Australian Government financial support more affordable. Importantly, the survey found **reducing placement hours did not reduce standards or learning:** 76% of students supported this while only 4% indicated that reduced hours were not helpful for learning.

### **Developing a capability framework (with a focus on demonstrated learning, instead of hours)**

Another strategy to enhance the affordability of paid placements for the Australian Government would be to ensure that **placements focus on learning outcomes (rather than measuring the number of hours,** as the current AASW-ASWEAS field education model does). This strategy was endorsed by **85% of students (n=593), 82% of educators (n=161) and 81% of practitioners (n=237).** As these comments attest: *More focus on demonstrating learning as opposed to just "ticking off hours" could lead to **shorter placements with a higher focus on the quality of learning*** (Practitioner).

### **Increased Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**

**Increased recognition of prior learning (RPL)** could similarly operate to make a scheme that financially supports students to do placements more affordable for the Australian Government. Increasing provision for RPL was **endorsed by 86% (n=606) of students, 72% of educators (n=140) and 78% of practitioners (n=230).** Currently, students can apply to receive credit for their first placement or part thereof if they have worked 'for a least the equivalent of three full-time years in a setting deemed appropriate as a field educator setting required for a first placement student and demonstrate competencies against AASW practice standards' (AASW, 2021). If a full-time (37.5 hour) week is 1950 hours per year, **this is almost 6 times the requirement of a 500-hour placement, which is considered equivalent.** Qualitative data speaks to the concerns:

- *The **current AASW-required standard for prior work experience greatly exceeds the experience that would otherwise be gained from completing a 500-hour placement*** (Student).
- ***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*** (Practitioner).

**Recommendation 4: That the Australian Government ensure regulatory bodies adopt evidence-based, flexible, contextually responsive standards that reduce disparities in required placement hours between comparable professions, remove barriers that prevent students participating in university education, and maximise affordability of Commonwealth support for students on placement.**

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