

Western Sydney University (WSU) School of Social Sciences Social Work External Advisory Committee (EAC): Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

The Western Sydney University (WSU) School of Social Sciences Social Work External Advisory Committee (EAC) has a number of functions. It provides collegial advice on the relevance of courses to prospective students, the community, industry, and appropriate professional bodies. The Social Work discipline at WSU is a member of the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education (ACHSWE) and the EAC is aware of, and fully supports, the contents of its evidence-based submission to the Accord. For reasons of brevity and space we will not duplicate its contents here.

EAC members thank the Accord Panel for the Interim Report, welcome the report, and recommends;

- Section **2.2.4** of the Interim report be extended specifically to include social work.
- That the considerations for change contained in section **2.3.3.2** be carried forward to the final report, in particular that students receive payment while on placement at a per hour rate at least equivalent to the Minimum Wage.
- That the final report makes clear and strong recommendations to government, professional bodies, and industry to establish a consistent framework for social work and comparable disciplines and to provide equitable solutions to the problems outlined below.

Comments

The interim report does not refer specifically to social work. Our profession has a long-established presence in the Social and Community Services, Health, and Education sectors. Graduates will be employed in both government and non-government organisations at all levels including administration. Our EAC, has been concerned about Field Education Placements because of

- the impact on student poverty created by unpaid placement requirements.
- the difficulties for students in completing the required number of hours.
- the increasing difficulties faced by the university and its students in locating supervised field education placements.

All of these issues are covered in your report and apply in equal measure to social work students across Australia and **we submit that social work should also be identified in the final report and treated as a matter of urgency alongside teaching and nursing.**

WSU has a long history of engagement with equity and social justice issues and with meeting the needs of local students. Most of our Bachelor of Social Work students are the first in their family to undertake tertiary education. The cost of tertiary education means that most must engage in employment while they are studying, in order to support themselves and sometimes their families. Social work is also a female dominated profession with many students being single parents.

Students must also consider the prospect of a significant HECS debt upon completion of their degree. For fee-paying international students limits on working hours and lack of familiarity with conditions of employment creates financial hardship, with adverse impacts locating suitable housing, and access to adequate food and medical care. Their families have frequently made enormous sacrifices so that their children can travel abroad to study.

Field Education Placements have a long history in social work and are a crucial part of the professional training process. However, increasingly they come at a significant and sometimes unaffordable cost to students, who are required to forgo the income they need to support themselves in order to complete their course requirements.

WSU recently hosted a National Summit on Field Education, sponsored by the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education (ACHSWE). It was attended by representatives from Schools of Social Work in every State and Territory; students; representatives from industry; the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and other peak bodies. In preparation for this Summit, a survey of students, academic staff, placement supervisors, and Industry representatives was conducted by the ACHSWE and led by Professor Christine Morley of QUT. The results of the survey revealed a major shortfall of viable placements as well as escalating levels of student poverty placing significant stress upon students and university staff. All present at the Summit recognised the urgent need for change. This data can be found in the ACHSWE submission.

Among the key messages emerging from presentations at the Summit, student poverty was identified as the major issue in completing 1000 hours of unpaid placement in both the BSW and MSWQ. Students reported the impact on them including postponing placements or dropping out of courses because they could not afford the loss of income. Austudy and Youth Allowances are barely adequate, and most students who rely on them for income must supplement their benefits with permitted hours of work. International students also often rely on permitted hours of work to survive and are not eligible for other allowances.

Though student poverty has been an issue in Social Work for some time, it has likely reached a critical point due to increasing rates of poverty and disadvantage, and rising cost of living and housing. From our perspective, there are discreet demographic features of the WSU student catchment area that further underpin issues of student poverty.

- o 2021 ABS Census data tells us that (Greater) Western Sydney is about half of Sydney's population, more than a third of the population of NSW
- o Western Sydney is Australia's third largest economy (https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/researchpapers/Pages/western-sydney-an-economic-profile_1.aspx)
- o There are significant Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and First Nations communities and people with disability (those requiring assistance with core activities) who have increased vulnerabilities to poverty and disadvantage
- o Parts of Western Sydney have lower educational attainment rates (2021 ABS Census)
- o Poverty and disadvantage has increased across Western Sydney as seen in the recent NCOSS report on Economic Disadvantage in NSW

We cannot escape the incompatible nature of placements (in which work is completed for no remuneration) with contemporary labour market legislation and policy, a point being made by students in the media.

Even more worrying is increasing evidence that student mental health issues are on the rise. As Social Workers we cannot ignore the ethical impact of such placements, in that they may actually cause harm to some students. There is an inevitable flow-on impact of the harm caused to students, to academic staff, adding further complexity to an already high workload. Staff, full-time and casual, report spending more time managing harms and coordinating student welfare responses, thus detracting from other priorities that are the mainstay of any University.

Casual academic staff report spending hours of unpaid time responding to emails from students seeking special consideration and time after class to provide brief support/referral interventions.

The paucity of placements has been noted in the Interim Report and is a significant and increasing problem for the university. At the commencement of this academic year there were 550 WSU Students (MSWQ & BSW) requiring placement. Two weeks prior to commencement there were 150 students still waiting. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of fieldwork coordinators this was reduced down to 50 by 24 May 2023. The School authorised intensive assistance to approximately 20 students of the cohorts completing placement in the 2nd half of the year (that is, enrolled to start placement in June and to complete December: 2H). The cohorts completing placements in 2H are final year BSW; first year MSWQ and final year MSWQ. These intensive support sessions facilitate direct contact between the student and an agency not otherwise offering a placement. This jeopardy is incredibly stressful for all parties including the field education team. It is not peculiar to WSU but is replicated at University of Sydney, UNSW and all other HEPs across the country.

We note the Interim Report's reference to the urgency of addressing these issues and the potential skills shortage in nursing and teaching in particular. We draw your attention to the data in the Social Work Occupation Profile prepared by Jobs and Skills Australia.

"ISA produces [employment projections](#) to show where likely future job opportunities may be. The latest data are for the five years from November 2021 to November 2026. Over this period, the number of workers:

- *is expected to grow very strongly*
- *is likely to reach 49,300 by 2026."*¹

At our recent EAC meeting a senior industry representative noted that an impact of Covid on major agencies such as Hospitals and Family and Community Services has been a loss of experienced staff. The higher-than-normal vacancy rates have resulted in a reduction in the number of those qualified to supervise a student on placement.

The results of the ACHSWE survey (referred to above) show that a significant number of respondents identify the likelihood of not being able to complete their degree, leading to a costly outcome for students, universities, and the Australian governments investment in the future job force.

We repeat our request that social work be included in the list of professions facing hardship incurred by unpaid placements, and also be identified as a profession with a potential skills shortage.

The issues around student placements are complex and involve multiple players, including governments, universities, students, professional associations, industries. Whilst many key players recognise the problems, it is all too easy for players to transfer responsibility for a solution to another party. The stark reality is that no one player holds the key.

As an EAC we have lobbied for change with the professional body, the AASW and also with ACHSWE. Students involved in our EAC and the National Summit have also been active in pressing for change, joining with students from other universities in setting up a student lobby group to press for resolution of these issues, in particular the lack of placements and the unpaid nature of the work.

We are cognisant of the funding challenge to government however, we believe that a modest stipend approach is achievable and will be particularly important in supporting students experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.

¹ At <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/occupation-profile/social-workers?occupationCode>