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Social Work Association of
Graduate Students

Social Work Association of Graduate Students

The University of Melbourne

Parkville, VIC 3052

20/09/2023

Re: Submission to the Australian Universities Accord

We are writing today as deeply concerned social work students as part of the Social Work Association for Graduate Students at The University of Melbourne. We wish to discuss and highlight key issues that we urge the Australian Universities Accord Panel to consider, in relation to:

- Institutions' duty of care to students on work-integrated learning;
- Supporting students' mental health and wellbeing on work-integrated learning;
- Addressing the harm and risk that students face on work-integrated learning; and
- Enhancing the student voice and empowering students in work-integrated learning.

We are aware there is a lot of pressure currently to introduce payments for students on placement. We would like to make it clear that **this is not the purpose of our own advocacy. We believe student poverty is just the tip of the iceberg and far more troubling issues exist with the very structure and underlying assumptions of the work-integrated learning or placement model. We believe that students are being placed in workplaces and workplace cultures that are unsafe, unsupportive, dysfunctional, and unsuitable as learning environments. And we believe that these issues are not unique to social work students, but students in many other disciplines with a substantial work-integrated learning requirement.**

We are concerned that a high level of dysfunction has become normalised and embedded in the current practice around student placements in social work. As a student representative organisation offering student support, we have witnessed this first-hand in the experience of students approaching us for advocacy support in their placements, as well as through student surveys. Some of our members have also experienced this directly through the experience of their own placements.

Our concern is that there is an inherent conflict between the [TEQSA's Guidelines for Workplace Integrated Learning](#) and the current structure of social work placements at



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1,000 hours or 2x 500 hour blocks; and that universities are failing to meet the duty of care for students on placements.

“The provider has taken effective steps to monitor and support the wellbeing and safety of students engaged in WIL, and has clear student grievance processes capable of resolving issues students may have with the WIL aspects of their course of study, as well as managing critical incidents should they eventuate.”

As we have witnessed, **the reality is that there aren't enough quality assured, safe placements to match the number of students enrolled in social work programs. Students end up in dysfunctional and unsafe workplace environments with toxic and unsupportive working and learning cultures. This causes significant distress and is detrimental to the student's learning.** We have seen students being placed into workplaces that do not practice according to the evidence and theory being taught in the social work curriculum. Some are being placed in organisations that don't employ a single social worker, which is currently allowed by the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) guidelines. In a sector such as social work, that is well known to experience staff retention issues, burnout, vicarious trauma and to be strained and under-resourced, we are concerned that students are at a high risk of being either exploited or neglected while on placement, with their genuine training and learning needs disregarded. **We have seen first-hand that the conditions of some student placements can be extremely damaging to student wellbeing in the short- and long-term, with trauma that students carry with them long after their time at university.**

Students have the right to be assured a safe and supportive environment to learn in. They have a right to a quality learning experience that is consistent across their cohort. They also have the right to have their wellbeing and mental health protected, as stated by TEQSA. However, for many students on placements, these rights are not being upheld.

A key reason for our advocacy is that we see that there is a high level of resistance amongst social work students to raise their concerns and complaints directly with university staff. **We understand that universities may genuinely be unaware of many troubling and disturbing circumstances where students are placed in dysfunctional, unsafe, and unsupportive workplaces.** We see that issues discussed throughout the coursework around power and hierarchy are prominent for student placements both within workplaces and with the university. As a student representative organisation offering student support, we see first-hand that many students, especially those who are younger or are international students, choose not to speak up at all to the department or school of social work. This is usually out of fear of failing the placement, not completing the unit or degree, or of general judgment and discrimination. For international students, there are also serious implications around visas should they need to delay their placement. For students from minority or



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marginalised groups, including those with a disability, a further layer of issues will exist. This imbalance in power between students and the universities as the gatekeepers to the qualification only further compounds these issues when they do arise.

"My supervisor was away so another social worker supervised me for the day. She and I worked closely together on a patient's case; I consulted her every step of the way and followed her instructions. In the end it turned out we had accidentally picked up another social worker's patient which created a lot of confusion for the patient's family. The patient's family was very unhappy and made a complaint. The social worker supervising me sat me down and told me that the team had some "feedback" for me and told me what I could do next time to avoid making the same mistakes. At that point I realised they had blamed the whole situation on me even though I was only following my supervisor's instructions. After this, I went back to my desk and I just couldn't stop crying. I ran outside and I just cried and cried for hours. For weeks afterward, I felt like I couldn't trust anyone there anymore."

Anonymous Student Quote

We have seen numerous cases where there is a serious lack of understanding within organisations as to the purpose of a placement generally, the appropriate role for a student and at times awareness that a student is even coming to the organisation. In our experience it can occur that staff may be completely unaware, or in some cases even have resistance to accepting and supporting a student. Again, these scenarios can be extremely distressing and challenging for students to navigate and are unlikely to provide a quality opportunity to learn. While it may be important for students to learn to advocate for themselves and to build resilience, as we've seen the university often encourage in such scenarios, we feel the onus of this cannot rest entirely on the shoulders of the student, who has very little genuine power or authority when they are not formally employed by that organisation. **There is also an inherent dilemma for students to admit they aren't having a quality learning experience in their placement, for the implications and fear of failing to meet the learning requirements necessary to then pass the placement. Students feel like they have no power and no voice in this situation.**

"In my first week of placement, my Task Supervisor told me that they didn't have time to help me and that they had better things to do. When I raised this with my Field Educator (who was external to the organisation and a university faculty member) the advice they gave me was to "avoid and ignore" that person as much as possible and just get on with my work. I was also told that it was quite "normal" to be distressed and crying in the first supervision session. I found this all very alarming and confusing with it only being my first week of a three-month placement. I was also confused that the organisation didn't employ any social workers, but this was considered acceptable for a social work placement."



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Anonymous Student Quote

While social work will inevitably be a challenging and confronting occupation at times and students may be exposed to difficult themes and experiences while on placement, we raise the question: **how could it be appropriate or beneficial for a social worker's training to involve extensive exposure to a highly dysfunctional workplace that doesn't practice according to theory, or provide adequate support, care or supervision to the student?**

We are aware of issues for the universities around sourcing enough placements to match demand, especially since COVID. **We are also aware that the social work accrediting body, the Australian Association of Social Workers, have refused to exercise any flexibility around the number of hours required on work-integrated learning as an entry requirement for the profession.** Even when placed in high-risk environments with workplace cultures that are unsafe for learning, students continue to be expected to remain for the 500 hours, coping with poor quality, detrimental placements as there simply are no reasonable alternatives available. Furthermore, students who do speak up, despite raising legitimate concerns and complaints about their placement, aren't always offered reasonable acknowledgement by certain university staff members and are often given no choice but to remain and endure in very harmful environments for the three-month duration. This is highly harmful and unethical.

In conversations with various senior social workers in the profession and after exploring online forums for social workers, it appears this issue is not restricted to this current generation of social workers, or even to Australia alone. As mentioned, **our key concern is that a high level of dysfunction while on placement has become normalised within the profession and within the university, and students are suffering unnecessarily at the hands of those from the social work profession itself. Students are being placed in workplace cultures that are unsafe, dysfunctional, and inappropriate as learning environments. We are concerned that universities are not fulfilling their duty of care to the students.** We are concerned that Field Work Education teams and university staff may have become desensitised to the troubling stories and recurring student complaints that likely come up every year. The troubling and disturbing stories shared between students, that may never be told to the universities, also contribute to a normalisation and acceptance of these dysfunctional experiences to the detriment of the entire profession and to the whole higher education sector. We have also witnessed that even when students do raise concerns, it may be framed that the problem and solution lie with the student who just needs to develop more skills, they tend to be coached through the issues, told to be more resilient, focus on self-care, and are still expected to remain in the harmful placement environment for its duration. **We are unwilling to accept that a traumatic placement experience in a dysfunctional and toxic workplace culture would just be a "normal"**



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risk or rite of passage for entering the social work profession, or any other profession with work-integrated learning requirements.

While the July 2023 Interim Report of the Universities Accord has discussed issues including the institutions' duty of care, student mental health and wellbeing, and addressing harm for students, and empowering the student voice, these issues have only been discussed in relation to the university campus experience.

We urge that these issues are also considered in relation to the work-integrated learning context, for social work and other health, medical, and education disciplines that include placement in their pedagogy. We urge that the Review will continue to give consideration to the following areas:

- a. examining issues with placements beyond their unpaid nature and promoting the student voice in the continued enhancement of work-integrated learning across disciplines and institutions;
- b. examining whether current work-integrated learning practices are placing students in dysfunctional and unsafe workplace cultures that are unsuitable for their learning and negatively impact student mental health and wellbeing;
- c. ensuring that institutions are meeting their obligations to fulfill their duty of care to students undertaking work-integrated learning in external organisations;
- d. resourcing and supporting institutions in the provision of safe and supportive work-integrated learning, recognising that accrediting bodies who specify the professions' entry requirements may create barriers to the necessary changes in the work-integrated learning model;
- d. ensuring that a national student charter takes into account the rights of students on work-integrated learning and the risks to their safety when placed in unsafe workplace cultures;
- e. ensuring that institutions create new structures for students to raise their concerns and advocate for their interests in relation to their work-integrated learning environment.

Warm regards,

Social Work Association for Graduate Students