Connectivity: Engaging with Industry in the Creation of Student Placement Opportunities

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Abstract

Innovation in placements is challenging stereotypes in social work field education. This article presents a Co-operative Inquiry between industry and university stakeholders, located in Australia and Scotland, about their experiences of non-traditional social work placements, and whether connectivity promotes such placements. Co-operative Inquiry, a participatory research methodology, involves researching and writing with people rather than about people. Our inquiry led us to consider connectivity (differing from collaboration) to be about engagement, relationships and partnerships with agencies and colleagues that create and impact practice learning opportunities. This article posits that interprofessional connections drive collaboration and quality learning outcomes for students, staff and educators across university and industry. Interprofessional connectivity can lead to future placements, improved placement capacity and possible expanded employment opportunities for social workers.

Keywords: *Social work; Field education; Partnership; Engagement; Connectivity; Collaboration; Non-traditional placements*

Introduction

Non-traditional social work (SW) placements, that is, placements outside of typical SW contexts and placement settings and with no qualified social workers present, are increasing internationally (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019; Poulin, Silver & Kauffman, 2006; Rollins et al., 2017). What is considered non-traditional and/or innovative varies depending on the jurisdiction and context of the SW practice. Marketisation in human services globally, including in Australia and Scotland, in the context of a growing demand for social workers, has impacted the availability and nature of SW placement opportunities. The trend is driving a need for innovation in, and a broadening of, field education. This has led to a demand to deliver creative placement opportunities for SW students in new contexts (Hicks-Pass, 2013; McLaughlin, Scholar, McCaughan, & Coleman, 2015). Non-traditional placements which seek to expand the current options for placement, have the potential to generate new student-industry-university connections and engagement. This article presents a Co-operative Inquiry (hereafter Inquiry) which examined engagement across industry and academia, and its impact on placements, the use of non-traditional placements, and placement outcomes.

The Inquiry reviewed our experiences of placement opportunities and partnerships in social work in Australia and Scotland through the exploration of engagement, connections, and collaborations. Its objectives were, first to contemplate examples of collaboration within placement and second, to consider how connectivity can drive quality learning outcomes for students, staff and educators across sectors.

Literature review

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) encourages "educational preparation that is relevant to beginning social work professional practice with individuals, families, groups and/or communities in any given context" (IFSW, 2018, 2.8). This involves "fieldwork" and the formation of field education partnerships between educational institutions and agencies (IFSW, 2018, 3.12). Fieldwork (referred to in this study as placement), also known as practice education, field education, workplace learning, practicum and placement, has become the "signature pedagogy" in SW (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Placement is a central form of instruction, preparing students for the SW profession (McLaughlin et al., 2015).

Non-traditional placements

Use of, and literature about, non-traditional placements appears to be growing (for example, Hek, 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2015; Testa, 2011), due to placement shortages. Non-traditional placements can be defined as placements within a location or setting outside of typical SW contexts for that location or setting (Hughes, 2009, p. 22; McLaughlin et al., 2015). This includes where students are not surrounded by qualified professional/s, commonly engaged and named as "SWers" such as in legal settings, police, rescue services and schools (Hicks-Pass, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2015).

A growing interest in non-traditional placements

Consistent with the growth in non-traditional placements, some students prefer non-traditional placements, for example, those completing dual degrees (such as the Bachelor of Social Work/Criminology and Criminal Justice) (New South Wales University, 2020) because they are flexible, aligning with cross-professional learning goals. Others studying Masters' qualifications with previous training may have an interest in placements that integrate their work, training and professional knowledge. They may perceive such placements as potentially creating future platforms for employment in their fields of interest. McLaughlin et al. (2015), who evaluated non-traditional placements in a children's charity in Scotland, England and Wales, argued that non-traditional placements are richly valued pedagogical opportunities that assist students in shaping their future career paths.

Further to student interest, some agencies are negotiating with universities for non-traditional, innovative placements, creating interprofessional connectivity. Innovation can include "a sense of change"; and be defined as a desire "to integrate practice, research, and field practicum" in "creative ways" to "enhance student learning" (Hardcastle & Bisman, 2003, pp. 34, 37, 39). Whilst connectivity can be defined as being "connected with each other's work so that together we can develop ways in which our practice becomes more transferable across context" (Gray & Fook, 2004).

Literature contains examples of non-traditional placements promoting connectivity and/or innovation; two are presented here. First, in the United States of America, the Congregational Social Work Education Initiative composed of SWers, nurses, clergy and other professionals, addresses local gaps in welfare services for aging populations (Poole et al., 2013). This collaboration involved placing SW and nursing students together in religiously affiliated organisations where they supported the needs of people in their local community (Poole et al., 2013). Second, Monash University, Australia, grouped law, finance and SW students in a multidisciplinary clinic (Hyams, Brown, & Foster, 2013). This approach allowed all students to draw on each other's skills to: working with problems as a multidisciplinary team; developing problem-solving skills; learning about social justice; and assisting people with legal-socio-financial problems (Hyams et al., 2013).

Student learning central to placements in literature

A critical review of the literature revealed two dominant views about non-traditional placements. One view is that non-traditional placements in multidisciplinary environments provide valuable learning opportunities (McLaughlin et al., 2015). In contrast, concerns were raised about students not learning SW skills, and being assessed by non-SWers (Jasper, Munro, Black, & McLaughlin, 2013, Social Work Taskforce, 2009; Zuchowski, 2013). This leads to a critical question: can such placements be perceived as compromising traditional SW identity? Scholar, McLaughlin, McCaughan, and Coleman (2014, p. 1012) warned, "If we as a profession fail to articulate, promote and lobby for our own conception of SW's role and identity, we should not be surprised that others are willing to do this for us, prescribing and limiting the role of SW to what is required by statute and within statutory settings."

Thus, while non-traditional placements—similar to traditional placements—offer opportunities for students to learn, the field of SW needs to promote the unique contributions of SWers and ensure that non-traditional placements meet the educational needs of students.

Innovative placements were considered by Cleak, Hawkins, and Hess (2000) from an academic perspective. Similarly, Scholar et al. (2014) reviewed the features that support the successful development and implementation of non-traditional placements in the United Kingdom from a student perspective. The research concluded that two conditions were necessary to meet SW courses' requirements and foster student confidence in their professional identity in non-traditional placements. Firstly, educational institutions and agencies needed to ensure clarity of the SW role during orientation. Secondly, learning opportunities should adhere to professional standards such as supervision and promote the development of professional social work identity (Scholar et al., 2014; Jasper et al., 2013).

Supervision is viewed as essential in assisting students in developing their SW identity throughout traditional and non-traditional placements (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019–APA7; Hek, 2012; Hyams et al., 2013). More specifically, and we argue necessary for non-traditional placements, Zuchowski (2013) advocated for quality supervision for students by supervisors who understand the context of the agency where the student is placed. Such supervision provides a developmental approach to learning, allowing students to integrate theoretical knowledge into their practice and develop professional competencies (Agllias et al., 2010). This poses a challenge in non-traditional placement contexts, particularly in service settings or locations where there is a lack of SWers with relevant contextual understanding.

While identifying challenges, the literature suggests pedagogical and andragogical benefits of non-traditional placements. New contexts and partnerships provide students with enriched learning experiences, creating opportunities for creativity, individually tailored adult-focused learning, and innovation—while also expanding future employment prospects (Hyams et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2015). The increasing interest in non-traditional placements suggests: a need to critique the role and impact that "innovative placements having a place within the practice learning landscape"; and, to question if connectivity associated with non-traditional placements creates opportunities and supports "the development of SWers of tomorrow" by linking students with new fields of practice (Scholar, McCaughan, McLaughlin, & Coleman, 2012, p. 948).

Methodology

This article focuses on Australian and Scottish contexts. Within Australia, students complete 1,000 hours of placement in at least two units of study across different settings (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2012a, 3.4; 2012b, 1.3). Within Scotland, students spend at least 200 days in placement (with a minimum of 160 days spent in supervised and assessed direct practice) in contrasting service delivery settings and with at least two different service user groups (Scottish Executive, 2003).

The authors came together to discuss non-traditional SW field education through an Inquiry. This methodology was chosen because of its prior demonstrated suitability in researching field education (for example, Short, Dempsey, Ackland, Rush, Heller, & Dwyer, 2018) and it would ensure a careful examination and critique of the issues associated with non-traditional placements. An Inquiry is a collaborative and participatory methodology which brings together like-minded people to explore a field of mutual interest (Heron & Reason, 2008). Heron and Reason (2008) argue that an Inquiry is research with people, rather than about people. This methodology is unique with everyone involved being an author, inquirer, subject and participant (Short & Healy, 2017). The Inquiry occurs through ongoing exchanges across multiple forums and reflective processes.

The participants

This Inquiry was initiated by the Combined University Field Education Group (CUFEG) in New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory, Australia in partnership with industry following joint research methodology training conducted by CUFEG and the New South Wales branch of the AASW (Short, 2018). Following indications of interest in an Inquiry into field education, information was emailed by CUFEG to other university and industry partners. The Inquiry started with four co-participants who then invited others working on non-traditional placement projects to join. Each interested invitee then self-selected to join the Inquiry resulting in participants from Australia and Scotland.

All Inquiry participants had experience with field education and an interest in expanding the pedagogy, 10 worked in Australia (three in rural settings), and one in Scotland. All were over 25 years, one was male and 10 were females, seven were academics (all with industry experience), one was a student and three were practitioners. Each participant brought their knowledge and expertise about non-traditional partnerships and placements to this Inquiry.

The method

According to Heron and Reason (2008; Reason and Heron [sic], 2016), Co-operative Inquiry involves, in collaboration, repeatedly circling through four phases, as summarised in Figure 1.
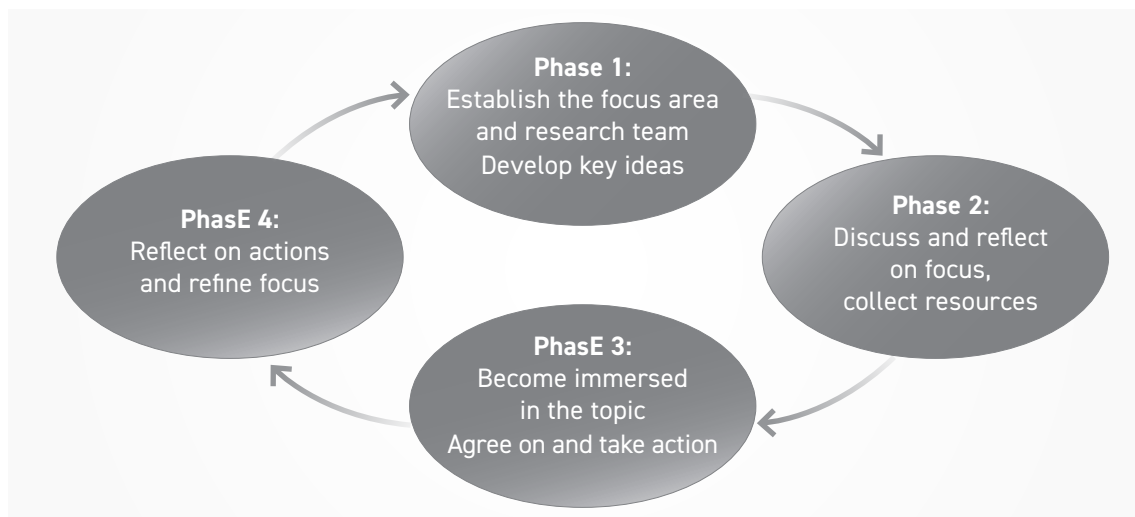

Figure 1. Inquiry phases (Heron & Reason, 2008; Short & Healy, 2017).

As depicted in Figure 1, in phase one, as co-researchers we jointly engaged to establish the Inquiry research team and the topic, with a discussion of related interests and concerns informing the research questions (Reason & Heron, 2016). Underpinned by a narrative approach, we communicated weekly by teleconference, video-conference, a communal Google doc or email, consenting to the recording of these conversations in minutes or audio recordings. These were considered public information (not confidential) and stored on a Padlet website. This information became our data, alongside information publicly available through the internet, newsletters and literature. Since all members of the research were also authors of this low-risk project, ethics approval was deemed not required.

In phase two, we agreed upon the research questions, being: "What are the authors' experiences of innovative and creative non-traditional social work partnerships and placements? Do these placements promote connectivity and vice versa? If yes, does connectivity help create innovative opportunities, including future employment for students?"

In this phase we also agreed to: be co-participants, to collaborate and to communicate weekly about our everyday work and placement experiences (Reason & Heron, 2016); share personal experiences about non-traditional placements; and co-operate as a group in generating knowledge about the field. The experiences were shared in the form of narratives about non-traditional student placements. We began defining the key terms and collecting relevant information. That is, we shared our stories about past placements and sourced other documents and resources about placement practices. To include a student perspective, Bec Burrows from Australian Catholic was invited to join the Inquiry as an equal co-inquirer, co-subject, co-researcher and co-author—ensuring that there would be no conflict of interest or power dilemmas. Bec was invited because of her known interest in SW projects.

Phase three involved immersion in the field (Reason & Heron, 2016). We, as co-subjects, continued collecting and sharing about past placements, which included: interprofessional placements in government-funded schools in Australia and Scotland; rural Health government and non-government-funded services in New South Wales, Australia; and the non-government-funded services in Scotland. This sharing allowed us to understand and analyse non-traditional placements afresh—that is the analysis occurred through the perceptions of the co-inquirers (Reason & Heron, 2016). We then began narrowing the Inquiry field. Sara Hitchin summarised her thoughts about school placements in Scotland. We then discussed the Australian SW in Schools (SWiS) Program. SWiS addresses the social determinants of health in identified schools in areas of high disadvantage, helping pupils reach higher educational outcomes, and where students connect with children, families, teachers and local communities. We collectively decided to focus on SWiS as an illustrative case study because information about this placement was available in the public domain (Maple, Pearce, Gartshore, MacFarlane, & Wayland, 2018; University of New England, n.d.). Scott Gartshore, SWiS Project Officer and Davina Jones, research assistant, were invited to join the Inquiry and assist with understanding the role of SWiS.

This decision to analyse and critique SWiS was consistent with the literature and assisted with addressing the research questions. School social work (SSW) has been viewed as a professional practice field for many years in some jurisdictions, but this is inconsistent globally. For example, while recognised as a practice field by the AASW (2008), SSW has been limited and inconsistent in Australia with few SWers in schools (Lee, 2012). Some education programs and non-government-funded schools may employ social workers; however, this is not consistent throughout Australia or Scotland. Therefore, in the Australian context, school placements are often viewed in the extant literature as non-traditional SW (Testa, 2011, pp. 14, 24). Whilst not necessarily explicit within the literature, school placements are also uncommon within Scotland. Sara describes her experience of school placements in Scotland:

> School placements … are viewed as innovative here. In some local authority areas, there was a period a few years ago when some schools had "integration teams". … In the local authorities that I am aware of, these teams did not last.

In school placements in Australia and Scotland, students regularly have a teacher or student support staff as a task supervisor with SW supervision offered externally by the university. In our experience, often, these placements are newly established in the particular school context.

For the purposes of methodological rigour, throughout phase three, the group consistently reviewed the emerging data through individual and group processes from a student-industry-academic perspective. This included: reviewing meeting minutes, comparing individual contributions with the group discussions, and ensuring multiple Inquirers examined the materials submitted. These review processes ensure data accuracy.

Additionally, as Inquiry data analysis is an iterative process, each participant reviewed the data progressively after each communication to draw out themes which informed the ongoing Inquiry focus and answered the research questions. This approach guaranteed that the views of all participants were captured, acknowledged and reflected. Each person—that is the student, industry partners and academics—as per the methodology, had equal power in the process.

To further ensure rigour and enhance the available data we interviewed Scott (supervisor) about the SWiS Program, using an outsider witness narrative approach. Michael White (1995) developed this approach drawing on Andersen's (1987) ideas on reflecting teams. Outsider witnessing involves interviewing a person for their story with an audience drawn from their community (Carey & Russell, 2003). For this inquiry, the interview was undertaken virtually. Consistent with the underpinning narrative frame and the participatory approach of the Inquiry, we chose this approach because it facilitated a "rich" telling of a personal story to the Inquiry group, accommodated people's different locations, and allowed group reflection on this. This allowed a reflective yet focussed examination of the stages involved in implementing programs such as SWiS.

In phase four, we reassembled as co-researchers. We reconsidered the research questions, ensuring we had answered them (Reason & Heron, 2016) and captured the Australian and Scottish contexts and the student's voice. We reflected on our conversations and materials, collectively identifying the themes outlined below and co-wrote this paper. Each of the 11 co-participants volunteered to draft, analyse, modify and/or review parts of the article with all proofreading and editing. (Authorship was collectively agreed upon, based on writing contribution.) The group cycled through the whole Inquiry four times—ensuring rigour—until a rounded Inquiry was created (Short, Broughton, Short, Ochala, & Anscombe, 2017).

Themes (findings)

In contrast to the literature, four distinct, but interconnected, themes emerged: connectivity; collaboration; a quality placement experience; and opportunities such as employment in new settings. Sharing our thoughts about these themes gifted us opportunities to critically self-reflect on our personal and professional opinions about pedagogy, andragogy and non-traditional placements.

Connectivity

Our research questions prompted us to define connectivity. We discovered that connectivity differed from collaboration, as demonstrated in the illustrative quotes below:

> Dalia (academic): With connectivity, there is a relationship that is multidimensional... [whilst for me] collaboration is working from a holistic, inclusive approach ...Not necessarily in a social work setting ...

> Sheridan (industry): Innovation [for me] leads to [connections], cooperation and collaboration and quality outcomes for students.

As these conversation pieces above illustrate, we had many rich ideas to explore, including how connectivity relates to non-traditional placements in Australia and Scotland. Gray and Fook (2004, p. 838) discuss connectivity as transferring practice across different contexts, narrowing to two contexts—one being the relationships/partnerships forged between professionals and the other relating specifically to relationships/partnerships between universities and agencies providing non-traditional placements. Collectively the Inquiry realised that connectivity, as expressed in these contexts, was an amorphous concept. Rather than talking quickly over the phone, meeting once, or developing a one-size-fits-all approach to placements, connectivity involved multiple interceptions of critical connections and engagements, a collective forming and the willingness to trial a placement in a new context—as indicated below.

> Scott (academic): Connectivity is developed through "time spent together" as colleagues in clarifying an idea ... This allows a mutual understanding to develop about the "fit" of an innovation ... [and] ... the connectivity required to make the placement a success.

In addressing our research questions, we noted that connectivity was promoted through trust between individuals and agencies, which emerges over time. One critical example of connectivity was when one key stakeholder of a school site transferred to a different school. The stakeholder had developed a trusting relationship with the university and subsequently maintained their connection, seeking to commence placements in their new site. In contrast, in their original school, staff changes had meant that some of the established connections had diminished and trust needed to be reformed. These two experiences highlight the importance of trust over time, and that collaboration in a partnership is different from connectivity. Connectivity, enhanced through trust, we perceived as being more profound than a networked acquaintance, in both the Australian and Scottish contexts.

Professional trust is a critical feature of connectivity within a student-industry-university triad, and in setting up non-traditional placements. The student perspective in our Inquiry highlighted the importance of trust in the learning context. Based on our experiences, we recognised that placements have the potential to benefit, create innovative opportunities and/or bring tension to any workplace. We were excited about the students, universities and industries deciding to trust each other and risk a non-traditional placement. Academic Erica Russ, off-site supervisor and research assistant Davinia, student Bec and industry partner Sheridan shared why trust is important when developing connections for non-traditional placements.

> Erica (academic): Providing appropriate, supportive [connections] and developmental opportunities for students in new contexts ... involves risks; therefore, trust is critical.

> Davinia (industry and academic): Supervisors who do not have a background in social work often wonder what students can offer their agency, and university staff can be nervous that appropriate projects or tasks are available.

> Bec (student): Without professional trust in uncharted contexts, learning opportunities [and connections] for students are hindered.

> Sheridan (industry): Students invest a lot in their placements and entrust the quality and appropriateness of these placements to their university, and in turn the agencies ... this makes trust imperative ...

Through these illustrative conversation pieces, it became increasingly clear that defining connectivity was vital to ensuring our continuity of thought about non-traditional placements. Sara, based in Scotland, brought clarity to the term.

> Sara (academic): Connectivity is about relationships and partnerships with agencies and colleagues in settings where a practice learning opportunity might be created and where trust is crucial.

This defining of connectivity from the student-industry-university Inquiry triad in both Australian and Scotland allowed us to observe the spectrum of advantages and placement opportunities connectivity created for students. Connectivity, in the Australian and Scottish contexts, appeared to us to create the potential for new discussions, new andragogy and professional trust. It provides students with new opportunities to connect with practitioners across disciplines from various workplaces, as demonstrated in the example below about rural health placements:

> Robyn (industry): Students placed in [rural health] Lismore, Australia, connected with many professionals working to build local community capacity through a monthly networking event called "the Social Connections" breakfasts.

The surprising impact of connectivity for us was that those non-traditional placements such as described in the quote above can bring new questions and insights; social change; critical and fresh thinking; enthusiasm; perceptions and learning opportunities; epistemologies and ontologies; employment opportunities; and radical ideas. Making new and innovative connections can drive common understandings across the different levels within organisations; promote stronger connections which nurture common goals; give a sense of achievement about successful placements; and forge deep connections and partnerships between the university and industry. The SWiS program is an example of this. This program structures social work students' placements within the schools and grows their professional skills, knowledge and identity. Supervision is conducted externally by supervisors experienced in the school context. Scott describes his experience of SWiS:

> SWiS has placed 52 students in over 20 public schools in rural NSW over five years. Feedback about the role of students in schools has been positive, and the program is continuing on a strong basis with growing interest from additional schools. The SWiS five-year project report states: 30% (15 of 52) of students have been employed by schools which had not previously employed social workers. (Gartshore, 2019, p. 13)

The SWiS example suggests connectivity has the potential to support and transition SWers of tomorrow into new contexts and may have long-term benefits for organisations and students as well as enhancing placement opportunities. Scott further states:

> The placements have resulted in benefits for individual children and the school's community, and the impacts can be immediate, especially in communities with high needs and limited or no access to social services.

Collaborations

Dalia (academic): Collaboration is working with everyone, ... different disciplines, projects.

Considering Dalia's idea, we defined collaboration as working with others using a holistic, inclusive approach. It involved participating in common practice fields with those whom

we are collaborating. For us, in both Australia and Scotland, collaboration differed from connectivity, which tended to emphasise relationships over participation.

The Inquiry discussed collaboration, focusing on interprofessional teams, which may or may not include a SWer. All the placements discussed identified the importance of developing a student's SW identity and an off-site/external SW supervisor. For example, students were placed with agency supervisors and/or colleagues who were lawyers, nurses, nutritionists, occupational therapists, welfare workers and speech pathologists—as illustrated below.

> Robyn (industry): A school ... in rural Australia provides placements for social work, occupational therapy and speech pathology students.

> Scott (academic): ... the social work students have helped form a collaborative partnership between an aged care facility and the school—which promotes intergenerational awareness. ... The Aboriginal Community garden is a third example ...

These examples demonstrate the impact of non-traditional placements where students engaged in cross-discipline collaboration and partnership, including the mutual sharing of knowledge and skills between students, community and the school. Such examples made us examine the benefits of collaboration and partnerships, which were summarised into three areas.

First, the reciprocal relationship that innovative placements can facilitate. Placements based on collaboration benefited the agency and others in tangible, measurable and observable ways whilst providing valuable learning opportunities for the students to meet their learning goals (Gartshore, Maple, & White, 2018).

Secondly, innovation and collaboration can occur in unexpected ways through the placing of students in agencies in non-traditional fields of practice, as highlighted below.

> Erica (academic): These placements ... influence the way services provide for clients ... It goes back to the influence of social work.

In such situations, students often benefited the agency, its clients and community by their engagement and actions, through managing projects that may otherwise not occur—due to enhanced capacity regarding the task and participation in collaborative processes. While students in these placements may work alongside students from other disciplines, the placement period places SW in a position to build relationships and enhance client outcomes in a collaborative context.

Thirdly, positioning students in innovative collaborations has the potential to create new fields of practice. This may benefit and ensure the sustainability of the SW profession by strengthening its activities, identity and values within the human services sector. Non-traditional placements can trail-blaze opportunities for the profession. As SW develops

and evolves in alternative practice contexts, and as a body of SWers is established who can provide student supervision, placements can shift from non-traditional to standard placement arrangements.

A quality placement experience

Consistent with Zuchowski (2013), this Inquiry recognised the importance of placement in SW curricula and the benefit for students in their transition to professional practice (IFSW, 2018, 3.2, 3.8). We proposed that, as SW adapts to new environments, non-traditional placements should fit IFSW qualification requirements and local SW bodies' professional standards. Therefore, non-traditional placements "should be sufficient in duration and complexity of tasks and learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for professional practice" (IFSW, 2018, 3:7). Developing quality and pedagogically appropriate, non-traditional placements is complex. They require SW faculties to: be interconnected with the local community; value engagement and partnerships; commit time and resources; have an awareness of trends in welfare and social systems; and support agencies to provide professionally relevant placements.

As part of the human services sector, contemporary SW is responding to trends in funding arrangements; the dilution of SW roles in some settings, globalisation; the ongoing need for social justice; and the fluctuations in private, public and quasi-markets (Short, Trembath, Duncombe, Whitaker, & Wiman, 2018). In response to these trends, it seems that SW is continuously redefining and developing new placement opportunities. These trends led to questions, for example:

> Erica (academic): How do we look at creative opportunities for placements? The sector is changing rapidly.

And, also how are non-traditional placements part of Scottish curriculum? What is the impact of these placements?

Sara (academic) summarised her experiences of non-traditional placements:

> ... [in Scotland], creating innovative practice learning opportunities often works best when a new, untested area of practice is incorporated into an established placement ... This can feel less risky than putting a student into an entirely new setting and can enhance the student experience.

Innovations such as non-traditional placements can create a legacy within an agency, with subsequent students continuing the work initiated by their predecessors. The examples of placements in Scotland and Australia are a testimony to connectivity and the variety and breadth of non-traditional partnerships and placements that exist globally. Furthermore, Sara and Scott's thoughts about innovative placements point towards opportunities to uphold, expand and/or strengthen core elements of SW in new contexts, including, promoting and

advocating for social justice and human rights, and intervention where people interact with their environments (AASW, 2010; IFSW, 2014). Therefore, non-traditional placements can facilitate the development of SW practice skills and professional identity.

Opportunities such as employment in new settings

In addressing our third research question, we considered that connectivity can create expanded opportunities for employment. Employment of social workers in new settings, including schools was evident, for example:

> Scott (academic): SWiS [led to] ... new employment opportunities for social workers. ... Eight students have had ... employment contracts as a result of their placements...

This, though, is not a guaranteed outcome for students, as illustrated in the next passage. Where agencies have tight budgets, students' work may be seen as additional to an agency's core business and creating new positions may not be a priority for the service offering the placement. However, it benefits students and universities when a SW student obtains employment through their placement.

> Sara (academic): I am interested in the idea of trying to promote/develop/influence employment opportunities for social workers in non-traditional settings ... In my experience of social work in Scotland, I am not aware of organisations creating social work positions following their experiences of placements ... In general, third sector organisations have more limited funding ... to employ social workers, other than in management positions, as their salaries are higher ... Students do, however, often take up volunteering or temporary employment with agencies post placement.

We also identified other advantages for the student-industry-university triad; first, advantages in the field of human resources. There can be further placements for students, professional development opportunities for agency staff, experience in supervision for staff aspiring to promotion, and agency supervisors developing their management skills.

Second, we identified advantages in raising the SW profile. Well-run, innovative non-traditional placements can result in a better understanding and appreciation of the diverse roles of SWers in new fields of practice, such as the Australian intergenerational and Aboriginal garden projects. These initiatives can open doors for future placements and employment opportunities through improved understanding of the place, role and value of SW in new settings. A further example is a very successful placement in an advocacy service for people with a learning disability in Scotland, described by Sara:

> This placement can be challenging for students as they are developing their social work identity in a setting where both staff and service-users may have negative attitudes towards social workers. Students, through modelling good social work practice, have been successfully challenging the negative stereotypes.

Discussion

From a student-industry-academic perspective, our critical analysis of non-traditional placements through an Inquiry, the drawing upon scholarly thinking such as McLaughlin et al.'s (2015) work on learning opportunities, and our practice wisdom and narratives of experience in Australia and Scotland lead to the themes: connectivity, collaboration, quality learning and opportunities such as employment in new settings. First, connectivity between university field education personnel, non-traditional SW workplaces and students, facilitated the outcome of new student placements. Reflection, discussion, and the building of trust between stakeholders can lead to an explosion of ideas generating quality learning experiences. Mutual trust, combined with an ability to risk accepting a student, supported by an external SW field supervisor known to the service, can produce positive outcomes. It can result in successful placements and increased awareness of the value of the SW role.

Second, collaborations established by students in non-traditional settings in Australia and Scotland with other staff, agencies and clients can result in surprising outcomes. Consistent with Poole et al.'s (2013) work, we noted that projects can be devised and created that would not have existed within an agency without the presence of students. In these situations, the exposure of the SW role, and vice versa, can lead to new understandings, facilitate creative thinking, innovative projects, and contribute to more holistic outcomes for service users.

Third, non-traditional placements ensuring quality learning for students have partly arisen in response to economic constraints. Market forces, such as the privatisation of services and economic rationalism have led to the trend of employing fewer SWers and the provision of fewer placements in some contexts. In addressing our research questions, our Inquiry recognised that non-traditional placements have the capacity to offer deeper learning experiences within this environment, such as generating closer interaction with clients at a "grassroots level". Reflections from the Inquiry noted that this opened students' eyes to important socio-economic and social justice issues. Focussed task supervision from the workplace and external professional supervision (complementing the workplace learning) provided essential and foundational learning for students. This evidences that, with appropriate support and supervision, students can experience SW practice-based learning enabling role clarity and the development of a strong professional identity in non-traditional settings. As highlighted in the literature, supervision is essential (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019). Further, the clarity of the role of SW in the workplace context and the structure of the placement can provide an effective learning opportunity.

Finally, opportunities can emerge with particular reference to employment and human resources when placing students in non-traditional practice settings. Agencies, after hosting a student, can make transformative decisions which impact their workforce, with some students gaining employment within the agency. Additionally, many agencies continued to host SW students—some increasing student intakes. Some agencies saw benefits in the social work role and created new employment opportunities for SWers in their workforce.

Limitations

Co-operative Inquiry generates limitations. First, a small number of researchers who were concurrently research participants engaged in critical discussion and reflection on non-traditional placements. Therefore, findings from this research cannot be generalised, but the process can be replicated (Short, Dempsey, Ackland, Rush, Heller, & Dwyer, 2018) and the themes identified may have broader relevance.

Second, the co-researchers' availability was restricted and varied. All researchers were not present for all conversations. However, this generated a co-learning and co-researching environment that was flexible and adaptable.

Third, face-to-face meetings were not viable given researchers worked across time zones and geographical distance. Group contact was through phone calls, video-conferencing and written communication. For this Inquiry, weekly telephone or videoconference meetings, making notes in a communal Google doc and emails were the standard methods of communication.

Fourth, the Inquiry drew on limited, exemplar, non-traditional placements in Australia and Scotland, limiting the examples and contexts considered. For instance, we did not consider non-traditional placements in countries where social work was not regulated similar to Australia and Scotland.

Suggestions for future action

Whilst recognising the limitations, the four themes that emerged have relevance for the field. Based on these themes, the following points may be beneficial to developing future placement opportunities in non-traditional contexts. Consideration of these points would also support quality practice-based learning and the development of clarity of the SW role and identity. With this in mind, we suggest the following:

- A greater focus on interprofessional connectivity across sectors is pursued in an attempt to develop innovation in non-traditional, collaborative placements.

- Those responsible for field education are supported with time and resources to develop quality innovative placements in partnership with agencies and that this is reflected in curriculum content.

- Innovative non-traditional placements are supported by educators and experienced professionals with contextual knowledge of and connections with host agencies and/or related practice areas.

- The embedding of quality supervision for students in non-traditional placements through a collaboration between an experienced agency supervisor and professional SW supervisor.

- An in-depth study of innovative non-traditional placements in international contexts to examine how students develop their SW identity, the application of SW roles and implications across interprofessional settings.

Conclusion

This Inquiry drew on varying contexts and experiences of the co-participants, who were located in Australia and Scotland, and their understanding of connectivity in achieving a shared vision and collaborative opportunities. This Inquiry addressed the research questions: "What are the authors' experiences of innovative and creative non-traditional SW partnerships and placements? Do these placements promote connectivity and vice versa? If yes, does connectivity help create innovative opportunities, including future employment for students?" Our examination of examples of non-traditional social work partnerships in Australia and Scotland confirmed that non-traditional placements can positively impact the sustainability of field education programs. We conclude that connectivity for non-traditional placements is vital, acting as a precursor to strengthening relationships that drive innovation, collaboration and quality learning outcomes for students, professionals, and educators across university and industry. Our experience is that non-traditional placements promote connectivity. Similar to traditional placements, non-traditional placements can also offer rich pedagogical and andragogical experiences. The benefit of non-traditional social work placements and connectivity is that these placements may create new connections, engagements, partnerships and positive new placement opportunities for students while raising the SW profile and contribution in the human services sector. They can inspire radical and creative critical thinking; new engagements with clients; social and systemic change; enthusiasm; learning opportunities for all involved; emerging perceptions, epistemologies and ontologies; and employment opportunities.

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