

# Leading Through Collaboration: The National Field Education Network

**Wendy Rollins, Ronnie Egan, Ines Zuchowski, Mary Duncan, Phyllis Chee, Patricia Muncey, Nicole Hill and Maree Higgins**

Wendy Rollins, National Professional Practice Coordinator, Australian Catholic University  
Ronnie Egan, PhD, RMIT  
Ines Zuchowski, PhD, James Cook University  
Mary Duncan, Manager Field Education, Flinders University  
Phyllis Chee, PhD, Griffith University  
Patricia Muncey, Field Education, University of South Australia  
Nicole, PhD, The University of Melbourne  
Maree Higgins, Manager Work Integrated Learning, University of New South Wales

---

## **Address for Correspondence:**

wendy.rollins@acu.edu.au

---

## **ABSTRACT**

Social work field education is under pressure across the globe, including in Australia. Current application of neoliberal principles to education and human services policy and service delivery impact on social work practice, social work education and the availability and delivery of practice placements. Social work educators are concerned about delivering quality social work education so that students can engage in supervised service delivery in preparation for professional social work practice. Field education staff in universities across the country experience significant challenges in ensuring and organising increasing numbers of quality student placements.

The formation of a national leadership group was triggered by a collective realisation that all university field education programs were facing similar challenges. The purpose of a national group was to better respond to the identified challenges and identify directions for research. Collaboration has been effectively used across university-based field education programs as a leadership approach, in the development of the Australian National Field Educators Network (NFEN). This paper reports on the formation of the NFEN and the resulting identification of six themes affecting provision of social work field education as an example of collaborative leadership. The paper concludes with an appraisal of the opportunities and challenges of taking a collaborative approach in developing a national response and working as a unified national organisation.

**Keywords:** *Leadership; Collaboration; Placement; Field; Quality; Social work education; Social work*

## INTRODUCTION

In Australia, social work field education is a significant component of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (Qualifying) (MSW (PQ)) curricula located across 30 university social work schools. Guided by the social work accreditation body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), and via the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS), it is the responsibility of university programs to ensure that every enrolled student is allocated at least two placements where practice learning occurs (AASW, 2012). Each social work placement requires the collaboration of the placement agency, the university, social work placement supervisors and liaison visitors to ensure the student experience meets education standards and that student learning is appropriately supported and assessed (AASW, 2012).

The field provides the learning context and the social work supervisors for individual placements. Social workers external to the university significantly contribute to the learning and assessment of student placement learning. Practising social workers have seen placement supervision as a responsibility and an important commitment to sustain the profession, a view promoted and reinforced by the AASW. It is the collaboration between university-based field education programs, the social workers who undertake supervision and liaison roles and the staff employed by the placement agencies that has endured, making social work placements possible in the prevailing context. Indeed, collaboration is a hallmark of social work placement learning in Australia, and social work field education is, in effect, a role model for collaborative practice.

This paper discusses the collaboration manifest in social work field education programs that precipitated the identification of common pressures. A common desire to respond to these pressures led to the formation of the NFEN. An overview of the Network's achievements to date is provided. The paper begins with a discussion about the current contexts of field education.

## CURRENT CONTEXT FOR UNIVERSITY-BASED FIELD EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Over the last 20 years, as neoliberal policies and practices have increasingly dominated tertiary education and human service organisations, social work field education programs have experienced increasing pressure in their aim to find at least two good quality placements per program for each student (Hanlen, 2011; Noble & Sullivan, 2009; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). The effects of neoliberalism on social work field education and social work generally have been thoroughly documented (Chenoweth, 2012; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Healy, 2014; Noble & Sullivan, 2009; Zuchowski, 2011, 2014). Neoliberalism is defined here as:

*... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional*

*framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.* (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Field education is a core component of tertiary social work education. While social work field education programs are established parts of academic social work programs, field education support has often not been regarded as an academic pursuit and so has not enjoyed the same status as research and teaching. This situation has not helped field education navigate the additional challenges resulting from neoliberal approaches to management of university education. Due to the advent of neoliberalism, and the subsequent marketisation and corporatisation of universities, social work field education has been confronted with securing dramatically increased numbers of placements in health and human services sectors that have been less able to offer placements. A corollary of this trend is the reduction of discipline-specific positions that has resulted in a relative decline of agency-based social workers and increasing reliance on externally available social workers to provide student supervision (Chee, 2016). In a managerial environment where schools of social work are competing for the same placements, the NFEN set out to address the concerning prevailing context and to develop a collective collaborative response.

## **COLLABORATION**

Collaboration is an important strategy in leadership approaches that seek to counteract the spirit and outcomes of neoliberalism and promote sustainable change (Weeks, 2003). Weeks argues that collaborative activity and collective processes that increase capacity for responsiveness underpin collaborative leadership. Such leadership includes consultative and collaborative decision-making and information sharing. It facilitates organisational and policy development and can enable the kind of advocacy effort needed to change ineffective structures. Apart from the historical collaborative foundation that underpins the planning of each and every placement in social work field education in Australia, there has been a strong tradition of state-based collaborative networks and associations between university field education programs in Victoria (Cleak, Hawkins, Laughton, & Williams, 2014), New South Wales and Queensland, and collaboration also exists between the two social work programs universities in South Australia (Drake, Pillay, & Diamandi, 2016).

It can be argued that current rates of change in the broader public policy environment both demand and undermine interdependent and partnership approaches. Mitchell (n.d.) contends that it is impossible for organisations to undertake change on their own. This is particularly true of university social work programs which are interdependent with industry to endorse graduates and facilitate their transition into the workforce. In his examination of private–public partnerships, Mitchell identifies the elements required for a successful private–public partnership in the human services sector. These include a strong legal and regulatory framework, transparent and accountable processes, suitable policies, commitment to the public good, a shared understanding, resources and being responsive to consumers and the broader community (n.d., p. 3). The principles for private–public partnership (Carnwell & Carson, 2009) are identified as:

- working towards common purpose;
- ensuring a transparent and non-hierarchical organisational structure;
- applying cooperation as an organisational strategy; and
- valuing of knowledge and expertise over position and role.

While universities and agencies are not specifically represented by the public–private characterisation, they do work in partnership, and such principles reflect the type of national approach that university field education staff identified as necessary.

Many partnerships and collaborative ventures exist within a pressured and competitive environment. Despite the intense competitive pressures that exist in field education, the NFEN has adopted collaboration as a guiding principle, and to a large extent, has been able to adhere to this principle in practice.

### **FORMATION OF THE NATIONAL FIELD EDUCATION NETWORK**

The widespread concern shared amongst university-based field education programs about the pressures in field education throughout 2013 and 2014 led to the decision to hold a forum for field education programs to articulate the identified issues and to explore the potential of forming a national field education group. In 2015 a workshop of Australian-university-based social work field education programs occurred. A general question posed to workshop participants at this inaugural meeting ascertained interest in the idea of forming a national leadership group. This question met with a unanimous and positive response and resulted in the National Field Education Network (NFEN).

The NFEN currently represents 186 members across 31 university field education programs, placement agencies, institutes and social work field educators and liaison visitors. The inaugural NFEN workshop reached agreement about the stated purpose of the NFEN – to facilitate national collaboration in research and to better respond to current pressure points and themes related to the delivery of quality social work field placements. Terms of reference for the NFEN were also developed at this time. The specific aims of the NFEN include being:

- a forum for identifying and responding to social work field education programs issues and common NFEN goals;
- a community of learning for social work field education programs; and
- a space where information pertaining to social work field education is collated and accessible.

NFEN comprises staff members of social work programs at Australian universities and any field education staff member can join the network. The leadership group comprises at least one member from every Australian state and territory, and the group meets monthly to

progress the issues identified in the annual workshops. The work of the NFEN is guided by principles of transparency, collaboration, inclusivity and leadership. These principles are integral to the NFEN developing credibility and integrity. Since the September 2015 meeting, the NFEN has made considerable progress in establishing a governance structure. A premise of the NFEN is that collaboration and partnership across university social work programs is required at a national level to address the critical and widespread issues facing field education.

The inaugural meeting of the NFEN in September 2015 confirmed there was broad agreement about key issues and full agreement was expressed about the importance of a unified response to articulate and find solutions to these issues. Since early discussion in 2015, there has been explicit and continued acknowledgement amongst the group that collaboration within a competitive neoliberal context is inherently challenging and may even undermine NFEN's aims over time. However, this challenge is not confined to universities as many health and human service organisations also seek to collaborate about placement organisation, though they are also in a competitive context.

## **PROCESSES OF THE NATIONAL FIELD EDUCATION NETWORK**

Scholarship and research about field education has been identified as an urgent priority in social work field education, perhaps more so than other parts of the curriculum. Field educators anecdotally describe a crisis in implementing best pedagogical practices (Bogo, 2015). It was considered important, therefore, to bring together the available information to clarify a research agenda, a goal that has influenced the development and progress of the NFEN.

### **Gathering information – the scoping survey**

The initial 2015 NFEN workshop planning group decided to undertake a scoping survey to gain a more detailed picture of the issues field education programs were facing and the importance programs were attaching to these issues. An invitation was sent to all university field education staff inviting them to attend a national field education meeting and asking them to complete a short survey in preparation for the meeting. Recipients were asked to forward the survey to others in their university networks. A total of 44 responses to the survey questions were received. The information was used by the workshop planning group to develop the inaugural agenda of the 2015 Melbourne NFEN workshop. The survey revealed a widespread concern about the barriers to delivering quality social work education experiences to students, a collective desire to respond to identified pressures and the need for research. The results of the survey identified five key pressures facing field education programs. These were: finding sufficient suitable placements; ensuring suitably qualified social work supervision; responding to complex student circumstances; addressing the perception that field education has lower academic standing compared with other subjects in the curriculum; and responding to the perceived need for alternative placement models.

### *Prioritising action*

At the inaugural meeting, 46 participants from 22 schools of social work came together to discuss the findings from the survey. From this discussion, six themes relating to the

context of field education in Australia were identified, forming the basis for the prioritising of action. The workshop also provided an opportunity to discuss differences between cooperation, coordination and collaboration within a competitive environment, issues that were also identified through the survey data analysis. This was used as the starting point to develop governance within the national network and establish draft terms of reference which includes:

- building the knowledge base of social work field education through collaborative research;
- providing a forum for professional relationships and meaningful collaboration to identify and respond to common field education issues;
- advocating as a collective voice on social work field education issues; and
- scoping draft responses to ASWEAS requests.

The importance of reaching agreement about on what and how we can work together was critical and goes to the heart of trust and relationship building, key features of collaborative practice which also reflect the values of the social work profession and the discipline. These four concepts were endorsed by the meeting participants and have since become the NFEN's guiding principles.

### **The identification of themes**

Six broad themes of primary concern were identified during the inaugural meeting. Through collaborative discussions and research these themes were refined and further developed. The themes identified linked to the aforementioned pressure points that impact field education programs in every state and territory in Australia. These related to professional issues, supervision (for example, new models), student issues, the placement agency, industrial issues and administration requirements, and policy and regulation.

#### *1. Profession*

Field education is important to the profession and the profession's standing in the service field. It was suggested that the range of models in field education needed to be explored and that the banding in university funding did not reflect the cost associated with field education and its significance within the curriculum.

#### *2. Supervision*

There is a reduced availability of placements with onsite social work qualified supervisors and an increased reliance on external supervision in field education. The emergence of external supervision as a more common form of supervision in placements suggests the importance of training of supervisors and building capacity in the field and profession to have qualified supervisors available and trained. Other models of supervision were explored and the relevance of postgraduate supervision courses discussed.

### *3. Students*

Field education is affected by the changing demographic profile of the student body, and the complexity of student needs. Of particular concern are the issues identified by the NFEN that relate to supporting international students in their placement learning. For example, students may have limited awareness and understanding of the local human service context and can struggle with western conceptualisations of professional practice including communication. Other issues that need further exploration include readiness and fitness for practice, outcomes for students, students' and industry's expectations, marketisation of placement learning, student involvement in placement finding, the impact of student poverty on placement learning and managing student risk in placement.

### *4. Placement agency*

The increased student numbers, pressures on the field, sector changes and difficulties for finding placements were discussed with regard to the placement agencies. Balancing benefits in agencies having students on placement against the demands of high agency staff workloads was discussed. Alternative models of supervision and placements, such as student units and group supervision, and setting of placements outside traditional areas were also considered. Other matters that emerged in the discussion about agency placement issues included confidentiality, heeding the student voice, student-placement matching and risk-averse practices.

### *5. Industrial issues and administration requirements*

It was recognised that social work educators in field education faced several industrial issues often connected to the administrative requirements of their positions. Discussions explored the difficulties of quantifying work, costs of setting up placements in non-traditional areas, use of learning technologies, managing risk and aggression. Specific industrial issues highlighted were the differences between academic and administrative/professional roles, casualisation of field education staff, union support and the conditions of work in the sector, including supervising staff in casual roles without recognition of this work.

### *6. Policy and regulation*

Many questions were asked about field education policy and regulation including the necessity and rationale for AASW field education requirements and university practices governing the number of student enrolments in social work degrees. It was recognised that current field education policies and regulations have adverse impacts on student wellbeing, such as exacerbating poverty and these need to be specifically explored. Regulations and policies that guide field education are set by the AASW, universities, government departments and placement agencies. Via the AASW accreditation, the AASW has guidelines about, for example, program accreditation, recognition of prior learning (RPL), placement hours and work-based placements. Universities formulate learning outcomes, policies and standards of education and pedagogy. Governments at all levels provide funding, set standards and directions for education and related issues such as student housing while the placement agency's policies and regulations guide procedures, practices, and options for placements.

## Pressure Points

The pressure points identified are, for the most part, discussed in the academic literature (see for example, Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Zuchowski, 2011, 2014) and chiefly include: finding sufficient suitable placements, the capacity of human service and health sectors to provide quality learning experience for students (in accordance with accreditation requirements), the pedagogical consequences of an overburdened system on student learning and finally, the effect of student-related pressures on placement learning and experience.

A consequence of increasing pressure in field education is the degree to which the current organisation of social work field education impedes quality pedagogical practice within and across institutions. The following section provides an explanation of key pressures and how they are experienced within social work programs.

### *1. Finding sufficient suitable placements*

A significant and widely documented problem is finding sufficient suitable placements for social work students (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Zuchowski, 2016). Over the past decade, changed funding policies for higher education informed by neoliberal policies and practices were introduced using marketisation and “user-pays” mechanisms. Currently, universities are heavily reliant on this source of income to maintain or improve their fiscal sustainability (Van Onselen, 2015). This has led to a dramatic increase in student enrolments causing significant anxiety that the quantity of placement learning environments will not keep pace with demand. Indeed, placement supply has been further jeopardised in some sectors, as many publicly provided services have suffered funding cutbacks and social worker workplace stress (Gillingham, 2016; McFadden, Campbell & Taylor, 2015; Storey & Billingham, 2001). In 2009 the Australian government introduced a measure that removed the limit on public university places that allowed a place for every domestic Bachelors student who met university admission criteria. Between 2009 and 2013, this has resulted in an increase in Commonwealth Supported Places from 440,000 to 541,000 (Dow, 2014, p. 66). Enrolment of international students has also significantly increased over this period and these students are subject to a higher fee structure.

In Australia, the number of enrolled BSW students doubled from 3,389 to 6,787 between 1989 and 2007 (Healy & Lonne, 2010, cited in Smith, Cleak & Vreugdenhil, 2014). There has also been a significant rise in the number of postgraduate social work students. Between 2008 and 2009, there was a substantial increase in the number of students undertaking the Masters (Qualifying) programs in Social Work. Across Australia, approximately 680 students have enrolled in MSW(Q) programs since the programs were recognised by the AASW in 2008 (Healy & Lonne, 2010). The risk to high academic standards has been noted as another concern of the social work field education sector (Healy & Lonne, 2010).

Because the minimum number of field education experiences and hours per student is set by the AASW (as the accreditation body), the number of placements and placement hours required rises in direct proportion to the increasing number of students. While the undersupply of quality placements is not new (Fook & Cleak, 1994), the current higher levels of student enrolments seriously challenge university capacity to ensure quality placement learning within the social work curricula.



*2. The human service and health sector's capacity to provide quality learning experience for students in accordance with accreditation requirements*

Neoliberal practices have impacted beyond higher education to the public sector generally, leading to higher caseloads, increased reporting obligations and risk management, and austerity and welfare reforms, which exacerbate the pressures in social work field education as supervisors based in busy organisations are less able to support student placements (Chenoweth, 2012). Placement shortages are evident beyond Australia. In Canada, USA and Britain, authors have highlighted that field education faces a significant challenge in finding supervisors and internships for students (McKee, Muskat, & Perlman, 2015; Torry, Furness, & Wilkinson, 2005; Wayne et al., 2006).

For most university programs in Australia social work field education is heavily reliant on the goodwill of the relationships that field education programs develop with human service and health sectors, discussed further later. However, universities have become increasingly competitive, and have introduced a range of strategies that threaten this goodwill, for example, arrangements which tie specific organisations to providing specific numbers of placements (Torry et al., 2005). Such arrangements can lead to difficulties for colleagues at other universities in finding adequate numbers of social work placements. Poor communication of capacity and preferential arrangements has led to last-minute rushes for placements, disruption of university–industry placement relationships and disorientation in the organisation of placements, undermining quality student placement learning (Torry et al., 2005). Moreover, it threatens the long-established collaboration that underpins provision of social work field education which sustain service networks.

The compulsory nature of field education means that a significant share of the responsibility for training social work students falls on an already overburdened field (Smith et al., 2014). While the number of social work programs has expanded over the last three decades, major growth has also occurred in a number of related degree and diploma programs in human services, community welfare and applied social and behavioural science, all of which have embedded practicum components. The rapid expansion of social work and human services educational programs has also coincided with substantial growth in the health and community services workforce, adding to existing pressures (Healy & Lonne, 2010).

An area of increasing concern is the number of placements without social work supervisors. Where a qualified social worker is not available to provide the required social work supervision, universities contract “external supervisors” who offer social work supervision that complements the supervision provided by non-social-work staff in the agency. Student placements with external social work supervision are increasing. These placements have to be carefully negotiated to ensure optimal learning experience for students, to ensure clear and effective collaboration between all parties involved (the internal and external supervisor, the student, the liaison person and university staff) and to ensure that they all work in the interests of the student and their learning (Zuchowski, 2016).

*3. Pedagogical consequences of an overburdened system*

Increasing pressures on health and human services organisations places unfair expectations on the professional and non-professional employees of the services who provide the social

work supervision that is so critical for student practice learning. Despite multiple studies indicating the supervisory relationship is central to student learning on placement Smith et al. (2014) found that only 70% of students experience supervision in accordance with the ASWEAS Guidelines. While it is recognised that students' learning is enhanced when their practice was observed and feedback was given, Maidment (2000) and Smith et al. (2014) found that students reported a lack of observation of their practice by their social work supervisor.

#### *4. Pressures experienced by, and capacity of, students*

The current student body in social work makes the provision of field education complex. Increasing student numbers are working full-time and have other competing demands including family commitments, that compromise, and in many cases, undermine, their capacity to meet placement requirements (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Many of these students express the need for fewer contact hours on placement due to the competing demands on their time. Since field education requires students to spend large blocks of time in the field, paid employment is frequently sacrificed, leading students to report considerable financial stress while on placement (Baglow, 2014; Maidment, 2003) or to continue working extensive hours whilst undergoing full-time placement (Johnstone, Brough, Crane, Marston, & Correa-Velez, 2016).

Increased financial pressure with its adverse impacts for secure housing tenure and maintaining good health has also been observed anecdotally by field education staff in Australia. Gursansky and Le Sueur (2012) report that most students in Australia who work in paid employment do so out of necessity and are therefore unable to reduce working hours to undertake placement (Johnstone et al., 2013).

The student population in social work and other related human service disciplines is demographically very diverse (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2011). It is a population that is predominantly female (Healy & Lonne, 2010; Martin & Healy, 2010), includes many international students with different levels of language ability and cultural backgrounds (Healy & Lonne, 2010). While this diversity adds richness and depth to the study body, aspects such as lower levels of verbal and written English skills reduces their potential to be viewed as suitable for placement by agencies. Anecdotal evidence from the social work programs indicates it is not uncommon for these students to experience racism from staff or clients of host agencies or others they meet in the course of their placement. The combined effect of the "whiteness" of Australian health and human service agencies and students from cultural backgrounds outside that whiteness discourse, is that racism is commonly experienced, as has been noted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Bennett, Green, Gilbert, & Bessarab, 2013; Gair, Miles, Savage, & Zuchowski, 2015). In addition, social work cohorts contain proportionally more mature age students, students with disabilities and mental health issues and students with wide-ranging relevant experience who are seeking formal academic qualifications (Healy & Lonne, 2010).

#### **Advancing the Action Agenda**

At the conclusion of the September 2015 NFEN meeting, the following three priority action areas were unanimously endorsed:

### *1. Relationship with AASW, ASWEAS, and Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (the Council)*

It was agreed that an active working collaboration with the AASW was essential for the NFEN and the profession as a whole. The purpose of such collaboration was to advocate for quality student placement experience and learning, particularly in light of the 2016 planned review of the ASWEAS standards. In the longer term, members agreed on approaching the AASW to consider new models of field education, for example, simulation or innovative use of technology and cross-discipline activities. Two members of the Council attended the 2015 workshop and they issued an invitation to the NFEN to attend the next Council meeting to provide an overview of the priorities and process of the NFEN.

### *2. Research*

Several potential research areas were identified. There was recognition that the scoping survey identified themes and pressures relating to the delivery of quality field education programs, however, that detail was lacking. There was also an acknowledgement that research conducted might challenge as well as enhance the pedagogical basis of field education requirements in Australia.

### *3. Communication and Relationships*

Developing communication strategies and forming and consolidating relationships between NFEN and agencies and agency-based social workers, was identified as priority for building collaboration across the entire field education sector. It was also agreed that an online platform would enable communications and collaborative practices within the NFEN, including the storage of documents and resources. Marketing of the NFEN was also recognised as a priority as this would help to raise the profile of field education with key stakeholders in the sector.

## **DISCUSSION**

As outlined above, the NFEN is premised on the view that collaboration at a national level is required to address the critical issues facing field education. Agreed terms of reference now define the NFEN's role. The NFEN strives to be an effective platform for a collective, national response to issues and challenges facing social work field education in Australia. The NFEN has gained significant support and commitment from field education staff across Australian social work programs. Hall and Wallace (1993) define collaboration as close mutually supportive working relationships where participants "value this way of working highly enough to commit themselves to it: they choose to engage in joint work to achieve joint goals" (p. 105). Collaborative leadership increases capacity for responsiveness, and is guided by collectivist principles, consultative and collaborative decision making and information sharing to enable organisational and policy development and advocacy to change the structures (Weeks, 2003).

The ongoing work of the NFEN is undertaken by the NFEN committee that includes field education representatives from all Australian states and territories. In addition to this committee, task groups, comprised of both general and committee members, have formed to address each of the identified priority areas. There is biannual communication through the NFEN newsletter about the work of the task groups, notification of events and resources, links to current field education research projects, core committee work, activities

of the state-based groups and preparation for the annual NFEN face-to-face workshop. To date, three national meetings have taken place. The broader membership joins different task groups, provides opportunities for consultation and welcomes their participation in working together on shared concerns. This open participation and the NFEN principles has been the bedrock of the achievements of the NFEN to date. The collaborative process of identifying field education issues, developing strategies and working on priorities meant the NFEN undertook a process where members were able to be meaningfully engaged and feel a sense of ownership, agency and achievement.

Collaboration at a national level is not without its challenges. It requires significant commitment from field education staff. As the NFEN consolidates direction and activity, maintaining principles of collaboration and leadership will continue to be challenged in the current competitive environment. While similar issues and challenges are experienced across many programs, different resources, priorities and responses exist across programs. More time is needed to elicit any unstated tensions and build the necessary trust within relationships to be a sustainable and effective national voice. Insufficient time and opportunity for NFEN members to unpack the practicalities of how the group will work together is a challenge and this task involves strengthening the governance structure of NFEN. For example, videoconference meetings have been fraught with technical difficulties, and the large numbers at some meetings has frequently complicated and limited inclusive conversation. An additional, and important, priority for NFEN is how best to engage the expertise, practice and field education experience evident in the vast pool of agencies and practitioners that support and supervise social work students on placement.

As the group moves to actions, having this conversation becomes even more imperative and precipitates addressing tough questions such as: What do we think collaboration means? What do we agree to collaborate on and is collaboration required for all activities? Do field education staff members have the delegated authority from their institutions to share institutional information, for example, information around the costs of external supervision to programs? Do all members have to collaborate on the same issues, particularly given the needs of programs differ? What are the implications for NFEN's capacity if some field education programs want to collaborate but cannot? Do we need a written agreement to document the different levels of working together or is trust enough? The purpose, platform and processes of the NFEN continue to evolve. The question of how we sustain the NFEN is important for its role as a leader in Australian social work field education.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has discussed the shared and serious pressures facing field education programs as identified through the national scoping survey and meetings of the NFEN, linking these findings to the literature, and discussing the benefits of collaborating nationally in this context. Addressing these present changes and challenges cannot be left to individual field education staff, and the NFEN model has implications for the broader university sector, professional bodies, agencies and other key stakeholders. Collaboration at a national level strengthens the effectiveness of a collective voice in addressing organisational and policy

development and advocating for structural change. The NFEN's action agenda identifies processes that address and advocate for these issues at the appropriate level.

While a collaborative approach maximises positive professional relationships and advances strategies in achieving joint goals (Hall & Wallace, 1993), this discussion acknowledges that the broader competitive context in which field education operates inevitably impacts on the Network's potential to operate as a unified national organisation – one based on transparency and trust. Critical dialogue that promotes collaborative process and the capacity to identify and name the challenges requires “difficult conversations.” Demonstrating this capacity is integral to the NFEN philosophy and powerfully determines the NFEN's modus operandi into the future.

## References

- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2012). Guideline 1.2: Guidance on field education programs. *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS)* (pp. 1–69). Canberra, ACT: AASW.
- Baglow, L. (2014). Findings from the AASW student survey on income support. *AASW National Bulletin*, 24(4), 1–21.
- Beddoe, L., & Worrall, J. (2012). The future of fieldwork in a market economy, *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, 7(1), 19–32.
- Bennett, B., Green, S., Gilbert S., & Bessarab, D. (Eds.). (2013). *Our voices: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work*. South Yarra, VIC: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bogo, M. (2015). Field education for clinical social work practice: Best practices and contemporary challenges. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 43(3), 317–324. doi:10.1007/s10615-015-0526-5
- Carnwell, R., & Carson, A. (2009). The concepts of partnership and collaboration. In R. Carnwell & J. Buchanan, *Effective practice in health, social care and criminal justice: A partnership approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 3–21). Berkshire, UK: McGraw-Hill.
- Chee, P. (2016). Fluidity and space: Social work student learning in field supervision. In I. Taylor, M. Lefevre, M. Bogo, & B. Teater (Eds), *Routledge international handbook of social work education* (pp. 232–242). London, UK: Routledge.
- Chenoweth, L. (2012). Troubling times? Strategies for countering contemporary challenges in social work and human services practice. In V. Pulla, L. Chenoweth, A. Francis, & S. Bakaj (Eds.), *Papers in strengths based practice* (pp. 66).
- Cleak, H., Hawkins, L., Laughton, J., & Williams, J. (2014). Creating a standardised teaching and learning framework for social work field placements. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 49–64. doi:10.1080/0312407x.2014.932401
- Cleak, H., & Smith, D. (2012). Student satisfaction with models of field placement supervision. *Australian Social Work*, 65(2), 243–258.
- Dow, C. (2014). Reform of the higher education demand driven system (revised) in Budget review 20014-15 Parliamentary Library Research Paper **Series 2013–14**, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Drake, R., Pillay, S., & Diamandi, S. (2016, September). *A model of external supervision for social work students doing placements in schools*. Paper presented at the 2016 ANZSWWER Symposium, Advancing our Critical Edge in Social Welfare Education, Townsville, James Cook University.
- Fook, J., & Cleak, H. (1994). The state of field education in Australia – Results of a national survey. In J. Ife, S. Leitmann, & P. Murphy (Eds.), *Advances in social work and welfare education – A collection of conference papers given at the National Conference of the Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE)* (pp. 29–42). Perth, WA: University of Western Australia.
- Gair, S., Miles, D., Savage, D., & Zuchowski, I. (2015). Racism unmasked: The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in social work field placements. *Australian Social Work*, 68(1), 32–48.
- Gillingham, P. (2016) Social work and child protection in Australia: Whose job is it anyway? Practice: 1-14.
- Gursansky, D., & Le Sueur, E. (2012). Conceptualising field education in the twenty-first century: Contradiction, challenges and opportunities. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 31(7), 914–931.
- Hall, V., & Wallace, M. (1993). Collaboration as a subversive activity: A professional response to externally imposed competition between schools? *School Organisation*, 13(2), 101–117.

- Hanlen, P. (2011). Community engagement: Managers' viewpoints. In C. Noble & M. Hendrickson (Eds.), *Social work field education and supervision across Asia Pacific* (pp. 221–241). Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neo-liberalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Healy, K. (Ed.). (2014). *Social work theories in context: Creating frameworks for practice*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Healy, K., & Lonnie, B. (2010). *The social work and human services workforce: Report from a national study of education training and workforce needs*. Strawberry Hills, NSW: Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
- Hemy, M., Boddy, J., Chee, P., & Sauvage, D. (2016). Social work students “juggling” field placement. *Social Work Education*, 35(2), 215–228.
- Johnstone, E., Brough, M., Crane, P., Marston G., & Correa-Velez, I. (2013). Field placement and the impact of financial stress on social work and human service students. *Australian Social Work*, 69(4), 481–494.
- Maidment, J. (2000). Methods used to teach social work students in the field: A research report from New Zealand. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 19(2), 145–154. doi:10.1080/02615470050003520
- Maidment, J. (2003). Developing trends in social work field education. *Women in Welfare Education* (6). Retrieved from <http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Women-in-Welfare-Education/199990329.html>
- Martin, B., & Healy, J. (2010). *Who works in community services? A profile of Australian workforces in child protection, juvenile justice, disability services and general community services*. Adelaide, SA: National Institute of Labour Studies, Flinders University.
- McFadden, P. Campbell, A., & Taylor, B. (2015). Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: Individual and organisational themes from a systematic Literature Review *British Journal of Social Work* 5(5): 1546-1563.
- McInnis, C., James, R., & Hartley, R. (2000). *Trends in the first year experience in Australian universities*. Melbourne, VIC: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.
- McKee, E., Muskat, E., & Perlman, T. (2015). Students today, educators tomorrow: Shaping the social work curriculum to enhance field education. *Field Educator*, 5(2), 1–6. Retrieved from [http://www2.simmons.edu/ssw/fe/i/McKee\\_Shaping.pdf](http://www2.simmons.edu/ssw/fe/i/McKee_Shaping.pdf)
- Mitchell, M. (n.d.). An overview of public private partnerships in health. Retrieved from <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ihs/publications/pdf/PPP-final-MDM.pdf>
- Morley, C., & Dunstan, J. (2013). Critical reflection: A response to neoliberal challenges to field education? *Social Work Education*, 32(2), 141–156, doi:10.1080/02615479.2012.730141
- Noble, C., & Sullivan, J. (2009). Is social work still a distinctive profession? Students, supervisors and educators reflect. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 11(1), 89–107.
- Smith, D., Cleak, H., & Vreugdenhil V. (2014). “What are they really doing?” An exploration of student learning activities in field placement. *Australian Social Work*, 68(4), 515–531. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2014.960433
- Storey, J., & Billingham, J. (2001). Occupational stress and social work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 20(6), 659–670.
- Torry, B., Furness, S., & Wilkinson, P. (2005). The importance of agency culture and support in recruiting and retaining social workers to supervise students on placement. *Practice*, 17(1), 29–38. doi:10.1080/09503150500058025
- Van Onselen, P. (2015, January 10). Reforming higher education should go beyond fee deregulation. *The Australian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/peter-van-onselen/reforming-higher-education-should-go-beyond-fee-deregulation/news-story/57cfb69526fd0bef0dbf768b2b9b2257>
- Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2006). The need for radical change in field education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 42(1), 161–169.
- Weeks, W. (2003). Women: Developing feminist practice in women's services. In J. Allan, Pease, B., & Briskman, L. *Critical Social Work*, (pp. 107–123). Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Zuchowski, I. (2011). Social work student placements with external supervision: Last resort or value-adding in the Asia-Pacific? In C. Noble & M. Henrickson (Eds.), *Social work field education and supervision across the Asia Pacific* (pp.373-95). Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press.
- Zuchowski, I. (2014). Planting the seeds for someone else's discussion: Experiences of task supervisors supporting social work placements. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 13(3), 5–23. doi:10.1921/12202130105
- Zuchowski, I., (2016). Getting to know the context: The complexities of providing off-site supervision in social work practice learning *British Journal of Social Work*, 46, 409–426.