

# The Importance of Connection: A Quantitative Study of Students' Learning in Placements Completed Remotely from an Organisation

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## Abstract

This quantitative study surveyed eighty-two Australian social work students who completed their placement during COVID-19. The delivery of health and welfare services during the pandemic had a significant impact on field education with the result that many placements had to be offered remotely from an organisation. The research was interested in whether this practice learning model can provide quality learning experiences for students by exploring various aspects of the placement experience. Frequency data were generated and the data were analysed using chi-square tests to determine, firstly, if there were any statistically significant relationships between student learning outcomes and model of supervision, supervisor contact, type of e-placement and student demographics. Secondly, the various learning activities were rated against the students' attainment of their placement learning outcomes and their developing confidence, skills and social work identity. Findings highlight that student learning is enhanced when they have opportunities to experience work within an agency setting and when agency staff are involved in supervising and supporting students in e-placements. There were also

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indications of negative learning outcomes when students are not provided with direct observation opportunities of agency staff and some evidence that e-placements might be more suitable for second placement students.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, e-placements, field education, placements, practice learning, research placements

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## Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a rapid response from social work educators to implement online learning, support students remotely and how to provide students with the fieldwork component of their courses. Even before the pandemic, a lack of available student placements was an internationally recognised challenge with a diminished capacity of agencies to provide adequate placement opportunities for increased student numbers (Jefferies *et al.*, 2021; Cleak *et al.*, 2022). Insufficient social work placement opportunities in conventional settings, and the learning opportunity that research can offer to placement students has led to students undertaking projects/research that can be located remotely from an organisation (Crisp and Hosken, 2016; Zuchowski *et al.*, 2020). In Australia, the terms used for practice learning are field education or placements, elsewhere it is described as practice placement or practicum. Qualified social workers supervise and assess placements as field educators, elsewhere also known as practice educators.

There have been several terms to describe this model of placements, such as remote placements (Crisp and Hosken, 2016), online direct practice placements (Sarbu and Unwin, 2021) and telehealth approaches to placements (McFadden *et al.*, 2020). This study used the term ‘e-placement’ to refer to project, research and/or direct practice placements undertaken remotely from an organisation and supported by online and other communication technologies (Bentley-Davey *et al.*, 2020). Project and research placements are sometimes used interchangeably and can include activities such as ‘... service audits; policy development; literature reviews; planning and conducting research projects; data analysis and organising an online conference/symposium/training event’ (Crisp *et al.*, 2021, p. 1849).

## Background

States and territories in Australia imposed lockdown requirements in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt and emergency

nature of the pandemic demanded an immediate response from higher education institutions which closed their doors to students and staff and halted face-to-face delivery of courses. These measures created significant challenges for social work field education with the cancellation or pausing of placements by agencies or universities, the withdrawal of students from placements that had commenced, and rapid development and implementation of alternative placement arrangements.

Field education is an essential component of social work education, immersing students in real-world practice and thus facilitating the theory to practice integration (Jefferies *et al.*, 2021). Whilst field educators are often under pressure and might not always manage to provide adequate levels of supervision, the importance of the supervisory relationship and offering students authentic learning contexts and activities is widely acknowledged in the research literature (Bogo, 2015; Vassos *et al.*, 2018). Key pedagogical factors that support student learning in placements include supportive and welcoming learning environments, the opportunity to observe and debrief and the collaborative relationships with field education that allows students to be actively involved in their learning (Bogo, 2015). Regular supervision and safe learning environments are central to the development of students' social work identity and professional confidence (Roulston *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the unprecedented reduction or inability for students to participate in this agency-based learning environment challenged social work programmes globally to balance the competing needs of students to experience the roles and tasks of social work practice without eroding professional and university standards (Beesley and Devonald, 2020).

Globally, professional social work associations made temporary, albeit different, changes to the accreditation requirements (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020a; CASWE, 2020; CSWE, 2020). The English social work regulatory body provided a directive that social work education providers could make individual decisions about whether placements could be continued, shortened, suspended or replaced (Council of Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020). Thus, some placements were shortened if the student was meeting the expectations of the Professional Standards (Beesley and Devonald, 2020). In Northern Ireland, final year social work students were withdrawn from placement early. This facilitated entry to the workforce but with additional support and supervision to maintain accountability to the organisations and service users (McFadden *et al.*, 2020; O'Rourke *et al.*, 2020). In the USA, the field hour requirement was reduced and the in-person requirement changed to include 'remote-based field activities' (Council of Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020). A survey found that amongst 235 field directors, 99 per cent reported modifying operations due to COVID-19, 47 per cent reported allowing students in all placement settings to modify their field placement work and 74 per cent reported

allowing students whose field placement were interrupted to work on crisis response activities (CSWE, 2020).

In Australia, the accreditation standards were temporarily modified to include the reduction of placement hours, application of group supervision and undertaking placement work remotely (AASW, 2020a). Social work programmes utilised these temporary amendments to varying degrees, including suspension of placements and facilitating university run e-placements, project placements with organisations, modification to face-to-face delivery and additional skills training and telehealth delivery (Crisp *et al.*, 2021; Zuchowski *et al.*, 2022).

Social work in Australia is a self-regulatory profession which is accountable to the AASW. The AASW (2020b) requires students to be exposed to social change and social justice practice, working in a participatory way with communities to empower individuals, groups and societies. Methods of social work intervention include community work; counselling and interviewing; advocacy and direct action; policy development and implementation and research (AASW, 2020b, Appendix 2, 1.2). Unlike social work in the UK and Ireland, where students are largely placed in statutory settings and are employed in these organisation, social workers in Australia are employed in a wide variety of roles including manager, community worker, educator and counsellor (Healy and Lonne, 2010).

Recent evaluations of field education responses to COVID-19-related restrictions described several positive outcomes, such as the development of new practice knowledge and skills, different ways of working and technology familiarity (Archer-Kuhn *et al.*, 2020; Bentley-Davey *et al.*, 2020; Sarbu and Unwin, 2021). Students also recognised that the ability to work in virtual spaces would be useful, as this type of work could become a regular feature of post-COVID-19 workplaces (Sarbu and Unwin, 2021). However, there were challenges that included the need for students to reconceptualise placement learning and goals (Bentley-Davey *et al.*, 2020), isolation, difficulties with technology and working from home, which lacked opportunities of incidental learning observation, and blurred lines between work and the private domain including family responsibilities (Sarbu and Unwin, 2021).

It is recognised that there has been considerable published descriptive research about social work programmes' adjustment of placement processes and learnings (Beesley and Devonald, 2020; O'Rourke *et al.*, 2020; Sarbu and Unwin, 2021). This study emerged after significant numbers of students undertook an e-placement during restrictions in 2020 which provided the opportunity to evaluate students' experience in an e-placement. The study explored whether the placement, supervision and learning activities added to the students' professional development and feelings of competence and identity as an emerging professional via the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between placement outcomes as reported by the participant and model of supervision, supervisor contact, type of e-placement and student demographics?
2. Are the various learning activities, measured against the established learning outcome statements, considered to represent best practice for supervision (Roulston *et al.*, 2018)?

## Materials and methods

E-placements are defined as project work, research and/or direct practice placements undertaken remotely and away from an organisation and supported by online and other communication technologies. The aim of this research was to explore students' experiences in e-placement during 2020. The objectives were to ascertain students' learning in e-placements, the supervision and support they have received and what learnings might be derived from these arrangements. A further objective was to compare the learning opportunities that students in these e-placements were afforded, with learning activities that have been identified in international studies as contributing to students' sense of professional identity and confidence (Roulston *et al.*, 2018). As it is widely accepted in the literature that students' development of professional competence and social work identity is closely linked to supervision and exposure to 'real-life' learning environments (Bogo, 2015; Roulston *et al.*, 2018), it was considered important to explore whether this can happen in alternative placement models where students are not on site.

## Data collection

Insights from previous research, anecdotal data and literature were used to develop a self-administered survey (Walter, 2019). The online software Survey Monkey was used to create the survey tool. Both quantitative and qualitative questions were included. The survey explored student's demographic information, information about the e-placements and students' experiences and views about e-placements. It sought feedback about students' placement tasks, professional growth and learning using open-ended questions, multiple choice and Likert-scale items (Walter, 2019). The survey checked what learning activities students engaged with during placement and those identified by students as helpful in developing their professional identity during placement (Roulston *et al.*, 2018). The survey tool was pilot tested for functionality (Walter, 2019) by a social work student.

Human Ethics approval was sought for this study and was granted by the James Cook University's Human Ethics Committee, approval number H8234.

## Recruitment

To seek participants for this research, an email invitation was sent to the Heads of Schools of thirty-two universities who were listed on the AASW website as offering professionally accredited social work courses in Australia. Each school of social work was invited to send the anonymous survey link to social work students who had undertaken a full or partial e-placement in 2020. The email to the Heads of Social Work asked that the programmes confirm that the email had been sent out to students and provide the total number of students who would have received the survey invitation.

## Data analysis

Frequency data were generated for all data. The sample sizes presented some limitations, but statistically significant results are still reported in the findings with caveats where expected cell counts were not met for the statistical tests, or when alternate tests (e.g. Fisher's exact test) were consequently used. In some cases, the reclassification of responses was also necessary where expected counts were low. When the category 'community work' was explored in regard to what tasks were undertaken, five of the eight 'community work' selections were clearly describing service delivery, two 'project work' and one 'research'. Similarly, three of the project placements were reclassified as they clearly described research only. Some Likert-scale responses were dichotomised into agree/disagree, with responses which can be interpreted as positive and neutral included in 'agree', and responses which are clearly negative classified as 'disagree'.

The data were analysed using Pearson chi-square tests, Fisher's exact tests for small-sized samples and Kendall's tau ([Grazino and Raulin, 2013](#); [Walker, 2016](#); [Kim, 2017](#)) to explore the research questions. The significance levels for the analyses were set at  $p \leq 0.05$  (95 per cent confidence level) and  $p \leq 0.1$  (90 per cent confidence level) ([Grazino and Raulin, 2013](#)).

## Findings

In this article, we are reporting on findings relating to student learning in e-placements. Of the thirty-two Australian universities that were

approached to send the survey link to students, twenty-one agreed to do so. Eleven universities did not send out the survey links to students for the following reasons: eight were unresponsive, two declined the invitation to participate and one university had not commenced the social work degree.

## Demographics

Eighty-two students responded to the survey; 54 per cent ( $n=44$ ) were first placement Bachelor of Social Work students, 20 per cent ( $n=16$ ) were first placement Master of Social Work (Professionally Qualifying) students, 13 per cent ( $n=11$ ) second placement Bachelor students and 12 per cent ( $n=10$ ) second placement Master students. There was one Bachelor repeat placement student. Twenty-eight per cent of the students were international students ( $n=20$ ).

Eighty-one respondents indicated their gender and age; seventy-one were female and ten were male. Most respondents ( $n=65$ , 80 per cent) were aged 44 years or younger, 14 per cent ( $n=23$ ) between 45 and 54 years old, 5 per cent ( $n=2$ ) between 55 and 64 years old and one over 75 years old.

The chi-square tests did not show statistically significant differences in learning outcomes based on gender, age or degree. However, the chi-square tests did find statistically significant correlations at the 0.1 level between learning opportunities or outcomes and international student experiences, with this group being more likely to agree that they had developed the skills and knowledge needed for professional practice ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.224$ ,  $p = 0.073$ ) with 95 per cent ( $n=19$ ) of international students to 72 per cent ( $n=45$ ) of domestic students, and more likely to agree they have learnt about legislation, policies and procedures ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.436$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ) with 80 per cent ( $n=16$ ) international students compared with 60 per cent ( $n=37$ ) of domestic students in agreement.

## Type of placement and placement learning activities

Respondents undertook a range of e-placements including research ( $n=36$ , 44 per cent), project ( $n=30$ , 37 per cent) and service delivery ( $n=10$ , 12 per cent) e-placements or a combination of these tasks ( $n=7$ , 9 per cent). Students in research e-placements, apart from frequently naming 'research' in general, undertook literature reviews ( $n=9$ ), data analysis ( $n=4$ ) and interviews ( $n=3$ ), wrote reports, recommendations and discussions ( $n=6$ ), ethics applications and statements ( $n=3$ ), research proposals ( $n=3$ ) and developed resources ( $n=4$ ), networked and had client contact.

Students in project e-placements developed resources ( $n=14$ ), undertook project management/implementation ( $n=7$ ) and research tasks ( $n=7$ ), facilitated/developed forums ( $n=4$ ), group meetings ( $n=3$ ) and training ( $n=1$ ), wrote reports/discussion papers/studies/literature reviews/needs analysis ( $n=8$ ) and articles ( $n=1$ ), provide support ( $n=1$ ), advocacy ( $n=1$ ) and client contact ( $n=2$ ) and participated in events ( $n=1$ ) and networked ( $n=2$ ).

Students in direct service e-placements supported/contacted clients ( $n=6$ ), delivered workshops/group work ( $n=3$ ), completed applications ( $n=2$ ), undertook intake and assessment ( $n=2$ ), phone counselling ( $n=1$ ) and home visits ( $n=1$ ), provided information ( $n=1$ ) and developed recovery plans ( $n=1$ ).

Table 1 shows that overall, just over half of the students in e-placements felt that placement prepared them for professional practice, contributed positively to their identity as social work graduates and helped them develop the skills and knowledge required for a graduate social worker.

One of the trends in Table 2 indicates that students were most likely to agree with the statement that their placement helped them develop

**Table 1.** Placement learning outcomes

My placement ...	Level of agreement with the given statements for learning outcomes during placement									
	A great deal		A lot		A moderate amount		A little		Not at all	
	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent
... prepared me for professional practice	22	26.8	19	23.3	17	20.7	18	22	6	7.3
... contributed positive to my identity as a social work graduate	30	36.6	20	24.4	17	20.7	8	9.8	7	8.5
... contributed positively to my confidence as a social work graduate	21	25.6	22	26.8	13	15.9	13	15.9	13	15.9
... helped me develop the skills and knowledge as a social worker	21	25.6	31	37.8	12	14.6	13	15.9	5	6.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>		<b>92</b>		<b>59</b>		<b>52</b>		<b>30</b>	

Notes: The type of placement and students' consideration of its contribution to their development of the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate (see Table 2) was selected for further analysis after a Pearson chi-square test identified a statistically significant association. Since more than 20% of cells had expected counts less than 5, Fisher's exact test was used to determine if there was a significant association between these variables, which was found (two-tailed  $p = 0.014$ ).



**Table 2.** Type of placement correlated with skills and knowledge development

Type of e-placement	Skills and knowledge were developed for the e-placement type									
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree	
	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent
Project work ( <i>n</i> = 30)	2	7	2	7	7	23	15	50	4	13
Research ( <i>n</i> = 30)	3	10	8	27	4	13	5	17	10	33
Community work ( <i>n</i> = 10)	0	0	1	10	0	0	7	70	2	20
Service delivery ( <i>n</i> = 7)	0	0	1	14	0	0	1	14	5	71
Other	0	0	1	20	1	20	3	60	0	0
Total	5		13		12		31		21	

the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate if they described their placement as ‘Community work’ (90 per cent or,  $n = 10$ ) or ‘Service delivery’ (85 per cent,  $n = 7$ ). Conversely, only 50 per cent ( $n = 30$ ) of the students strongly agreed that they had developed these skills and knowledge in research placements.

### Correlation between learning activities and opportunities and learning outcomes

Students identified various learning activities they were able to undertake during placement (see Table 3) which were ranked against the learning activities that have been identified in international studies (Roulston *et al.*, 2018) as contributing to placement students’ sense of professional identity and confidence.

Students on e-placements most often selected that the following learning opportunities were provided to them: ‘Thinking critically and reflectively about the social work role’ ( $n = 69$ , 83 per cent), ‘Given constructive feedback about progress’ ( $n = 57$ , 70 per cent) and ‘Discussing feelings and values about practice’ ( $n = 57$ , 70 per cent), ‘Link practice to AASW Values and Ethics’ ( $n = 57$ , 70 per cent) and ‘Linking theory to practice’ ( $n = 56$ , 70 per cent). However, less than half the students selected the ability to ‘learn the role and function of team or organisation’ ( $n = 39$ , 48 per cent), ‘observe supervisor or staff’ ( $n = 29$ , 36 per cent), ‘link task with practice foci and key role’ ( $n = 25$ , 31 per cent) and ‘have practice observed by supervisor or staff’ ( $n = 21$ , 26 per cent).

When compared with the rankings outlined in the research, there are several differences between the Roulston *et al.*’s (2018) ranking and this study (see Table 3). Notably, ‘have practice observed by supervisor or staff’ is ranked second in the prior research but fourteenth in this study;

**Table 3.** Comparison of ratings of usefulness of learning activities for developing practice competence against the Roulston framework and year level (first or second)

Learning activities <i>Roulston et al., (2018)</i> ranking (1–16)	Student rankings		
	Student (overall)	First placement	Second placement
1. Given constructive feedback about progress	3	6	2
2. Observe practice teacher and staff	14	14	15
3. Discuss feelings and values about practice	3	6	2
4. Provided with formal social work supervision	3	2	8
5. Learn about legislation, policies and procedures	9	7	8
6. Learn about role or function of team or organisation	13	10	13
7. Discuss and reflect on practice skills	2	2	2
8. Think critically and reflectively about SW role	1	1	1
9. Discuss and prepare for learning new tasks and skills	10	9	6
10. Link theory and practice	7	2	10
11. Learn about resources, systems and networks	11	12	11
12. Have practice observed by practice teacher or staff	16	16	14
13. Provided with reading materials and theory	12	13	11
14. Link tasks with practice foci and key roles	15	15	15
15. Link practice to AASW standards <sup>a</sup>	4	8	2
16. Link practice to AASW values and ethics	3	4	6

<sup>a</sup>This was chosen as a contextual learning activity equivalent to ‘Learn about sociodemographics and service users’ from *Roulston et al. (2018)*.

‘learn about role or function of team or organisation’ is ranked thirteenth rather than sixth and ‘learn about legislation and policies’ is ranked fifth in the prior research but ninth in this study. Conversely, ‘link theory and practice’ was ranked in seventh spot, but in the prior research was ranked tenth.

Differences are also found between first and second placement responses, which highlight that first placement students selected opportunity to ‘link theory to practice’ significantly more times (ranked second) than second placement student (ranked tenth).

Several results show similar rankings between the *Roulston et al.’s (2018)* research about useful learning activities for developing practice competence and students in this research being able to undertake them. These areas include ‘discuss feelings and values about practice’, ‘provided with formal social work supervision’, ‘learn about resources, systems and networks’, ‘provided with reading material and theory’ and ‘link task with practice foci and theory’.

To support this qualitative analysis, Kendall’s tau-*b* correlation (*Walker, 2016*) was calculated to determine the relationship between the *Roulston et al.’s (2018)* ranking and student overall rankings (first and second placement) for the learning outcomes identified, amongst the eighty-two participants in *Table 3* (see *Table 4*).

**Table 4.** Kendall's tau-*b* correlations for the ratings of usefulness of learning activities for developing practice competence ranked against the Roulston framework

	1	2	3	4
1. Roulston <i>et al.</i> (2018) ranking	–			
2. Student ranking—overall (combined)	0.154	–		
3. Student ranking—first placement	0.170	0.844**	–	
4. Student ranking—second placement	0.157	0.795**	0.593**	–

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

The results support a discordance between the Roulston *et al.*'s (2018) activity ranking when compared with the overall student ranking ( $\tau_b = 0.154$ ,  $p = 0.414$ ), student first placement ranking ( $\tau_b = 0.170$ ,  $p = 0.366$ ) and the student second placement ranking ( $\tau_b = 0.157$ ,  $p = 0.412$ ), with no statistically significant correlations for ranking accordance.

The correlation was particularly strong between the overall ranking and first student placement ranking and ( $\tau_b = 0.844$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) second student placement ranking ( $\tau_b = 0.795$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The correlation was still significant but less strongly correlated for first and second student placement rankings ( $\tau_b = 0.593$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). This suggests that student rankings have changed slightly between first and second placements, but that the ranking is still in statistical accordance.

Table 5 provides a summary of the chi-square test statistics for correlations between the learning opportunity and the learning outcomes, indicating the number of times participants selected the activities in the first column, and the significance of the correlation at the 0.01 and 0.05 level. Learning outcomes able to be selected were: 'The learning from this placement was relevant and useful to my professional practice' [Usefulness], 'I achieved the learning goals for this placement' [Goals], 'My placement prepared me for professional practice' [Preparation], 'My placement contributed positively to my identity as a social work graduate' [Identity], 'My placement contributed positively to my confidence as a social work graduate' [Confidence] and 'My placement helped me to develop the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate' [Skills].

The results in Table 5 highlighted that selection of learning outcomes such as 'skills', 'relevance' and 'goals' was strongly positively associated with almost all learning opportunities, and 'preparation' was also positively associated with a number of opportunities, particularly those with a focus on practice, roles and policy. The learning opportunities 'have practice observed by supervisor or staff', 'provided with reading materials and theory' and 'learn about resources, systems and networks' were recognised as contributing significantly to nearly all learning outcomes for students, which suggests that these learning opportunities are of

**Table 5.** Pearson chi-square test significance between learning activities and learning outcomes

Learning opportunities	Learning outcomes					
	Identity	Confidence	Skills	Preparation	Relevance	Goals
Given constructive feedback	0.093	0.132	<0.001**	0.110	0.077*	0.006 <sup>a,**</sup>
Think critically and reflectively about social work role	0.172 <sup>a</sup>	0.129 <sup>a</sup>	<0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>	0.133	0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>	0.005 <sup>a,**</sup>
Discuss feelings and values about practice	0.250	1.000	<0.001**	0.268	<0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>	<0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>
Learn about legislation, policies and procedures	0.182	0.517	<0.001**	0.054*	0.021 <sup>a,**</sup>	0.029 <sup>a,**</sup>
Provided with formal supervision	0.720	0.954	0.470	0.900	0.044 <sup>a,**</sup>	0.006 <sup>a,**</sup>
Discuss and reflect on practice skills	0.332	0.176	0.018 <sup>a,**</sup>	0.038*	0.004 <sup>a,**</sup>	<0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>
Observe supervisor or staff	0.412	0.048**	0.087*	0.126	0.247 <sup>a</sup>	0.011 <sup>a,**</sup>
Discuss and prepare for learning new tasks or skill	0.375	0.035**	0.009**	0.040**	0.277 <sup>a</sup>	0.016 <sup>a,**</sup>
Link theory and practice	0.328	0.185	<0.001**	0.019**	0.052 <sup>a,*</sup>	<0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>
Learn about the role or function of team or organisation	0.196	0.931	0.224	0.250	0.265	0.089 <sup>a,*</sup>
Have practice observed by supervisor or staff	0.023**	0.003**	0.002 <sup>a,**</sup>	<0.001**	0.101 <sup>a</sup>	0.055 <sup>a,*</sup>
Provided with reading materials and theory	0.055*	0.097*	0.016**	0.074**	0.057 <sup>a,*</sup>	0.092*
Learn about resources, systems and networks	0.011**	0.388	<0.001**	0.015**	0.002 <sup>a,**</sup>	<0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>
Link practice to AASW practice standards	0.626	0.189	0.059**	0.009**	0.115 <sup>a</sup>	0.002 <sup>a,**</sup>
Link practice to AASW values and ethics	0.533	0.132	0.058*	0.268	0.224 <sup>a</sup>	<0.001 <sup>a,**</sup>
Link tasks with practice foci and key roles	0.462	0.056*	0.016**	0.084*	0.425 <sup>a</sup>	0.026 <sup>a,**</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Fisher's exact significance is reported (two-sided).

\*Significant at the 0.1 level.

\*\*Significant at the 0.05 level.

particular importance for students in the development of key outcomes from placements. Table 5 also highlights those opportunities which do not seem to contribute significantly to meeting the learning outcomes. These included 'link practice to AASW Values and Ethics' and 'learn about the role or function of team or organisation', with only one or two significant correlations to contribute positively to the achievement of student learning outcomes.

## Supervision

### *Supervision arrangements*

The most common supervision arrangement was a social work academic from the University ( $n=38$ , 46 per cent), followed by a non-social worker from the agency and a social worker externally appointed ( $n=17$ , 21 per cent), a social worker from the agency and a university academic ( $n=11$ , 13 per cent) and a social worker from the agency ( $n=10$ , 12 per cent). One student selected that there was no social worker involved in the placement, three selected 'other' and two were unsure who supervised them. For simplicity in the following tests, these scenarios were all collected into 'other'.

To quantify the statistical significance of a positive association between supervision arrangement and learning opportunities, Pearson chi-square tests were run for all combinations, with Fisher exact tests significance values (two-sided) used due to the expected cell counts all have >20 per cent of cell with expected counts less than 5 (see Table 6). Four learning opportunities were identified as having a statistically significant correlation (two-sided) with supervision type: 'given constructive feedback about progress' (Fisher exact test statistic = 10.595,  $df=4$ , Exact sig = 0.023), 'discuss feelings and values about practice' (Fisher exact test statistic = 10.295,  $df=4$ , sig = 0.026), 'observe supervisor or staff' (Fisher exact test statistic = 8.540,  $df=4$ , sig = 0.066) and 'learn about role or function of team or organisation' (Fisher exact test statistic = 8.503,  $df=4$ , sig = 0.071).

Table 6 indicates several trends. Students who had a non-social worker from the agency and a social worker externally appointed supervising their placement were most likely to select that they had received constructive feedback (88 per cent,  $n=15$ ), followed by a social work academic (74 per cent,  $n=25$ ), a social worker from the agency and a university academic (73 per cent,  $n=7$ ) and a social worker from the agency (60 per cent,  $n=6$ ).

A further trend shows that the combination of supervision by a social worker from the agency and a university academic had the strongest correlation with 'Discuss feelings and values about Practice' (100 per cent,

**Table 6.** Supervision arrangement correlated with learning opportunities

Supervision arrangement	Learning opportunities															
	Constructive feedback given				Discuss feelings and values				Observe supervisor or staff				Learn about role or function of team			
	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	
	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent
Non-social worker from the agency and a social worker externally appointed ( <i>n</i> = 17)	2	12	15	88	4	24	13	76	9	53	8	47	4	23.5	13	76.5
Social work academic from the university ( <i>n</i> = 38)	10	26	28	74	14	37	24	63	27	71	11	29	20	53	18	47
Social worker from the agency ( <i>n</i> = 10)	4	40.0	6	60.0	2	20.0	8	80.0	6	60.0	4	40.0	6	60.0	4	40.0
Social worker from the agency and a university academic ( <i>n</i> = 11)	3	27	8	73	0	0.0	11	100.0	4	36	7	64	7	64	4	36
Other ( <i>n</i> = 6)	5	83	1	17	4	67	2	33	6	100.0	0	0.0	5	83	1	17
Total	24		58		24		58		52		30		42		40	

$n = 17$ ), followed by a social worker from the agency (80 per cent,  $n = 8$ ) and a non-social worker from the agency and a social worker (77 per cent,  $n = 13$ ).

Students who had a non-social worker from the agency and a social worker externally appointed supervising their placement were most likely to select that they had 'learn[ed] about the role or function of team' (77 per cent,  $n = 13$ ). Less than half of students in other supervision arrangements selected that they achieved this learning with 47.4 per cent ( $n = 18$ ) supervised by a social work academic, 40 per cent ( $n = 4$ ) supervised by a social worker from the agency and 36 per cent ( $n = 4$ ) supervised by a social worker from the agency and a university academic.

Strong correlations were also noted between 'Observe supervisor or staff' with students who were supervised by a social work academic from the university more likely to select a negative response with 71 per cent ( $n = 11$ ), followed by having a social worker from the agency (60 per cent,  $n = 6$ ). Conversely, students were more likely to select a positive response to 'observe supervisor or staff' if their supervision was by a social worker from the agency and a university academic (63.6 per cent,  $n = 7$ ).

### *Type of supervision*

More than half of the students ( $n = 44$ , 54 per cent) received a combination of group and individual supervision, and 66 per cent ( $n = 29$ ) of those students agreed with the statements that their placement helped them to develop the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate and that their placements contributed positively to their identity as a social work graduate. This was followed by twenty-nine students who received individual supervision, of which 62 per cent ( $n = 18$ ) agreed that the placement helped them develop the skills and knowledge and 55 per cent ( $n = 16$ ) that their placements contributed positively to their identity as a social work graduate. Of the eight students who received group supervision 50 per cent ( $n = 4$ ) agreed with both statements.

### **Students' year level and their reporting on development of social work confidence, knowledge and skills**

The survey asked students to respond to four questions related to how their placement helped them develop the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate; contributed positively to my confidence as a social work graduate; contributed to identity as a social work graduate and prepared the student for professional practice.

Chi-square tests were run to identify statistically significant associations between placement and these questions. Only one of these combinations was statistically significant with students more likely to agree that

**Table 7.** Students' development of social work confidence, knowledge and skills correlated with year level

The placement...	Agree		Disagree	
	<i>n</i>	Per cent	<i>n</i>	Per cent
First placement students ( <i>n</i> = 60)				
... prepared me for professional practice	30	50	30	50
... contributed positively to my confidence as a social work graduate	40	67	20	33
... helped me develop the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate	46	77	14	23
... contributed positively to my identity as a social worker	40	67	20	33
Second placement students ( <i>n</i> = 22)				
... prepared me for professional practice	17	77	5	33
... contributed positively to my confidence as a social work graduate	16	73	6	27
... helped me develop the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate	18	82	4	18
... contributed positively to my identity as a social worker	17	77	5	33

placement had prepared them for professional practice ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.894$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ), with 77 per cent ( $n=17$ ) of the second placement students agreeing with this statement compared with 50 per cent ( $n=30$ ) of the first placement students. However, interesting trends are still worth exploring in Table 7.

Half of first-year students (50 per cent,  $n=30$ ) felt that their placement prepared them for professional practice, compared with 77 per cent ( $n=17$ ) of the second placement students. Of the first placement students ( $n=60$ ), 67 per cent ( $n=40$ ) reported that placement did contribute to their confidence as a social work graduate, compared with 73 per cent ( $n=16$ ) or second placement students.

First placement students agreed that the placement provided them with opportunities to develop skills and knowledge (77 per cent,  $n=46$ ) and contributed positively to their identity (67 per cent,  $n=40$ ). However, the second placement students more clearly reported that the placements helped them develop the skills and knowledge to work as a social work graduate, with 82 per cent ( $n=18$ ) strongly agreeing or agreeing with the first statement and 77 per cent ( $n=17$ ) agreeing with the second.

This suggests that final year students were more positive after their placement, around preparation, skills development, confidence and identity creation.

## Discussion

The dramatic changes to placement arrangements during the pandemic have exposed the structural problems in delivering social work



programmes and in particular, placements that offer quality supervision and useful learning opportunities. Whilst acknowledging the need for longer term investment in innovative and sustainable strategies, this study provides some evidence around which type of alternative placement could offer students the learning activities that promote learning, as well as which supervision arrangements provide and support students' competence and identity as a developing social worker.

The first aspect of the study was to examine whether there are relationships between perceived placement outcomes and model of supervision, supervisor contact, type of e-placement and student demographics. The descriptive data show that undertaking direct or community work placements contributed most to students' development of social work skills and knowledge with research activities contributing the least to their professional development. Moreover, specific learning activities of 'discussing and reflecting on practice skills', 'Given constructive feedback', and 'Think critically and reflectively about social work role' helped students to feel that placements were useful and prepared them for professional practice. It confirms the primacy of quality supervision and support and suggests the need for careful consideration of the setup of the supervisory arrangements to ensure positive students' learning outcomes. Specifically, rather than offering a general research placement, consideration could be given to working with agencies to offer students direct practice and community development learning opportunities.

Overall, it appears that the presence and involvement of agencies to support students in e-placements was crucial to student learning. This is an important finding as it shows the importance of the agency supervisor taking an active part in the placement and offering the insights from practice, even when students are not located in the agency environment. In all aspects of learning, the presence of a worker from an agency, such as a task supervisor or social worker, resulted in enhanced learning, with supervision only from an academic being least useful. This re-affirms [Bogo's \(2015, p. 319\)](#) point that 'the presence of strong, positive learning environments in organisations and teams that welcome students and view teaching and learning as mutually beneficial' is a crucial factor in student learning.

A recent study of students' experiences with off-site or external supervision described that they received different things from each of their supervisors. External supervision provided the educational aspects of supervision, whereas task supervisor was able to offer more practical support and informal mentoring. This was described by one student as 'I got the best of both worlds.' ([Cleak et al., 2022, p. 11](#)). This finding consolidates the growing evidence that external supervision can provide suitable supervision and support in alternative settings ([Cleak and Zuchowski, 2020](#)); however, these arrangements require access to an agency social worker or task supervisor.

Similar to research findings regarding placements with external supervision, this research highlighted concerns regarding these supervision arrangements and placement type because they restricted opportunities to observe social work practice within agencies and the opportunity to work with clients (Bogo, 2015; Cleak and Zuchowski, 2020). The lack of direct observation of staff has implications for students' overall learning. Less than half the students in our research selected the ability to 'learn the role and function of a team or organisation' (40 per cent), 'observe supervisor or staff' (30 per cent), link task with practice foci and key role' (26 per cent) and have 'practice observed by supervisor or staff' (23 per cent). Yet, those four learning activities were shown to have high correlation with students developing their practice confidence in the Roulston *et al.*'s (2018) study.

Regular feedback has been identified as important to student satisfaction and learning (Bogo, 2015; Roulston *et al.*, 2018), and without observation of their practice, it might be difficult for students to fully integrate theory and practice learning. The lack of observation of the supervisor's practice and having their own practice observed is a problem identified in placements with external supervision, and students reportedly can feel disadvantaged without being able to observe social work practice or being observed in their practice (Cleak *et al.*, 2022). Thus, it appears important to ensure that no more than one placement is an e-placement, and that the other placement provides students with the opportunity to observe social workers in their practice settings and have their own practice observed and evaluated by social workers. This would be in accordance with the ASWEAS requirement that at least one placement is in direct practice and under the direct supervision of a qualified social worker (AASW, 2020b).

However, undertaking an e-placement as a full placement or as a component of a placement might be feasible in contexts of limited placement options, considering the changes to social practice that have rapidly expanded during COVID-19. E-placements have allowed students to recognise, particularly those in their second placement, that they have developed some of the skills and knowledge for professional practice and to feel that the placement contributed positively to their confidence as a social work graduate. It is possible that second placement students had already had a placement which had provided them with a clearer understanding of social work practice and were more attuned to the changing field of practice that requires social workers to be technologically savvy and able to work in online settings. Moreover, students in final years would have been more likely to have received academic input on social policy and research and might have been more able to embrace the task required. Learning how technology can guide and aid practice and learning (Archer-Kuhn *et al.*, 2020; Bentley-Davey *et al.*, 2020) will prepare students to incorporate these platforms as part of their practice, whether

they are working in an organisation's office or remotely. Nevertheless, in practice, giving preference to second placement students over first placement students in e-placements might be practically difficult. Final year students usually prefer placements in agencies that lead to direct employment, and agencies are looking for students about to graduate as future employees.

The finding that international students represented over a quarter of the participants in this study and reported more positive outcomes than domestic students by being more likely to agree that they had developed the skills and knowledge needed for professional practice is worthy of further investigation. This aspect may warrant further research.

## **Limitations**

Due to the low number of participants, results must be interpreted with caution ([Grazino and Raulin, 2013](#)). Conclusions cannot be generalised to populations outside of Australia. To account for the small sample size, we utilised tests designed for small samples (Fisher's exact test or continuity correction for Pearson chi-square tests where necessary). The cross-sectional design of the survey means that there is only a random representation of the target population, and thus whilst generalised insights can be drawn, causal inferences cannot be made ([Walter, 2019](#)). As students self-selected to respond to the survey, there is a potential for sample bias in the study, as those with particular interests or strong opinions tend to respond disproportionately in voluntary response surveys, and other sub-groups' opinions could be potentially missed. Moreover, due to the nature of the survey as the data collection tool, the data could not be explored further or clarified by the researchers with the participants.

## **Conclusion**

This quantitative study into the student experience of undertaking e-placements during COVID-19 highlighted that these placements could be useful learning experiences, particularly for second placement students. When there are active connections to a placement organisation and their staff during e-placements, these are supporting the students' learning journey. As for placements with external supervision, lack of observation of practice and being observed are drawbacks, and thus a student should not have more than one such learning experience during their social work degree. Further research is needed to explore this from the perspective of supervisors and educators, for example, how did supervisors manage building the supervisory relationships with students in e-

placements when working from home, and how can online contact and social distancing be made more conducive to how social workers practise. Understanding and exploring new methods of developing and maintaining positive and engaging relationships and offering students opportunities to model and observe social work practice can help future proof the profession.

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