

Implementing and evaluating an alternative model for training field work educators: A pilot study in Central Queensland

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Summary: In conjunction with academic social work educators, fieldwork supervisors are significant and influential instructors of emerging social work practitioners. This partnership is typically enhanced by universities offering training for fieldwork supervisors to assist and support them in their important roles. This can be challenging however in flexibly delivered programs where supervisors may be located in areas distant from the universities with which students are affiliated. Further, within the current human services context particularly in rural areas, fieldwork education is becoming increasingly subject to a range of organisational and policy imperatives that have the potential to limit the capacity of fieldwork supervisors to proactively engage with social work education. This paper describes a pilot project developed and evaluated in Central Queensland Australia which aimed to address some of these challenges. A multi-faceted approach to training, mentoring and supporting fieldwork supervisors of social work students on practicum was developed and implemented across diverse organisational and geographical contexts. Findings of the evaluation and implications for fieldwork education are presented.

Key words: social work; field education; Australia; supervision; mentoring; online support; distance education

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Introduction

The fieldwork experience is acknowledged by social work academics, students, fieldwork supervisors, practitioners and professional organisations alike as being integral within social work education (Maidment, 2006; LeFevre, 2005; Quinney 2005; Cleak & Wilson, 2004; Fortune, McCarthy, Abramson, 2001; Cooper & Briggs, 2000). Universities and practitioners recognise that the fieldwork practicum provides students with diverse opportunities to integrate and apply their academic learning within 'real life' contexts and to consolidate their unique frameworks of practice before embarking on their professional careers (Maidment 2006, Bogo & Vadya, 1998; Cleak & Wilson, 2004). For social work students also, fieldwork education is affirmed as being critical in their professional education (Buck, 2006/07; Quinney 2005; Fernandez, 2003). In Australia, the importance of fieldwork is demonstrated by the requirement of the professional accrediting body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) that students undertake at least 980 hours in two mandatory, supervised fieldwork placements during their education (AASW, 2000). Therefore, in Australia as elsewhere, a core activity of social work schools is to support and train fieldwork supervisors involved in the field-based education of their social work students.

Australian universities have traditionally provided training to supervisors via *university-based* education programs, an approach that is underpinned by the assumption that supervisors are situated relatively close to the universities that the students are attending. While this assumption may be true for social work programs located in large cities, it does not necessarily apply to those in rural and regional contexts or who are geographically distant from the university whose students they are supervising. While attention has been paid to the transition of practitioners into field educators (Fernandez, 2003; AASWWE, 1991) and to the roles and qualifications of 'practice teachers' (Nixon & Murr, 2006; Douglas & Magee, 2006/07), little has been written about the experiences of educators regarding their fieldwork training, particularly where it relates to social work programs that are offered across distance.

This paper describes a pilot project that was undertaken and subsequently evaluated in 2006 by the Department of Social Work and Human Services at Central Queensland University (CQU). Within

the project, a model of training was developed providing fieldwork supervisors who were distant from the university with a range of information-giving, support and network building components. While the project was only small, the participating fieldwork supervisors noted that they felt better connected to the University and highlighted the growth and support functions of the mentoring and email components of the program.

Training and supporting fieldwork supervisors in Australia

According to Bogo and Vayda (1998), fieldwork supervisors are in a position to have 'the greatest influence on a student's approaching career'. Over the years a plethora of literature regarding supervisory and educational approaches has emerged (e.g., Kolb, 1984 and Schon, 1983) and numerous texts describe how best to support and engage students on practica (Cooper & Briggs, 2000; Cleak & Wilson, 2004; O'Donoghue, 2003). Research has also been undertaken regarding the use and effectiveness of a range of modalities to support students' learning while on field placement. Mensinga (2003) for example described the usefulness of videoconferencing to integrate students' fieldwork experiences during their third and fourth year placements while others have identified the on-line environment as a constructive means of providing student support (Maidment, 2006; Waugh & Hart, 2003). Maidment (2006) argues that online support can 'parallel workplace reflective practices' by offering debriefing, peer support and feedback and that this is particularly relevant to placements in rural and remote areas.

Mentoring has been identified as an effective strategy to support learners more generally and to help workers develop professional skills. Bourn and Bootle (2005) described mentoring as a valued and effective strategy for supporting students studying an advanced award degree in social work by distance. Wilson and Tilse (2006) reported that managers working in child protection found mentoring increased their insight and knowledge regarding management roles. Further, managers reported that they felt better able to implement strategies being learnt

when the mentoring program was integrated within the broader office context. Caldwell (2006) reported findings from an in-depth case study of a field supervisor's experience of mentoring as being associated with an opportunity to reflect, develop new ways of knowing and build on existing practice frameworks.

However, while field education has begun to enjoy greater recognition and research attention (Nixon & Murr, 2006), little has been reported regarding experiences and effectiveness of training and support made available by universities to field supervisors (Webber, 1999). Barlow, Rogers and Coleman (2003) argue that there are not many continuing professional education opportunities for social work field supervisors and that their support can often be left to visiting field liaison staff from the universities whose primary task is to monitor the student's progress.

Challenges facing field education training in Australia

Placing all students with proficient, experienced and skilled social work supervisors is a crucial component in ensuring quality fieldwork experience for students. Within the current professional and organisational context in Australia however, there are challenges associated with meeting this goal. Firstly, being able to locate quality, experienced supervisors for all students is increasingly difficult. Fernandez (2003) reports that student satisfaction with their placement experience is directly related to perceptions of field supervisors' skills, how clearly field supervisors can articulate their expectations and evaluate their students fairly and how approachable they are. However, Fernandez also argues that while many supervisors are recruited on the basis of competence in practice, it cannot always be assumed that they will also be proficient in effectively facilitating a student's transition into practice. Tsui (2005) suggests that novice supervisors require considerable support until a level of confidence is reached and that only then are supervisors likely to be 'free to devote their attention to the personal needs and emotions of their supervisees'.

In addition, many human service agencies are currently experiencing

increased demand for their services which impacts upon professional workloads and in turn potentially constrains the availability and willingness of professional workers to supervise students (Davys & Beddoe, 2000; Bowles & Duncombe, 2005). Within the rural and regional human services context in Australia there are current workforce shortages (Taylor, Foster and Fleming 2008) which are further limiting the availability of eligible and experienced supervisors; supervisors located in rural areas can also feel isolated from the training institution and that their support and training as supervisors may be limited by geographical distance. Finally, the increased focus on risk management appears to be generating greater awareness and caution regarding the legal responsibilities and accountabilities of all parties involved in fieldwork education including universities, students, supervisors, organisations and agencies (Maidment, 2003). All of these factors have had the potential to constrain the field-based component within Australian social work education (Spencer & McDonald, 1998; Bowles & Duncombe, 2005).

Fieldwork education at Central Queensland University

Since 1998, Central Queensland University (CQU) has offered a Bachelor of Social Work program by distance education with both students and fieldwork supervisors typically dispersed over a wide geographical area. Traditionally, the university provided an annual, two day on site workshop for fieldwork supervisors that focused on developing their supervisory skills and facilitating their understanding of the university's problem-based curriculum and pedagogical approach to social work education (Mensinga, 2000; de Warren & Mensinga, 2004). However, given the wide geographical spread of both supervisors and students undertaking fieldwork, only a limited number of supervisors were usually able to attend field training workshops conducted on site at the university.

The project

An alternative model of training for field based supervisors was developed by academic and fieldwork staff at CQU early in 2006 with the goal of piloting and evaluating the model during 3rd and 4th year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students' fieldwork placements later in the year. The fieldwork training model was designed to provide supervisors with a choice of engagement and support tools while overseeing a BSW placement. The modalities chosen were selected to meet both the needs of busy supervisors and university academics with responsibility for providing support to fieldwork supervisors across a wide geographical area; they also reflected awareness of the increasingly demanding workplaces of supervisors.

The training program was conducted over eighteen weeks in total, beginning two weeks prior to the start of placement, continuing for the fourteen week duration of the placement and finishing two weeks after practica were completed. The staff group received a small faculty grant to implement and evaluate the model. The evaluation component of the project was conducted with ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Central Queensland University.

Participants

Potential participants for the project were drawn from the pool of fieldwork supervisors who had agreed to supervise a 3rd or 4th year BSW student from Central Queensland University in Term 2, 2006. All eligible supervisors were informed of the project and invited to participate. Due to the nature of the project and limited resources, only the first 16 participants who expressed interest and who met the participation criteria were accepted into the study.

Criteria for participation were as follows:

- Supervisors had agreed to supervise a 3rd or 4th year BSW student in Term 2 2006
- Supervisors were eligible for AASW membership and had a minimum of 2 years professional experience
- Supervisors were located within appropriate welfare and human service sectors

- Supervisors had made a commitment to participate in the project for its duration.

Once expressions of interest had been received from potential participants, individuals were mailed an Information Sheet and a Consent Form regarding the evaluation phase of the study. On receipt of the completed consent form, the Fieldwork Co-ordinator sent an email that welcomed the participant to the training program, explained the range of training options available to them and highlighted the requirements of the program evaluation. For the purposes of the project, the group was divided into three practice area groups: child protection, health and aged care, and generic social work practice. It was hoped that dividing participants into small sector-based groups would encourage communication, networking and supported discussions around supervising social work students within each field of practice.

The fieldwork training model

In the first week of the student practicum, phone contact was made with participating supervisors to confirm that the project was underway and to discuss their initial training preferences. Participants were invited to communicate freely with each other and to recontact the Fieldwork Co-ordinator regarding subsequent training needs and/or developments that potentially affected their participation.

Nine topic areas relevant to supervision, student learning and social work practice were selected as potential focus points for contact and discussion with supervisor participants throughout the training program. Topic areas were:

- preparing for a student placement
- balancing work needs and student learning needs
- supervision contracts
- learning styles
- models of supervision
- supervisory skills
- challenges in supervision
- evaluating students and
- reviewing supervisors' own learning.

The training and support modalities offered to participant supervisors were:

1. *Email*: Participants received an email from the Fieldwork Co-ordinator every fortnight throughout the program. Each email contained information and resources relevant to topic areas within the practicum. Participants within each field of practice group were introduced to each other by email with email-based group discussion and networking encouraged.
2. *Mentoring phone contacts*: Participants were offered regular supportive mentoring phone contact with either the Fieldwork Co-ordinator or an experienced practitioner teacher based at the university. Participant supervisors could nominate how they wished to participate in these phone calls, for example, to discuss training resources being provided, their own supervision frameworks, stress or time management strategies or to receive support if they or the student were experiencing difficulties on placement.
3. *Teleconferences*: One teleconference was offered to each participant group midway through student placements. This provided an opportunity for participants to discuss their supervision experiences with others in similar areas of practice and to exchange ideas and information about expectations and requirements of students on placement.

Evaluation of the fieldwork training model

Within two weeks of the completion of field placements, all supervisors were recontacted to participate in an evaluation interview about their experience of the training program. Evaluation interviews were conducted by a research assistant familiar with social work education. Interviews were based around a simple structured questionnaire and typically lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, comprising a combination of rating scales and evaluative questions. Interviews were audio-taped with participants' permission and later transcribed for analysis.

The questionnaire used to guide the interviews elicited the following types of information: details regarding participants and the organisations in which they worked; ratings of participant satisfaction

with the training program overall and each of its components; perceptions and experiences regarding the training program, its benefits and limitations, its contribution to the development of knowledge and skills around supervision and to the sense of connection with the university; and finally, suggestions for improvements to fieldwork training for supervisors.

Data analyses

Analysis of questionnaire data provided simple statistical descriptions of supervisors and their associated organisations; ratings of satisfaction with the training program and its components; selected perceptions and experiences associated with the program; and open-ended comments regarding questionnaire items. Interview data were analysed according to questions asked and conceptual themes within question areas.

Findings

The sample of participants

Fourteen fieldwork supervisors participated in the study, all of whom practised in Central or South East Queensland. Twelve participants were female. Four participants were employed in the child protection sector, four in health, and six in generic fields of social work practice. Regarding geographical spread of participants, nine were based in regional cities while five were located in country towns that ranged from populations of fifty thousand to less than ten thousand people.

Although original criteria for participation had included AASW membership eligibility and two years professional experience, two supervisors with human service qualifications and who had acted as 'task' supervisors of social work students (AASW 2000) requested participation and were accepted into the study. All participants reported having previous experience supervising BSW students on fieldwork placements: one participant had supervised twenty six students, six

had supervised between three and six students and one participant had supervised one student.

Evaluations and perceptions of the fieldwork training model

Participants were asked to rate the fieldwork training model overall along with each of its components (email, mentoring and teleconferences). Table 1 summarises these ratings.

Table 1
Participant rating of fieldwork training model

| | Excellent | Good | Fair | Less than expected | Poor | N/A* |
|---------------------|-----------|------|------|-----------------------|------|------|
| Overall Program | 7 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Emails | 6 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| The Mentoring | 9 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| The Teleconferences | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 |

* denotes non-participation

Thirteen of the fourteen participants rated their overall level of satisfaction with the training program as 'excellent' or 'good'. Participants reported the overall program was useful due to its flexibility and multi-modal form of delivery. Eleven participants reported that the program resulted in them feeling more connected to the university with the remaining three reporting that their existing connection had been further enhanced. While participants commended the overall support provided by the program, most identified a preference for one modality of support and training. Some participants reported time constraints in the workplace which had affected their use of the program but noted that the regular contact of the university served to refocus their attention on the needs of the student.

One participant, for example, commented on the usefulness of being able to access the training resources when they were needed:

I give it top marks basically I really valued it. I think I really liked the fact that it was spread out over those 18 weeks. It was happening while you were supervising the student. That was really timely. You can go to a two day course on it and

before the student comes, you get all this stuff... and so I felt that with the little bits over the longer period of time was really beneficial and you really took in a lot more and it helped you to reflect on your practice and therefore expand your knowledge

Another participant commented positively on how the training was delivered and that information was appropriately provided for their learning needs:

I think the level of professionalism and the level of interaction whether it be by email, phone contact or otherwise, was more than adequate. I thought any instructions provided were very clear, there wasn't too much information or too many directions provided

Another participant described the value of the program in terms of its availability, reliability and provision of helpful support throughout the student practicum:

I don't know that I made the best use of it sometimes for various reasons, but you just knew that there was a person there. There was [sic] the emails, there was the teleconferences, you just knew it was there and what you did access was worthwhile.

Evaluation of the email component

Eleven of the fourteen participants rated the email component with attached resource materials as 'excellent' or 'good'. In general, participants reported that the articles met their needs and provided them with materials to reflect on as well as to discuss with their students. The following quotations reflect participants' perceptions:

I enjoyed the articles. I don't have time to do much research myself, so I enjoyed ... I'll read them if someone else gives them to me, so that was excellent

...it had some good models of supervision, good reading that I could apply

I really enjoyed getting the emails ... umm like I said ... I've used a lot of it with my work with students. I've actually learnt a lot myself and it actually ... personally ... it's rekindled a passion to go back to study.

Participants who rated the email component less well cited time as the major obstacle and found the lack of contributions to the email discussions disappointing. One participant noted that if participating supervisors had initially met each other face to face, they may have been more prepared to discuss the articles on line throughout the program. However, another found the emails '*a bit chatty for my liking*'. One of the participants suggested that:

... I would find short dot point sort of suggestions or stuff like that to be much more useful..... just as far as time goes for the reading...

Evaluation of the mentoring component

The mentoring component was well received with 64% of participants (9/14) rating it as 'excellent'; less experienced supervisors in particular appeared to utilise the mentoring component well. Participants discussed a range of issues with their mentors including reflections on supervisory roles, challenges, competencies and frameworks, social work theory and practice and social work within the rural context.

Participants reported appreciating the regular individualised contact with their mentors and found it very supportive.

... it was over the telephone and I was a bit concerned about the limitations that it had, but I really connected well with the mentor and again really just practical and timely suggestions and it didn't take long and an hour a fortnight wasn't too much time to commit or anything

I would certainly recommend that they continue with that ... although I had a very good student and there weren't many issues cropping up ... I could see that if you did have some issues cropping up it would be a fantastic opportunity to talk to someone who is not involved in a confidential setting to get resources and to reflect on that.

...I thought it was good to have people check in and make sure you were doing OK and if you had any questions

Of the two participants who rated the mentoring component as either

‘fair’ or less than expected’, one reported that this was more a reflection of their level of supervision experience than of the program itself:

You see ... it was more based on one’s need and I know that some of the social workers who were fairly new to the social work game had actually, you know, used it quite significantly and I think that is what it is for ... I wasn’t in need of a lot of support and therefore it was there at the level I needed...

The other participant reported that they *would have preferred to replace [the mentoring component] with another teleconference or a couple of teleconferences.*

Evaluation of the teleconference component

The teleconference component within the program was least useful according to participant ratings. Five fieldwork supervisors did not participate in the teleconferences because they were unaware of when they were being held or they were away at the time.

Of those who did participate, people highlighted the benefits of sharing their experiences with others and talking to each other in ‘real time’.

... I think it is really useful to be able to explore those things in real time, have a conversation and it was actually easy for us to do that because it was ... planned in advance and we were able to set aside that time and it was good to hear what other people’s experiences were so yeah I did find that quite useful

The teleconferencing... I found that to be probably the most ... practical and useful for me overall. I think also the emails combined with that. The short emails between all the supervisors I thought was good, you know, just different suggestions about what we do, what we set up.

One participant also noted that

I am not a very good teleconference person so ... it just wasn’t my cup of tea.

Perceptions of the impact of the fieldwork training model on supervision approaches and time

Eight of the fourteen participants reported that the fieldwork training program had encouraged a change (if only minor) in their approach to supervising students on their field placement. Recognition of the need to pay attention to the structure of the placement and supervision sessions was directly attributed to the timely arrival of articles via email. The conversations with the mentor and other colleagues were cited by participants as providing valuable opportunities to reflect on their practice:

...the information and the conversation and the questions that were put up were very relevant ... and so that did help you think about what you were doing and how you were doing it.

While six participants reported that they did not think their approach had changed as a result of participating in the training, three indicated an increased awareness about the importance of the supervisory role:

[it] served as a reminder to kind of make sure that the realities that they are students and to maintain a more regular supervision, like it was good in the sense to keep you on track when some times, particularly with good students, you can be a bit tempted to just let them go and then think that once a week supervision is enough and at least this type of process did to not allow that to happen, the emails served as a constant reminder...

Twelve participants also provided brief statements regarding how participation in the fieldwork training program had impacted on their time. Responses were split almost evenly between those who said that participation in this type of training had significantly impacted on their time and those who indicated the opposite. Comments representing the former position included *[verbatim] I made the time for the mentoring as I got a lot out of it; it did take time but I could be flexible to suit myself; I had to make time [for it]; it took time but spending the time saved time*. Regarding the latter, participants' statements included: *[it didn't take] a lot [of time], [I] don't get involved if [I'm] not interested; [it] didn't take a lot of time, but that is how I arranged it. I could be flexible; [it took] very little [work time] as I would take readings home.*

Perceptions of supervisor training over distance

Participants were asked to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of undertaking fieldwork training over distance as had been provided in this project. When reflecting on the advantages, many chose to highlight the accessibility and flexibility of the pilot program, particularly for those in rural areas.

As a rural worker, supervision is very important. In the city you can talk to other workers, have communication with any number of people. In rural areas, even with one student, there is no one to talk to. This program is very important to rural workers and new people ... to be able to talk about the things you're doing ... get support from each other.

Others drew attention to the usefulness of having regular contact 'to keep you on track' while having a student on placement, the novelty of the program itself and the benefits of not having to travel. Other perceived advantages included feeling linked to and personally supported by the university, the usefulness of the program for new supervisors and its provision of current supervision-related materials and resources, greater formality around student supervision and its capacity to link supervisors, especially those in rural areas, with each other.

Regarding perceived disadvantages of engaging with fieldwork training over distance, some participants reported difficulty in finding time to participate in the program while others commented that some of the modalities could have been enhanced by having a face to face meeting at the start of the program. While acknowledging that the program was a pilot project, participants believed that understanding more clearly what to expect at the outset would also have enhanced the process. One participant noted:

I guess the only disadvantage was ... not knowing what to expect going into the program ... perhaps more information about the program and the times [required] that supervisors can kind of lock into their diaries .

Perceptions of the organisational context impacting on the training program

Most participants reported that their agencies, at least in theory, had provided approval for them to participate in the training program. Some acknowledged that they organised their own time to incorporate the training as best they could while others who managed their own programs had less difficulty in organising their time.

Participants were also asked about the recognition and support provided by their agencies for the supervision of social work students. Twelve participants reported that their agencies were very or reasonably keen to acknowledge the importance of supervision of social work students while two were uncertain about their agency's commitment. Thirteen of the fourteen participants felt that their agencies supported their supervisory responsibilities and interests very well or reasonably well in terms of workload. At the same time however, all but one participant reported that their agencies still expected that regular work loads would be maintained. One participant responded to this question with some surprise:

...that's a good question, actually no. Same workload, so that is actually a very good point which is something I hadn't even considered ... so maybe that is why I didn't have the time to sit down and respond to things or to have more conversations with my mentor or the other supervisors in the office, because we maintain our normal caseload as well.

The majority of participants reported that the flexible nature of the program's three components had assisted them in deciding and managing if, when and how they would participate. For example, emails could be 'followed up later', readings could be undertaken when time permitted and mentor appointments could be arranged when convenient. One participant stated that managing their time had proved challenging however another noted:

I really valued the support because it hadn't been there previously and I found the mentoring helpful. The time there really saved me time in the long run because I could clarify my thoughts and goals.

Suggested improvements for fieldwork training

As indicated earlier, the email and telephone mentoring components of the program were nominated by most participants as being most helpful. Where provided, suggestions for improving fieldwork training for supervisors included meeting other supervisors first (two participants), having a choice of university based, distance-based or a combination of both training options (three participants) and having more teleconferences (two participants).

Discussion

This paper reports upon an innovative, flexible model of training and support for regionally-based fieldwork educators in Australia, whose perspectives and experiences have been relatively under-represented within the literature. While this project has been discussed in relation to the geographically specific context of Central Queensland, it is likely that universities involved in providing flexible education to students and supervisors generally will share similar challenges. Thus, while fieldwork education programs are contextually, culturally and historically embedded in their own localities, elements of this program may be valuable for other educators to apply or adapt.

Overall the fieldwork training program was evaluated positively. The program's flexibility and multi-faceted training and support options enabled supervisors to adapt training and support to suit their own learning styles and their unique organisational contexts. This is consistent with the effectiveness of learning when it is needed wherein supervisors reported benefits from being able to engage simultaneously in experiential learning and reflective practice, both important components of effective supervision (Spencer & McDonald, 1998; Cooper, 2000; Zorga, 2002; Cousins, 2004; Morrell, 2005). As a result, practitioners were able to enhance their professional and personal development and gain insight via reflection of their experiences, enabling the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experiences (Zorga, 2002).

Of the training components, the personalised mentoring component was rated most useful and teleconferences least useful. While mentoring

has been found to be a relevant strategy to support and empower social workers' professional development (Collins, 1994; Bourn & Bootle, 2005; Wilson & Tilse, 2006; Caldwell, 2006), our study indicates that it is also potentially useful for field supervisors when incorporated into a field education training program. Mentoring is time intensive however and requires appropriate resource allocation in order to be effective.

The attempt through this program to establish supervision networks between supervisors in similar fields of practice was less successful than anticipated. This is consistent with Wenger's (2000) assertion that *informal* processes are more successful when supporting 'communities of practice'. Given that the CQU fieldwork program services a large geographical area and that participants were time- and resource-poor, there was, and continues to be, little opportunity for supervisors to meet and form a supervision-based 'community of practice'. While this could be a focus for future projects, a current lack of resources and the improbability of having the same fieldwork supervisors involved in supervising students each year makes such a community of practice unlikely, at least within a supervision-specific context only. All participants however reported enhanced relationship and sense of connection with the university and several reported feeling less isolated in their supervisory roles. Since developing partnerships between the university and field-based educators constitutes core business for universities involved in social work education, a continued focus on developing methods for consolidating such relationships is worth pursuing (Spencer & McDonald, 1998; Reisch & Jarmon-Rhode, 2000; Bowles & Duncombe, 2005).

Fernandez reported that field supervisors were enthusiastic about becoming more equipped to perform their role and that they '...felt the need for more knowledge and support when assessing students, especially when students are failing placement' (2003 p. 110). Due to the supervisory nature and responsibility of the field education role, training should encompass strategies for field supervisors to deal effectively with the unequal division of power, as many are unprepared for this position and '...have difficulty adjusting to their new authority' (Cousins 2004 p. 179). Participants in this study, particularly new supervisors, affirmed the importance of having appropriate support and knowledge when developing competence in their supervision roles.

Bogo and Globberman (1999) highlight the relevance of organisational theory in understanding factors that influence positive education

outcomes for social work practitioners. They identified the importance of the organisation's commitment to education, available resources and supports, ability to develop and maintain effective interpersonal relationships with the university, and finally the willingness to develop collaborative relationships. These factors are worth considering in light of current organisational and economic competition, within rural, metropolitan and global contexts which have emerged as a governing contemporary paradigm (Bowles & Duncombe, 2005).

Bogo and Globerman (1999) also reported that organisations, regardless of setting, generally demonstrated a commitment to the ongoing education of social work students, including a commitment to ensuring that students are integrated into the organisation and have their learning needs and interests considered. The capacity to deliver quality fieldwork education requires organisational commitment as well as appropriate resource allocation. While participants in this study reported positive organisational support for having social work students on practica, participants also reported that their total workloads had not been adjusted to accommodate the extra responsibilities of supervision. While it can be assumed that lack of access to appropriate technology can influence the success of training across distance, it is worth noting that participants in this study reported personalised mentoring and email to be the most helpful modalities for enhancing their supervisory competency and that time was the major constraining factor. Some participants suggested the benefit of having a choice between on-site or flexible training options although the goal of most universities in the current context of economic restraint is to adopt the training modality that will bring the greatest benefit to the greatest number of supervisors.

Further research regarding other dimensions of field supervisors' experiences is suggested. As Spencer and McDonald assert, a greater insight into the variables related to field education would transpire if the '...perspectives of those directly involved in field education...' are considered (1998 p.12). The perceptions and experiences of larger numbers of participants regarding flexible training models particularly in rural and regional contexts would also be valuable. Fernandez (2003) and Cousins (2004) both identify gaps in research in relation to skill and support requirements required to prepare workers for the supervisory role. Cousins also recommends further review of existing professional development opportunities in order to gain a greater

understanding of what ‘...social work supervisors feel would allow them to openly explore the inherent difficulties and tensions in the role’ (2004, p. 184). Bogo and Globerman (1999) note the need for a better conceptual understanding of the ‘complex and important relationships’ between organisations and universities in regard to fieldwork education which is consistent with the view that universities should take a lead role in developing models that effectively support such collaborative partnerships especially relating to field education (Bennett & Coe, 1998; Spencer & McDonald, 1998; Reisch & Jarman-Rhode, 2000).

The limitations of the pilot study and its evaluation are worth noting. As a pilot study, only a small number of participants could be included; limited university resources were also constraining. Participants self-selected into the study and cannot be said to represent Central Queensland fieldwork supervisors in general.

In spite of these limitations, this project has continued to significantly influence the field education programs in both of the regional universities with which the authors are affiliated. In particular, the email and mentoring components which were positively evaluated by supervisors in the pilot project have been maintained in varying degrees within both field education programs, particularly in regard to offering support and training to first-time supervisors.

Conclusion

Field-based supervision of social work students is a critical component of professional education. With a growing trend towards flexible and distance modes of social work education, orientating, training and supporting field educators to provide quality practicum experiences for students will be increasingly important. Models that provide a range of flexible learning components, including mentoring, and which can address diverse learning and supervisory styles of supervisors as well as increasingly demanding organisational contexts are important to consider. Such models can be developed and contextualised to specific educational sites but in principle provide a responsive and flexible approach to the challenges of contemporary field work education in social work.

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