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Educating Social Workers in the Midst of COVID-19: The Value of a Principles-led Approach to Designing Educational Experiences during the Pandemic

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Abstract

Social work education in Australia in the midst of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) would not have been possible under our pre-pandemic accreditation standards due to assumptions about best practice in higher education that were not possible to enact during the pandemic. Rather than immediately arguing for a new set of standards, as Heads of Social Work programmes the authors of this paper promoted a principles-led approach to inform ‘the right’ way—in an ethical sense—of ensuring social work education could continue in Australia during the pandemic. This meant conceptualising the challenges of delivering social work education in a pandemic as being not only practical but also ethical in their nature. Using examples of how this approach guided the design of adaptive online teaching and field education placements at our universities, we consider the future possibilities for ethical and rules-based governance approaches to social work education. How students learn is changing and what they are learning will help them respond to the immediate and future needs arising from the pandemic. As such, rather than having their education compromised by COVID-19, social work students at the time of the pandemic and into the future may in fact benefit from the changes that have emerged during this period.

Keywords: accreditation standards, Australia, COVID-19, disasters, ethics, social work education

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Teaser text

Having found the existing standards that focus on how social work is taught to be unworkable during the pandemic, we sought to adapt our programmes in ways which we hoped would produce graduates with attributes consistent with the profession's expectations of the capabilities of a social worker. However, as the pre-pandemic standards tend to be based on tradition, the underlying principles on which they were based were often not readily apparent. Hence, at the crux of our argument in this article is that a principles-based and values-led approach is crucial to any future reimagining exercise of a more flexible model of governance and delivery of social work education.

Our experiences suggest that rather than having their education compromised by COVID-19, social work students at the time of the pandemic and into the future may in fact benefit from the changes that have emerged during this period. For example, students continue to undertake supervised projects that enable them to work independently to assist effective responses to agency specific and client specific issues. How students learn is changing and what they are learning will help them respond to the immediate and future needs arising from the pandemic.

Introduction

Disasters are an uncomfortable reality for the individuals and communities who live on our planet. The impact of disasters is often disproportionately experienced by those members of communities who were already most disadvantaged and had least financial and other resources. As such, social workers not only need to be able to respond to disasters, but also have the skills and knowledge that enable them to respond to chaotic situations resulting in them being among first-line responders in disaster situations (Alston *et al.*, 2019).

Social work education also needs to be able to respond to disasters (Maidment and Brook, 2014), but highly prescriptive accreditation standards create difficulties when innovative responses are required (Williams and Sewpaul, 2004; Healy, 2019). When COVID-19 led to closures of university campuses and many placement providers were no longer in a position to host students for the practice learning components of their degrees, one option for social work education programmes was to cease some activities until they were once again possible. Potentially, this would prevent students graduating and not address the needs of employers and the community for a skilled workforce. The alternative was that social work education had to change to respond rapidly to the changing needs of our stakeholders, including students, placement agencies and communities. However, this would require significant efforts to redesign the delivery of social work education that had previously taken place in physical classrooms and the presence of students in placement agencies.

Member organisations of the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work (ACHSSW) (at which the authors represent their respective

universities) were confident that they could continue to provide educational opportunities that would meet the required social work learning outcomes identified in the 'Australian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards' ([Australian Association of Social Workers \(AASW\), 2020a](#)). However, ACHSSW members agreed that some changes to the existing guidelines were needed to allow alternate processes for providing and monitoring learning opportunities, particularly in field education. The views expressed in this article are our own and emerge from managing the personal and professional challenges associated with the disaster locally in our own universities. As a prescriptive approach to social work education accreditation standards proved problematic, we frame the challenges of delivering social work education under pandemic conditions as ethical dilemmas and present how a principles-led approach helped us to design alternate learning opportunities for online teaching and in field education. We conclude the paper by reflecting on the possibilities of principles-based approaches when considering future approaches to the governance of social work in higher education.

The suitability of prescriptive accreditation standards for social work education in disasters

The regulatory environment for social work in Australia is unique in that the accrediting body for social work education is the professional association, i.e. the AASW, which provides a range of services to its members, who are qualified social workers. As there is no registration of social workers, the AASW also adjudicates on complaints of unethical conduct, but as membership is voluntary, only has jurisdiction over members ([Healy, 2019](#)), of whom it has been estimated constitute approximately one-third of Australian Social Workers ([Parliament of South Australia, 2020](#)).

The accreditation standards for social work education in Australia have historically been highly prescriptive and were becoming more so over time as new risks emerged that potentially needed to be managed ([AASW, 2000, 2008, 2015](#)). This trend reflects a rules-based approach that foregrounds procedural requirements ([Arjoon, 2006](#)). So prescriptive were the standards published in 2017 ([AASW, 2017](#)) that members of the ACHSSW voted unanimously to reject them as excessively detailed and resulting in a very narrow understanding of the conditions required for effectively educating the next generation of social workers. As a result, new less detailed standards were developed ([AASW, 2020a](#)), which are more in line with international and national trends to minimise the level of specificity in accreditation documents ([PhillipsKPA, 2017](#)). This shift aligns with a 'principles-based' model of

governance that sets a standard of 'comply and explain', which contrasts with the 'comply or else' standpoint of rules-based approaches (Arjoon, 2006, p. 58)

Highly prescriptive accreditation standards presume that perfect conditions must be in place for good student learning to occur. Furthermore, social work students who are able to acknowledge uncertainty may actually be more competent practitioners (Spafford *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, reflecting on social work education in Hong Kong after the 2003 SARS epidemic, Lam *et al.* (2004) have argued that an education that is highly prescriptive does not adequately prepare students for working in contexts which are characterised by uncertainty.

In the USA, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) has emphasised that it is not just the content in the explicit curriculum, but also the implicit curriculum that is important. While implicit curriculum has often been taken to mean having a diversity of staff in terms of gender and ethnicity, the implicit curriculum also applies to the accreditation standards by which social work educators frame and implement their programmes. In many Australian social work programmes, students are made aware of the accreditation standards, particularly as they relate to field education, and as educators it is not uncommon for us to find ourselves debating the meaning of particular standards with individual students. While social work educators are often frustrated by students who demand to be taught prescriptive approaches to practice, student expectations are consistent with the implicit curriculum of highly prescriptive accreditation guidelines.

However, inflexible approaches to practice often cannot be applied in disaster situations. When disasters occur, social workers who are deployed to work with affected communities typically find themselves in makeshift work environments where they need to be able to adapt to working in less-than-ideal conditions, without proper offices or communication systems (Cooper *et al.*, 2018). Yet, these less-than-ideal working conditions can provide excellent opportunities for student learning, provided students and placement providers are willing to and capable of making adaptations. For example, social work students involved in group projects after the New Zealand earthquakes of 2010–2011, were able to make a 'significant contribution to rebuilding the earthquake-devastated city of Christchurch and surrounding districts' (Maidment and Brook, 2014, p. 83). Nevertheless, while real-world immersions have the potential to provide valuable learning about the realities of practice in the midst of uncertainty, some students struggled with the 'messiness' (Maidment and Brook, 2014, p. 82) of practice at a time when predictability could not be assumed.

Disasters can provide excellent learning opportunities for social work students, but rapid decision making can lead to overlooking ethical

principles (Taylor and White, 2006) and values, such as social justice, which are pivotal in social work education (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2019), being disregarded when it comes to either students or educators. For example, during SARS in Hong Kong, there were students who were told they were lacking professionalism if they did not attend placements which they judged placed them at risk of infection (Leung *et al.*, 2007).

The Chinese word for crisis brings together notions of ‘danger’ and ‘opportunity’ (Somerville, 2007). The opportunities for new ways of working during the pandemic, and the amassing of evidence as to whether these are viable in the longer term, is an example of what Clayton Christenson has termed ‘disruptive innovation’. First proposed in the late 1990s in respect of organisations, arguably it also applies in respect of processes such as social work education. Christenson argued it was not sufficient to just keep doing things well, but that continual evolution was required to remain cutting edge (Christenson *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, there are many stakeholders who vociferously argue that processes and guidelines, which have for long periods shaped social work education, should remain unchanged and even undiscussed (Crisp, 2017). This is despite increasing recognition that the accreditation guidelines for social work education seem to be arbitrary, with the principles on which they are based not readily apparent. Internationally, there is no agreement as to what social work education should involve and how it should occur (Healy, 2019). While differences in regulatory standards may in part reflect different cultural contexts (Banks, 2012), the extent of variation between countries in respect of standards for social work education suggests that much of the content, and how it is expressed, is somewhat by chance (Crisp and Dinham, 2019) and based on tradition and beliefs about what works rather than empirical evidence (Healy, 2019).

In the next section of this article, we reflect on how foregrounding social work values and ethics provided an important focus for resisting a prescriptive response to the pandemic, enabling innovative approaches for the delivery of social work education in Australia.

Responding to the ethical challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic using a principles-led approach

In March 2020, on-campus teaching ceased in Australian universities, which remained the case for most until early 2021. As Australian social work programmes were grappling with how to provide alternate learning experiences that would deliver equivalent learning outcomes, the CSWE issued a statement allowing for US social work placements to be reduced by up to 15 per cent (CSWE, 2020). Some members of the ACHSSW proposed that the Council should request the same reduction

for Australian social work students. Other suggestions as to how the modifications of the current standards might enable programmes to continue preparing students for graduation were also emerging. With the exception of the requirement for face-to-face contact, overwhelmingly the proposed changes under consideration by various stakeholders focused on field education.

These suggestions had obvious merit given the practical problem of delivering social work education and other social work services under pandemic conditions: the need to reduce the risks of shared space, adhere to social distancing requirements, and ‘stay at home’ to contain the spread of the virus. However, it is important to recognise that the practical problems emerging from COVID-19 have created specific ethical dilemmas for social workers (see, e.g. Xafis *et al.*, 2020). Reflecting on social workers’ accounts of these dilemmas, Banks (2020, p. 4) has emphasised the need for ‘slow ethics’ and ‘ethical vigilance’. This approach recognises ‘the time and mental energy needed to consider all the implications of every choice and decision, some of which were previously regarded as routine’ (Banks, 2020, p. 4). It is therefore important to resist defining COVID-19 practice issues as purely technical and instrumental in nature as this can lead to an over reliance on rules-based governance (including prescriptive accreditation standards) without properly considering the value of ethical governance approaches.

A principles-based approach to governance ‘searches for principles for guidance, general understandings that help to make moral decisions in a variety of circumstances, and assists in discovering the morally relevant aspects of decisions’ (Arjoon, 2006, p. 67). There are negative risks associated with both rules-based and principles-based approaches. For example, rules-based approaches can: be rigid; force responses without due consideration about what might be fair; result in absolutism rather than thoughtful decision making; limit innovation by emphasising ‘rules-based solutions’ and minimise the importance of moral and ethical perspectives (Arjoon, 2006, p. 72). Principles-based approaches are problematic if they are too generalisable. Compliance is then determined by a review of multiple interpretations, which suggests competition between individual perspectives. Consequently, debating principles can add costly time delays (Arjoon, 2006, p. 72). Ensuring ethical and effective standards of governance is important at all times, but this is especially important when faced with high-risk situations.

As Heads of Social Work education programmes, we found it useful to conceptualise the challenges of delivering social work education in the pandemic first and foremost as ethical dilemmas. It enabled us to think about our collective leadership challenge beyond issues of compliance with accreditation standards. By framing our task as a matter of ethical leadership, we were able to analyse the ‘accreditation issue’ from another perspective. For example, one of the authors of this paper

(Stanford) noted the risks of identifying modified accreditation standards without having considered the underlying principles that should inform any changes. One specific risk was to inadvertently disadvantage students and other stakeholders who needed to be assured that a graduate social worker is competent, irrespective of when they completed their degree. This insight led to developing a set of values-based principles to guide decision making at her university that were adapted and presented to Council. After they were debated, the agreed principles of the ACHSSW focussed on: emphasising student well-being; providing compassionate and flexible options; supporting affected communities; encouraging new partnerships and collaborative approaches; prioritising student and community safety and promoting accountability through development of an evidence base of our collective impact as social work educators through the pandemic. These principles were considered alongside a proposal to modify accreditation standards that were developed by a working group of the Council (the authors of this article were not members of the working group). In turn, both documents were sent by the ACHSSW to the accrediting body who agreed with the Council's proposal and published the adjusted guidelines on their website (AASW, 2020b).

The remainder of this article presents examples of how the authors applied these principles to develop adaptive strategies in the areas of on-line teaching delivery and field education at their universities—Deakin University, University of Tasmania and University of South Australia. At the time of writing this article, the results of formal evaluations of the changes we made to our programmes were not available.

Disruptive innovations in teaching

As the pandemic hit, social work educators across Australia found themselves unable to rely on the physical classroom as their chief mode of teaching. As in other disciplines and countries, the past two decades have seen an increasing incorporation of online learning into Australian social work education (Davis *et al.*, 2019; McAuliffe, 2019). In many social work schools around the country, social work programmes are delivered in an online or distance mode (Davis *et al.*, 2019), with some programmes opting for a mix of in-classroom learning and online learning within individual courses, including 'blended learning', which involves multiple learning modes and 'flipped classrooms' (Alammary *et al.*, 2014). Although distance education is allowed, the Australian accreditation standards for social work include the requirement that twenty days of learning across social work degrees for all students must occur face-to-face, in the physical classroom (AASW, 2020a). This is in contrast to the USA, which also accredits distance learning but has non-

face-to-face requirements (CSWE, 2015). In 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, it was impossible for Australian social work educators and schools to meet the face-to-face accreditation requirement in the context of campus closures and social distancing.

In a matter of weeks, most if not all teaching in Australian universities were moved online and most campuses were closed. As noted earlier, in response to these unprecedented circumstances, the ACHSSW worked with the social work education accrediting body to ensure that there would be flexibility about applying accreditation standards during the COVID-19 period. This included relaxing the requirement for students to participate in face-to-face learning in the classroom and an acceptance of online methods as an alternative. There are diverse views about the relative merits of online learning among higher education academics (Sahin, 2010). In particular, and understandably, social work educators often express concerns about whether it is possible to undertake practice-based learning in an online mode, let alone make a good job of it. The disruption wrought by the pandemic therefore presented us with a 'live experiment' where the possibilities of online social work skills development could be tested, albeit with the recognition that some social work educators and schools were already innovating and extending themselves in this regard prior to COVID-19.

As the year unfolded, reports began to emerge from Australian social work educators of practice-based teaching and learning using online methods (see, e.g. Morley and Clarke, 2020). In one example from the University of South Australia, social work educators utilised Zoom tutorials to facilitate the development of practice skills in social work interviewing, learning that would normally occur in physical classrooms or studios on campus. After knowledge-based online sessions focused on the components and stages of social work interviewing, student triads met in online break-out groups to practice undertaking the different stages of a social work interview, taking in turn the roles of social worker, client and observer around a particular case scenario. The educators moved in and out of the break-out groups to monitor student progress and provide clarification and feedback. In another example, students practised online group facilitation, receiving constructive feedback from the educator and fellow students. A formal exploration of the outcomes associated with these online skills development innovations is to follow, but student feedback has been positive and the educators believe that student learning outcomes were successfully achieved, perhaps in some cases to a higher level than in the usual physical classroom setting. As is pointed out by Davis *et al.* (2019), there is existing evidence that there are no significant differences in student learning in social work practice skills when in-classroom modes are compared with online modes (Okech *et al.*, 2014; Cummings *et al.*, 2015).

It is important to emphasise that the educators in the examples presented here also drew on a mix of learning strategies, including active learning methods. Educators were present in real time during the practice-based learning activities, both in the larger online groups and the smaller break-out groups, while asynchronous access to lectures, reading materials and quizzes were also incorporated. The utilisation of mixed learning strategies that include active learning, synchronous and asynchronous strategies, and strong teacher presence, have been emphasised by researchers as central to good design of online learning (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020). While the experience of educators and students in online practice teaching at the University of South Australia were reportedly positive, it is important to be aware that student factors play a role in whether online methods are successful (Lawrence and Abel, 2013). In particular, the age of students, experience with online environments and family responsibilities have been shown to influence whether online learning leads to positive learning outcomes for social work students (Lawrence and Abel, 2013). Moreover, any consideration of the value of online learning in social work education through this period of the pandemic must take into account the influence of the pandemic itself. For example, it is conceivable that students are more open to, and engaged with, online learning in the context of a pandemic than they may be in the ordinary course of events, when so much in their lives has changed and they may be starved of their usual levels of social contact and activity.

Another important consideration is that family responsibilities increased during the pandemic due to the periodic closures of schools and childcare centres, with the burden of increased care falling disproportionately on women. Just as the capacities of women with children to undertake paid work have been severely reduced because of COVID-19 (Power, 2020), so their efforts to study are also likely to have been undermined to varying extents. While online learning might offer greater flexibility to those carrying increased caring responsibilities during this period, participation in synchronous activities at certain times of the day may be more difficult than for other students. Future developments in online social work education therefore need to account for the gender and other intersectional barriers that might be faced by particular groups of students in an effort to avoid worsening gender and other social inequalities down track, including uneven access to digital technology (Willems *et al.*, 2019); this is a particularly important consideration for social work education with its commitment to social justice.

In addition to extending online teaching into practice-based learning in response to COVID-19 restrictions, educators also refined and extended the online learning strategies in their knowledge-based courses. In particular, rather than relying on discussion boards and forums, greater use was made of Zoom tutorials and educators experimented

with designing a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning strategies in these courses as well. At the University of Tasmania, this included incorporating examples and case studies that were emerging as the pandemic impacted the Australian state of Tasmania, which brought a strong sense of immediacy and relevance to what was being learnt.

The disruptive opportunities brought by COVID-19 not only provided opportunities for social work educators to extend their online teaching and learning into new areas that had largely been reserved for the physical classroom, but also to contest long-held assumptions that practice-based learning in particular could only be taught successfully face-to-face. The next step is for educators to systematically evaluate the outcomes associated with these innovations and for this and other evidence to inform the iterative development of social work accreditation standards into the future. In doing so, social workers need to be firmly in the present when judging technologies for practice and recognising the changes in the wider world which have come about from adaptive uses of technologies during the pandemic (Mohan, 2018).

Disruptive innovations in field education

By mid-March 2020, it was not just closures of university campuses occupying the minds of social work educators but also increasing closures of many of the organisations in which students were, or could be, placed. Like universities, there were also welfare agencies which overnight went from having staff working in the organisation's offices to working from home. From colleagues in both Australia and abroad we were hearing of some universities cancelling all field education placements, with others allowing placements to continue but placing limitations on face-to-face contacts with service users and staff.

All three authors were in universities which, after assessing the immediate and future risks that our students, community partners and other stakeholders faced if placements could not proceed this year, decided that placements were still possible during the pandemic. Nevertheless, each university realised that if we were to mitigate these risks, we needed to reduce our reliance on external partners to provide placements, which led us to question what was possible and under what conditions.

At the University of South Australia, an initial response was that there were lots of opportunities that could be considered to ensure students were getting their placement and skills training in creative ways, for example, by providing additional skills training sessions in the recovery period or tele-counselling during the crisis that could be recorded and reviewed by field supervisors. The university had also established an onsite Community Centre from which students placed at the centre

provided outreach services to the local community. While these adaptations appeared to offer sound placement opportunities for students, it is important to consider potential drawbacks, too, and how these might be redressed. For example, some students' levels of engagement with social work agencies are likely to have been reduced during COVID-19 lockdowns and planning for subsequent placements should take this into account.

At Deakin University, where there was already a cohort of students on placement in the first half of 2020, the initial priority was to support students continue in their learning and for this to remain a valuable learning experience. For some students, placements were able to continue with minimal or no modifications necessary. For example, students on placement in their own workplace could continue their placement, albeit recognising that learning tasks may be altered. A second group of students for whom placements were potentially able to continue with relatively few changes involved those working on projects not requiring face-to-face contact. However, for many students, substantial modifications were required to enable their placements to proceed. For students involved in face-to-face contact with clients or other stakeholders, an initial question was whether another suitable role could be found within the organisation or whether face-to-face contact with service users, colleagues and supervisors could occur online, with the possibility of students working off-site.

The scope of social work practice in the Australian accreditation standards includes a wide range of methods including 'community work; counselling and interviewing; advocacy and direct action; policy development and implementation; and research' (AASW, 2020a, p. 24). Discussions were held with both students and placement providers as to whether there were projects, which would benefit the organisation and enable the student to meet the required learning outcomes. It was envisaged that projects that could be undertaken by students might include but were not limited to: service audits; policy development; literature reviews; planning and conducting research projects; data analysis and organising an online conference/symposium/training event. Deakin University already had some experience of auspicing project-based placements in which students could participate in while working from home (Crisp and Hosken, 2016; Crisp, 2018), but prior to 2020 these placements had involved only a few students.

Project placements that students could undertake from home enabled several students to undertake placements who would not otherwise have been in the position to do so. This was particularly so for those students who had parental responsibilities and were living in Melbourne, where the longest lockdown, including closures of schools and non-essential services, lasted approximately 110 days. However, this type of placement was not suited to all students. In addition to a high degree of

self-motivation and a suitable place to work within the home, project placements are unlikely to be suitable for first placement students unless they have prior work experience in a setting providing social work services. In terms of resources, establishment and ongoing support of an effective project placement required a much greater investment of university staff time than the usual processes of allocating students to agencies. Commitment to the placement by staff in partner organisations by ensuring students had access to agency resources, participated in relevant meetings and training was also critical. For several students, being home-based was no different from the staff in partner organisations who they were working with. Furthermore, students who worked alongside agency staff who were also home-based, gained first-hand experience of how human service organisations can adapt during a crisis.

The University of Tasmania was in the fortunate position of being able to take a planned approach to designing an alternative placement model to address the needs of students and their communities as the placement programme typically commences after May. This meant there was time to consider how a principles and values-led approach could support the redesign of placements offered by the university. This sparked the creativity needed to achieve the civic mission of the social work programme to align with a critical ethics of care (Pease *et al.*, 2018) that is integral to the social work framework at the university. Not having to reconfigure placements, which had already commenced, the pandemic stimulated conceptualising a new partnership model between the University of Tasmania and a small number of agencies to create learning experiences for all students requiring a placement ($N = 154$) to reduce the risks of disrupted or too few placements.

The modified standards for social work education put forward by the Council (AASW, 2020b) enabled the development of non-traditional placements that could be undertaken remotely (from home) and involved students from each of the three regional areas of Tasmania working collaboratively in small groups on a shared project. For example, a partnership was developed between the University and the Red Cross that provided students with opportunities to support the community's recovery from COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was an urgent need for trained staff who could undertake psychological well-being checks via telephone to people in quarantine and also to those who had been displaced from Australia's recent bushfire disaster. Eight teams, comprising twenty-four final-placement and twenty-four first-placement students, supported by both university and Red Cross staff, made a total of approximately 6,000 calls to people who were isolated from their support networks and arranged medical, food, and psychosocial supports, as well as being a person to talk with. As such, students were deeply involved in providing crucial humanitarian actions in the midst of an unfolding disaster.

While each of our universities took a different approach to placing students during a pandemic, a common factor was that as programme providers we recognised that we needed to establish placements and not just rely on what was offered by community agencies. Given that the number of placements had risen almost 3-fold between 2000 and 2015 in some parts of Australia (Hill *et al.*, 2019), insufficient numbers of placements was already at crisis-point in many parts of Australia prior to the pandemic which had long been an issue for Australian providers of social work education (Zuchowski *et al.*, 2019). Previous suggestions that sufficient placements would only become available when new models of field education were implemented (Vassos, 2019; Zuchowski *et al.*, 2019) were vindicated by the fact that our universities not only managed to place all of our students in placements but in fact did so during the COVID-19 pandemic when many of the usual placement opportunities were not available.

Discussion

Having found the existing standards, which focus on how social work is taught to be unworkable during the pandemic, we sought to adapt our programmes in ways that we hoped would produce graduates with attributes consistent with the profession's expectations of the capabilities of a social worker. However, as the pre-pandemic standards tend to be based on tradition (Healy, 2019), the underlying principles on which they were based were often not readily apparent. Hence, at the crux of our argument in this paper is that a principles-based and values-led approach is crucial to any future reimagining exercise of a more flexible model of governance and delivery of social work education.

Our experiences suggest that rather than having their education compromised by COVID-19, social work students at the time of the pandemic and into the future may in fact benefit from the changes that have emerged during this period. For example, students continue to undertake supervised projects that enable them to work independently to assist effective responses to agency specific and client specific issues. How students learn is changing and what they are learning will help them respond to the immediate and future needs arising from the pandemic.

It is important that the lessons learnt during COVID-19 are not lost. One is the realisation that principles can very easily slip out of consideration when it comes to setting accreditation standards. We have clarified that adherence to overly prescriptive standards do not assure good—in moral and practical terms—student learning outcomes. Social work pedagogy is principled: for example, authentic learning experiences and assessment tasks are valued, and indigenous scholarship in all aspects of

learning and teaching is increasingly prioritised. As [Arjoon \(2006\)](#) explained, there is a challenge to develop conceptual frameworks for good and effective governance that integrate the best aspects of rules-based approaches (legal and regulatory requirements, codes of ethics, industry standards and reporting systems) and principles-based approaches characterised by relational, values-based and communicative elements of trust. We suggest the principles proposed in this article such as emphasising student wellbeing; supporting communities; encouraging collaborative approaches; prioritising student and community safety; and development of an evidence base, are not just applicable during a pandemic but should be considered whenever accreditation guidelines are being established or reviewed.

Furthermore, although proposed as a temporary measure during extraordinary times, the pandemic has provided opportunities to test what is or what seems possible to ensure that we continue to graduate students who are capable of responding to existing and new hardships arising from the impacts of the virus or subsequent disasters. This has required trialling new ways of ‘the doing’ of social work education. For example, in the context of COVID-19, social work educators were forced to explore new ways of teaching our students how to create client focused relationships through technology assisted mediums. Although some of our colleagues have long argued that requiring face-to-face contact at the university is not essential (e.g. [Maple et al., 2013](#); [Goldingay and Land, 2014](#)), informal conversations with some colleagues who have not previously taught online, have often resulted in them expressing their surprise at what can be done online. This is not surprising if their expectations of what can be done online is based on experiences of technologies that have been superseded ([Crisp, 2018](#)). At the time of writing, individual universities are undertaking small-scale evaluations of the initiatives, which they trialled during the pandemic. However, the AASW has not undertaken any evaluation nationally of the impact of the changes to accreditation guidelines during COVID-19. Moreover, the AASW’s letters to the ACHSSW in late 2020 indicated an expectation that pre-COVID-19 guidelines would be reinstated in mid-2021 without any changes, suggests the AASW was not open to exploring the desirability of promising innovations with a wider range of stakeholders in social work accreditation including employers, field educators, service user representatives and groups such as the Australian and New Zealand Association of Social Work and Welfare Education and Research and the National Field Educators Network.

Formal consultation with a wide range of stakeholders is necessary as despite the ways in which universities are re-imagining field education seeming promising, they are also potentially controversial. The three examples outlined in this article have changed the emphasis of a placement from being placed in a professional setting outside the university

to establishing opportunities for students to demonstrate the required learning outcomes with more flexible arrangements. If all placements were providing quality learning environments this would not be an issue, but unfortunately some placements, which fulfil the requirement of being located outside the university are limited as to the extent they are able to prepare students to demonstrate the competencies expected of a newly qualified graduate (Hill *et al.*, 2019). Nevertheless, as members of a current working party on field education standards, in the midst of the pandemic, we have found ourselves debating the precedence of location or learning outcomes for placements.

We experienced COVID-19 as leaders of programmes of social work education who were necessarily preoccupied with ensuring students could graduate and be employable on completion of their courses of study. However, our concerns were often not dissimilar from those of social workers in other settings who were faced with the dilemma of how to undertake their work and maintain professional integrity in unprecedented circumstances for which they were not prepared (Banks, 2020; de Kam, 2020; Xafis *et al.*, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that a need for ‘conceptual clarity’ (Alston *et al.*, 2019, p. 41) is deemed critical for social workers working in disasters.

For us, conceptual clarity resulted in developing a set of principles by which proposed changes could be judged. Although previous ways of doing social work education were not possible, new approaches needed to be consistent with the values of the profession (Nissen, 2020). We later discovered similar approaches had been taken by other health professions, particularly in respect of placements during the pandemic (Australian Government, 2020; Speech Pathology Australia, 2020). As with the principles we developed, these others also took into account the varied needs of stakeholders in professional education, including the needs of students, placement providers and employers, in addition to education providers. In a rapidly changing and uncertain context, we developed a set of principles aimed to ‘support conversations and problem solving between placement providers, clinical educators, and universities to support the continued provision of student placement opportunities in the extraordinary context of managing COVID-19 risk-management and response requirements’ (Speech Pathology Australia, 2020, p. 1).

While ‘ongoing effort is needed at the macro level to thoroughly conceptualise contemporary social work. Change at the professional level is also critical, especially in systems of professional regulation and policy’ (Bell, 2019, p. 243). In the context of COVID-19, there are many examples of how practitioners are applying principle-based approaches to social work practice. For example, social workers in a range of contexts have been able to determine the difference between ‘urgent and essential’ (Edelmaier, 2021, p. 124) and for prioritising the overwhelming demands placed on them (Di Ciero, 2021). These are the skills that

social workers need in uncertainty, but are at risk of being ignored when accreditation standards are more concerned with rules than principles.

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