

# Blood, sweat and tears: Youth work students on placement and 'good WIL'

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## ABSTRACT

As is the practice in many professional degree programs now, students spend time on placement as part of their learning experience, and while doing so are required to engage in reflective practice. The case study presented here details the experience of youth work students at a university in Australia who have been writing reflective online journals while on field education. The journals provide a space in which students document events which include those that have been both positive and harmful and distressing. This study provides a snapshot of their encounters of incidents which include violence, sexual harassment, malpractice and absent supervisors. The implications of these revelations for field education are considered and recommendations about how we can secure the delivery of good work integrated learning (WIL) in universities are provided. This article will be of interest to educators of human service practitioners, applied ethics, the law and student well-being. *Journal of Cooperative Education & Internships*, 2009, 43(1), 65-74).

KEYWORDS: Student voice, student well-being, work integrated learning, youth work.

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The question of what students, and in this case youth work students, experience when engaged in work integrated learning (WIL) has received little formal attention. Youth work students in Australian universities for example have been doing workplace-based placements for over 30 years however there are no documented accounts of students' experiences. This article is written with the intention of helping to fill that gap in the literature. While acknowledging the many positive and enabling aspects of field education, this study examines the harmful, distressing, unprofessional and unethical experiences youth work students encounter on placement. This question is important for a number of reasons. First, hearing the 'student voice' is critical for understanding what students encounter while engaged in WIL, and it is with this in mind that a group of youth work student's field education journals are examined and lessons are drawn from these (Ralph, Walker & Wimmer, 2007). Second, an appreciation of student experiences can assist various stakeholders in WIL, such as educators and universities, to identify their ethical, legal, pedagogical, and resourcing responsibilities. In this way, governments, universities, industries and professions can draw on student's experiences to identify their role in funding, managing and supporting good WIL. And in this instance the youth work student's journals can assist youth work field educators and youth sector agency based supervisors to clarify what is required of them, as well as improving the curriculum and pedagogy of WIL in youth work university programs. Moreover, such a project can contribute to securing the delivery of good WIL in universities as it builds on an overdue body of knowledge regarding student's practicum experiences. It may also help inform workplace and university policy about how to deal with some of the issues raised herein.

The literature on university student placements is examined. While these include literature from disciplines other than youth work they draw attention to various negative and disturbing events many students experience when they do workplace-based placements. In 2007 and 2008, 108 students enrolled in a three year undergraduate youth work degree wrote 585 reflective online journals while on placement, documenting significant events. The method used by students to write the reflective e-journals is described along with the method used to analyze them. This is a scoping study and the range of concerns encountered by students is presented. Along with relevant literature the student's journals provide a basis from which recommendations about how we can secure the delivery of good WIL in universities are articulated.

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## THE 'VOICE OF THE STUDENT' IN WIL LITERATURE

As mentioned youth work student's experiences of WIL have received little formal attention. Instead research has focused on describing and comparing models of youth work field education (Bowie, 2005; Forkan & McElwee, 2002; Weber, 2000). Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher and Pretto (2009) argue that because students are a key stakeholder it is important to understand their experience of WIL, however they struggled to access the views of students when doing Australia's first scoping study on WIL. This absence of student's accounts in WIL literature is echoed in social work (Lam, Wong & Leung, 2007; Noble, 1999; Spencer & McDonald, 1998); planning (Freestone, Thompson & Williams, 2006) and other disciplines (Ralph, Walker & Wimmer, 2007). Spencer and McDonald (1998) argued students are generally "talked about" rather than "talked with" when it comes to WIL; they are the objects rather than the active participants in the design of field education (p. 16). Clearly if universities are serious about improving the quality of field education then hearing and learning first hand from students is critical; and there is an emerging body of literature with the intention of filling this gap. Research identifies students are in favor of WIL because of the learning and career opportunities it provides (Patrick et al., 2009; Ralph et al., 2007; Scott, 2006). Nonetheless, there are accounts of a range of concerns students experience while on placement. Lam, Wong and Leong (2007, p. 97) identified a "prevalence of negative emotions such as distress, frustration, bewilderment, disappointment and fear" among the fieldwork placement journals of 114 Hong Kong social work students. The 'disturbing events' recorded by students arose from interactions with clients, staff in the field and university placement instructors. Barlow et al. (2006), Dunkel, Ageson and Ralph (2000) along with Tully, Kropf and Price (1993) similarly reported social work students experienced physical violence and verbal abuse, and worried about their safety, while on placement.

Ramathan (2005) identified hotel and catering industry students experienced discrimination on the basis of race, gender and disability during their workplace training experience. Newman, Daley and Bogo (2009) reported gay and lesbian students on practicum encountered prejudice and a lack of safety. Britzman (2003) gave voice to student teacher's struggles, ambivalence, discontentment, despair, vulnerability, and frustrations when on teaching rounds. In another study, student teachers identified the financial and extra workload burdens accompanying placement as the most negative aspect (Ralph et al., 2007). The same group of students reported concerns with staff in the field including unproductive criticism and conflict with agency supervisors as well as not being accepted or appreciated for their contribution, workplace politics and unprofessional behavior. Similarly, Barlow and Hall (2003a) argued conflict with the agency supervisor can be a primary source of stress for students when doing practicum (Barlow et al, 2006). The student teachers were also unhappy with their university for not adequately preparing them for internship, on-campus coursework being disconnected and irrelevant to WIL, on-campus practicum seminars being ineffective, and poor and unprofessional treatment by university field educators.

Ralph, Walker and Wimmer (2008) identified the most negative elements of the practicum for a group of engineering, nursing and teaching students were poor quality supervision, being given inadequate tasks, and unsatisfactory and deficient university program-organization. And in another study a group of planning students spoke of a range of 'disappointments' while on work experience, including mundane and unchallenging work, lack of professional status in the organization, disillusionment with the realities of planning – especially its politicization, minimal support from colleagues, insufficient feedback on progress, and missed opportunities such as never being given a big project or not getting into the field enough (Freestone, Thompson & Williams, 2006). The literature on students' experience of WIL provides a long list of potential issues for the current study. What follows is a description of the method used in the research to hear the youth work student's voice.

## METHODOLOGY

The students who participated in this study were completing a three year undergraduate youth work program at a University in Australia. All youth work students complete 35 day placements in the second and third year. During 2007 and 2008, 108 youth work students completed practicums with a variety of government and community-based youth sector organizations including schools, residential settings, drug and alcohol services, child protection, youth justice centers and local government youth service providers. While on placement each student wrote up to six e-journals, critically reflecting on anything of personal significance. Students were instructed to describe something that happened which they would like to give some thought to, including their and other's role, decisions, thoughts and feelings. In this instance the practice of reflecting generated descriptions of experience. It is these descriptions

that form the data for this study. While the online journals provided a space in which students documented positive and negative events, this study was interested in analyzing the journals to identify the harmful, distressing, unprofessional and unethical experiences youth work students encounter on placement. All ethical procedures required by the university were followed.

The 108 students wrote 585 online journals during 2007 and 2008 and all of the youth work student's journals over this period were analyzed using qualitative data analysis. The student journals were examined and compared, searching for common and exceptional or individual experience (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2005). During this process the journals were systematically organized and collated into emerging and evolving themes and categories, consistently comparing and re-examining the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005). The present study does not provide an accurate account of frequency or how many students experience certain incidents, because students were not specifically asked to report on whether or not they experienced a particular event. There are also considerations that may constrain student disclosure. Students know their journals are read by the university field educators and this lack of confidentiality could constrain students from disclosing difficult and stressful events. The journals are also an assessed activity, and disclosures of doubts, fears, failings and uncertainties might be difficult for those who feel they need to demonstrate their competence (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000). In other words, students might not disclose to avoid being labeled incompetent, a troublemaker, a failure, or not coping (Fernandez, 1998). Ralph et al. (2007) report almost 40 percent of a cohort of 226 student teachers encountered difficulties with university staff in charge of field education, and such poor quality relationships may also hamper students disclosing troubles, not to mention learning (Newman et al., 2009). This makes an analysis of the data in terms of student's gender, age, location of placement, year level and other variables unreliable, and therefore is not offered in this article.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The data categories of the harmful, distressing, unprofessional and unethical experiences youth work students encountered on placement are summarized in Table 1. Twelve major categories capture the student's concerns and 326 (n=585) of the student's journals fit these categories. In other words, 55.7% of the journals reported negative placement experiences.

### *Lacking Confidence and Not Getting Off to a Good Start*

Seven students wrote of feeling nervous, doubtful, overwhelmed and uncomfortable soon after starting placement. Their feelings frequently related to a lack of experience in the youth sector and surprise at the professional practices they observed and quantity of information they needed to learn. An unsatisfactory beginning to placement was also often cited described as being thrown in the deep end.

### *Difficulties Engaging Young People and Not Knowing What to Say or Do*

Thirty-one students recorded struggles with engaging voluntary and involuntary service users. Some students described themselves as quiet and shy and found meeting and talking with young people awkward and challenging. Many reported feeling frustrated and disappointed at what they saw as young people's unreliability (for example when young people did not attend pre-arranged meetings or agreed to participate in group activities then did not turn up). Students also wrote of feeling unsure and uncomfortable when they encountered dissent from young people who were bored, uninterested, uncooperative, reluctant, negative, not listening, not wanting to talk, unwilling to engage, and not wanting to be there. Some described feeling unprepared for practice and ill-equipped to effectively respond to young people's problems or to successfully achieve the tasks assigned to them. Examples cited in the journals included not knowing enough about mental health and being unsure of what to say when young people bragged about their criminal behavior. Students reported anxiety and feeling at a loss about what to say to young people when doing counseling and group activities. They wrote about their fears about doing the wrong thing, making the wrong impression, not doing a good enough job, and harming service users. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds wrote about struggling with English and being concerned that others would not comprehend what they were saying.

TABLE 1

Harmful, distressing, unprofessional and unethical experiences reported by youth work students when on placement

Category of concern	Students n=108 (%)	Journals n=585
Lacking confidence and not getting off to a good start	7 (6.5)	7
Difficulties engaging young people and not knowing what to say or do	31 (28.7)	35
Confronted by unpredictability and complex issues	33 (30.5)	48
Uncertain about appropriate boundaries	35 (32.4)	46
Challenging behavior and disciplining young people	23 (21.3)	27
Scared at violent and intimidating behavior from young people	22 (20.4)	27
The distress of unwanted sexual attention from workers and young people	7 (6.5)	8
Being subject to age based prejudice	4 (3.7)	6
The quality of supervision	32 (29.6)	45
Problems with the agency's practice	38 (35.2)	55
Funding constraints in the youth sector	11 (10.2)	13
Stress and workloads	8 (7.4)	9

*Confronted By Unpredictability and Complex Issues*

A common theme was feeling stressed by the uncertainty and sudden changes in tempo and mood characteristic of work with young people. This included accounts of not knowing if things would go to plan. Coming to terms with the messiness of youth work practice, which included an appreciation that things were never the same twice, proved to be challenging for 33 students. There were various stories of students feeling overwhelmed by hearing and working with the multiple and complex vulnerabilities experienced by young people, such as mental and chronic health issues, substance abuse, disabilities, homelessness, isolation, lack of income, family and intimate partner violence, and sexual abuse. Responding to young people who had self harmed and who spoke about suicide was particularly difficult. Many expressed shock and disgust at hearing young people's offending behavior. Cross-cultural practice and dealing with racism was also a struggle. Of particular concern for some students was being confronted when exposed to feces and bodily fluids such as blood, spit and urine. Some also recorded their fears about getting scabies, sexually transmitted infections, and being exposed to contagion in other ways.

*Uncertain About Appropriate Boundaries*

Thirty-five students recorded various challenges associated with balancing personal and professional relationships. They appreciated the importance of boundaries and felt guilty when they believed they had breached what was deemed acceptable. This included conduct like smoking in front of young people who then asked for a light, accepting gifts from service users, and hugging clients. More often students expressed uncertainty as to what the boundaries should be. They wrote of feeling confused by the actions of other workers, for example, declining an invitation to a service user's 18th birthday party because they thought this was the right thing to do and then finding out workers were attending.

Students described their struggles with knowing what constituted a suitable relationship with young people. Some wrote of feeling uncomfortable when their rapport with young people felt like friendship, sibling and parent/child relationships. Others spoke about the benefits of connecting with clients as friends, but were unsure if they were being professional. Others were confused when workers told them to act like young people's friends, writing it contradicted what was taught in course work. Students expressed confusion at hearing from workers be yourself at the same time as be professional. There were stories from students feeling conflicted at disciplining young people when at the same time they felt the need to build effective working relationships. They worried about what they saw as the possible negative consequences of being firm.

There was confusion about the issue of self disclosure. For example, some wrote about struggling with how much personal information to share with young people, and felt bad at not being truthful. Others recorded feeling unsure of what to say when young people asked personal questions like do you drink or have you used drugs? Students expressed discomfort about their personal connections with young people or when they recognized them outside of placement. There were accounts of fearing what might happen if they became too emotionally involved with young people who were service users. Some spoke of their vulnerability and pain at hearing stories of violence and suffering that triggered their own personal memories and overwhelming emotions. Other students wrote of struggling to detach or stop thinking about clients when they were away from placement. Some felt they should not take work home and were hard on themselves when they weren't able to do so. Feeling sad and guilty when placement finished because relationships where trust had been established had to be severed was also a common experience. Students reported service users telling them not to leave.

#### *Challenging Behavior and Disciplining Young People*

Dealing with young people's challenging behavior was an experience many felt ill-prepared for. Examples include young people doing graffiti, stealing, arguing, using indecent language, having food fights, bringing prohibited items into youth settings, and smoking at school. Twenty-three students described feeling uncomfortable and frustrated when young people misbehaved, tested boundaries, tried to push their buttons, didn't follow the rules, challenged their authority, talked back, and wouldn't listen. Students expressed feeling pressure to stay in control and recorded the ways they attempted to manage young people's behavior to maintain order. This included yelling at young people, not believing young people, conducting bag and clothes searches, telling workers about young people's behavior, and disciplining young people.

#### *Scared at Violent and Intimidating Behavior From Young People*

Twenty-two students expressed a sense of vulnerability and fear in response to services user's aggressive and abusive behavior. Students recorded having objects thrown at them, death threats, threats with knives, as well as threats of physical assault. There were reports of students being yelled at and verbally abused. There were also accounts of feeling unsafe and intimidated at witnessing serious fights and bullying between young people, physical and verbal abuse of workers, and property damage such as kicking down doors and punching walls. Students expressed feeling terrified when young people told them they had committed assault and rape.

#### *The Distress of Unwanted Sexual Attention From Workers and Young People*

Seven female students recorded experiencing and witnessing sexual harassment while on placement. They expressed offense when workers spoke about their sex lives, made sexually offensive comments, ogled young women, and inappropriately commented on female service user's physical appearance. Female students also reported unwelcome sexual conduct from male service users. Students wrote of feeling annoyed and intimidated at witnessing sexually inappropriate behavior and conversations, and when harassed to go out on dates and provide their contact details. They also expressed feeling unsure of what to do as well as guilt. As one student wrote: "Did I bring this on myself? ... I should have set better boundaries."

#### *Being Subject to Age Based Prejudice*

There were accounts from four students who were discriminated against because of their age or perceived age. It was assumed that because they were young they did not have the knowledge, experience or capability to effectively work with young people. The students expressed dismay at being subjected to age-based stereotypes perpetrated by youth workers, which youth workers should be working against. Students reported frustration at not being taken seriously when mistaken as a service user because of their age and appearance. There were also stories of being seen as just the work experience persons with limited capacity to make a worthwhile contribution or appropriate decisions.

#### *The Quality of Supervision*

Thirty-two students reported receiving no formal supervision and poor supervision during practicum. This included also accounts of receiving no induction or orientation to the agency. Some expressed dismay at the fact that supervisors were too busy to provide supervision. There were also reports of supervisors quitting or being dismissed mid-placement with no follow up provided to the student. Other students wrote of being inadequately

prepared and being given no direction for placement related tasks. Students reported the supervisor being disinterested in them and that they felt they didn't like them. There were stories of isolation, a lack of support, and feeling exploited and 'left out' while on placement. Students also expressed frustration when their supervisor didn't appreciate their contributions, many were also unhappy with what they described as their supervisors unfair judgments and harsh and unproductive criticism of their efforts. Students wrote about missing out on opportunities to have contact with young people and not enough hands on experience. Others recorded being given unchallenging and mundane work including administrative tasks. Students also complained about feeling unable or unwilling to talk about such issues with their supervisor due to a lack of confidence and fear of retribution.

#### *Problems With the Agency's Practice*

Thirty-eight students reported problems with the agency's practice. This included being disappointed with the poor quality management in youth agencies. Examples cited include a lack of support for youth workers and a preoccupation with reducing costs and constructing a public image to appear effective rather than providing quality services. Other students were left with an impression of youth sector management that lacks interest, commitment and involvement in youth work and young people. There were accounts about organizational politics. Students were dismayed when workers tried to recruit them into conflicts by backstabbing and gossiping about other staff. Some reported being warned not to work in rival agencies. Students described their efforts to remain neutral observers of such disputes.

Students wrote of chaos and disorganization in their placement agencies, particularly in relation to high workloads and not enough staff as well as lacking organizational procedures. At times the disarray was brought about by one or more staff members resigning, sometimes due to poor quality management and being overworked, while other workers were on sick or holiday leave. Some reported having to take on the work of staff who had left or were absent, and expressed disappointment at not having the opportunity to achieve their own learning outcomes. There were various accounts of unprofessional behavior from staff. These included workers using prohibited substances while at work, purchasing cigarettes for minors, breaching young people's privacy and confidentiality, and not insisting on the mandatory working with children check. Students were shocked when witnessing workers telling young people what to do, interrogating them, and not involving young people when decision were being made about their lives. They also reported how workers sometimes forgot about meetings with young people and failed to turn up for group programs.

Students were also upset when workers talked or made jokes about them to young people. Such incidents occurred in front of students or came to the student's attention when young people told them what staff had been saying. A frequent comment was that the youth work practice they observed while on placement was contrary to what they had been taught in course work and that it differed from their ideas, values and beliefs. For example, students were frustrated and concerned by practice like banning of young people from accessing services, inadequate group facilitation, the use of physical force by staff to put physically abusive young people in a seclusion room, and the failures in regard to duty of care.

#### *Funding Constraints in the Youth Sector*

Eleven students reported concerns with the resourcing of youth services. Students were surprised and disillusioned about the lack of value attached to youth work in the communities where they did placement. Many wrote of encountering ambivalence towards the need for youth workers. Students were dismayed by a lack of services for young people. Gaps were regularly cited in urban fringe and regional communities, the disability sector, youth housing including foster care, and child protection. Students observed the effects of under-resourcing, which included high workloads, stressed workers, staff redundancies and reduction in services. High on their list of frustrations were work practices that emphasized administration and paper work at the expense of direct contact with young people. Students expressed how resource constraints in the youth sector diminished their interest in becoming youth workers.

#### *Stress and Workloads*

Eight students expressed concern with the stress and workload associated with placement. Top of their list of frustrations was not getting paid while on placement. Students reported having to cut back paid work to do placement and were unhappy and struggled with the loss of income. Students wrote of feeling exhausted by the

extra workload burdens accompanying placement. Others recorded fearing they would burn out as they tried to juggle placement with on-campus course work, paid work, caring responsibilities and a social life. Students described feeling stressed and close to tears as a result of the demands of placement. These included working long hours and challenging tasks.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GOOD WIL

### *How Do the Concerns of Youth Work Students Compare to Accounts From Other Students?*

Some of the negative aspects of placement reported by the students in their online journals are congruent with research previously discussed. A notable exception is that the youth work students were asked to reflect on experiences from the workplace, therefore student's problems with the university organization of WIL and university staff delivering field education were unlikely to be reported; and weren't. Further many of the findings are specific to youth work students doing placement in the youth sector in Victoria, Australia. If similar research took place in other disciplines or in different locations where youth work is practiced the findings could vary. In other words it cannot be assumed that the harmful, distressing, unprofessional and unethical experiences recorded by youth work students in this study are universal, generalizable or transferable to other students. At the same time, the findings may be applicable to other human service domains in Victoria, Australia such as social work, education, and psychology because youth work students do placements in agencies and context where students in these disciplines also do WIL; including schools and youth sector agencies. Moreover, securing the delivery of good WIL in universities requires all disciplines to hear and appreciate their student's experiences.

### *Encourage Research That Listens to Students' Accounts of WIL*

This study affirms the importance of listening to students in the planning and delivery of WIL. Field education programs should be developed in consultation and review with students, and hearing and learning from students should lead to improvements in the design and quality of such courses (Barlow & Hall, 2003a; Ralph et al., 2007). However WIL educators who are best placed to carry out such research report demanding workloads that leave them little time to do research (Cooper & Orrell, 1999; Patrick et al., 2009; Universities Australia, 2008; Weisz & Smith, 2005). I return to the importance of improving the status and recognition of WIL for securing the delivery of good quality field education programs, and doing so could also attract more research. Appropriate research methodologies also need to be used that engage and support student's involvement. And students report many positive aspects of placement, and research needs to capture student's stories of achievement, courage, advance, endurance and strength (Ralph et al., 2007). Moreover, the pessimistic account of student's experiences of negative and disturbing events while on placement offered herein and in much of the literature, which positions students as vulnerable, being 'at-risk' and fragile, should not dominate and ought to orient towards optimism, agency, coping, resourcefulness and resilience (Barlow & Hall, 2003b; Clegg, Bradley & Smith, 2006; Eccelstone, 2004).

### *Attend to 'What is the Problem?' Before 'What Should Be Done?'*

The youth work student's concerns draw attention to the legal, ethical and pedagogical issues of WIL. Given the constraints of the paper the implications of each category of the findings is not able to be explored in detail. Recommendations for what should be done to address various issues and improve student's experiences are also already provided in the research previously cited on student's accounts of WIL along with literature exploring legal, ethical and pedagogical aspects of field education (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Cleak & Wilson, 2007; Goldstein, 1986; Mark, 2002; Zakutansky & Sirles, 1993). The suggested initiatives do not need to be repeated here and they offer some useful strategies for youth work university field educators, youth sector agency supervisors and youth work students. At the same time some general observations can be made about the shortfalls of what has by and large been recommended.

The first criticism is that careful consideration is rarely given to the question of what exactly is the problem. Researchers generally follow a functionalist line of argument and pose explanations for the concerns of students that focus on deficiencies in students, agency supervisors and university field educators, as well as the relationships between them, and prescribe solutions oriented towards changing their roles and responsibilities. Britzman (2003) argued this functionalist perspective is not the only approach to theorizing student's stories; and suggested a search for meaning as an alternative. An interpretive style of theorizing is interested in analyzing and locating the student's

experiences in relation to discourses, social practices and relational contexts. Such an interpretive framework can also illuminate the cultural knowledges working in a particular place and time as they are lived through the subjectivities of their inhabitants. Following Britzman (2003, p. 12-25), a search for meaning invites different questions, which could produce different understandings of what is the problem and subsequently different recommendations for improving students' experience of WIL that vary from what is usually offered. Questions could include, what does doing youth work field education do to youth work students? And, how are the students acting out the struggles, dynamics, assumptions, exclusions, inclusions, and history of conflicts and tensions in youth work?

#### *Enable WIL Educators to Deliver Quality WIL*

Secondly proposals for improving student's experience of placement generally demand more of university staff, but they typically fail to recommend improvements to the status and recognition of being a university field educator. As already mentioned those who deliver WIL in universities are time poor and report high workloads. McCurdy and Zegwaard (2009) and Orrell, Cooper and Jones, (1999) also identified faculty involvement in WIL programs is generally unrecognized and undervalued. And many of the measures suggested in the research require field educators who can sustain a level of commitment and support for the practicum over time, which is further challenged by the competing roles, duties and interests of university educators (Boud & Solomon, 2003; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; Ralph et al., 2007). If we are serious about improving the quality of WIL then it needs to be better incorporated in workload and promotion models, have a higher priority that puts it on equal footing to other academic activities such as research, on-campus teaching and governance, and have a more positive impact on earnings (McCurdy & Zegwaard, 2009, p 41). WIL educators should also receive orientation and ongoing professional development that supports them to deliver quality field education.

#### *Improve Institutional Arrangements to Better Support WIL*

A third criticism of the recommendations is that they tend to focus on roles and responsibilities in the relationships among students, agency supervisors and university tutors, failing to mention other key stakeholders in WIL such as governments, universities more broadly, industries, professions, and service users and their representative bodies. Moreover, they skip over the policy landscape, institutional arrangements and economic and political context within which WIL takes place. For example, universities are embracing WIL as the key strategy to meet demands from governments, industry, professions and the community to produce a 'work-ready' professionalized workforce with the requisite 'employability skills' who can meet the needs of a rapidly changing economy (Patrick et al., 2008). WIL is now a priority in the strategic directions of many universities as well as being closely linked to graduate attributes, and universities are obliging all faculties and disciplines implement WIL. But how equipped are universities to deliver quality WIL and provide safe and positive learning experiences? Suggestions for securing the delivery of good field education in universities should draw attention to the influence of the political and economic context, take account of the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders and inform good policy. This includes recommending universities are adequately funded so they can afford the high costs associated with delivering quality field education programs.

#### *Address Workforce Problems in the Youth Sector*

The issues identified by the youth work students resonate with a range of workforce concerns currently troubling the youth sector in Victoria and Australia. For example, high levels of stress, complex and demanding workloads, extensive service gaps, insufficient remuneration, and unsafe working conditions are significant issues for youth workers and contribute to a high turnover of staff. Securing the delivery of good WIL in youth work requires more than university field education staff working with students and individual agencies; it needs an increase in investment in the youth sector that would deliver better wages and conditions, safer workplaces, adequate staffing levels and reasonable workloads for youth workers. The professionalization of the youth sector may also lead to improvements in youth work field education. As occurs in teaching, nursing and other professions, a youth work professional association could set standards for youth work placements that address many of the issues discussed herein.

## CONCLUSION

This exploratory study scoped youth work student's journals to identify harmful, distressing, unprofessional and unethical experiences they encountered on placement. Of the 585 reflective online journals that 108 youth work students wrote while on placement in 2007 and 2008, 326 or 55.7% reported negative placement experiences. These were captured in 12 major categories. Many students learnt from placement that they were ill-equipped for the complexity and demands of professional youth work practice and that working with young people can be unsafe, scary and stressful. Others learnt that the youth sector is under-resourced and lacking in quality management, support for staff and standards for practice. The ways in which youth work student's stories resonated with accounts from other students was observed. The importance of listening to the voices of students to secure the delivery of quality WIL in universities was reiterated. And it was argued that improving field education for youth work students and attending to the legal, ethical and pedagogical issues associated with their concerns requires more than what is generally proposed in the literature. Improving the status and recognition of WIL was recommended. Appropriately resourcing WIL in universities, adequately funding youth services, and professionalizing the youth sector, was also suggested.

Further research is required to identify how many students experience different incidents. The emerging categories could also assist with future investigations. At the same time, data on frequency might not take account of intensity. In other words a student's experience of an issue might generate the harm, distress and negative response comparable to a number other students experiencing a different concern. Also suggested was further research on student's agency, resourcefulness and capacity to cope with the negative aspects of placement, which captures how they deal with and manage the demands and problems identified in this study.

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