# VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
## MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

*Field education in a market-place world*

This is the Published version of the following publication

# Field Education in a Market-Place World

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### Introduction

Field education operates as a key component of Australian social work courses yet support for it is marked by considerable ambivalence. The origins of this paper lie in an internal review of the first four years of the field education program within the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) course at Victoria University of Technology (VUT), Melbourne (Starbuck and Egan 1995). Exploration of the themes generated by the review challenged us to delve beyond this individual program to explore contemporary issues for field education, particularly those arising from the impacts of economic rationalist policies.

### Ambivalence in Social Work for Field Education

Nearly 20 years ago, on examining social work field education in Australia, Healy (1980) argued that the profession's continuing commitment to field education constituted retention of a form of professional training based on apprenticeship models which was no longer necessary within university, academic-based education. Although field education (field placements, field practicum) has continued as a key component for accreditation of social work degrees in Australia (AASW 1990), doubts about its role in BSW courses have continued.

Following a survey of Australian agency field educators, Slocombe (1993) recognised significant diversity in commitments to field education amongst agencies and universities causing her to ask the question, 'If field education is so vital why isn't everyone doing it?' An examination of social work and social welfare courses across Australia led Fook (1994) to conclude that 'the argument that our practice does not match our rhetoric is born out glaringly' (p.10) in that field education is marginal in many university curricula, the status of field education staff is relatively low and, compared to other areas, production of literature and research about field education is minimal.

In contrast, other research has judged field education to be both a significant and widespread component of professional social work education (Sarri 1989; Goldstein 1993; Beddoe and Worrall 1996). In an international review of social work field instruction Raskin, Skolnik and Wayne (1991) concluded that '(t)he universality of field instruction as an integral part of educational programs (of social work) is apparent.' (p.258).

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### Organisational Constraints

Compounding this educational ambivalence were the impacts on human services of Victoria undergoing the turmoil of a newly elected neo-conservative government in 1992 and encroaching market-place technologies, such as multiple organisational re-structures, unit-costing, outsourcing of organisational functions and privatisation of public utilities and services.

The impacts of fiscal, political and managerial reforms have exacerbated existing and long-standing shortages of placements and increased competition between schools of social work for agency resources. Across the state of Victoria, offers of placements from many agencies were considerably reduced as their own managements responded to funding threats and service agreements which required paring of organisations down to their perceived core functions'. In many agencies, reductions or loss of social work placements became the price of management and ideological techniques such as unit-costings, case-mix funding, tangible service outcomes and contracting of services.

In university settings, too, economic rationalism has a telling impact. Field education is a labour-intensive, high cost activity. At VUT, for example, negotiation and establishment of each placement is estimated to require, on average, nine hours of staff time (in addition to costs associated with liaison and assessment during the course of the placement). As such, and given the contradictory commitments within social work education, field education programs are visible targets for cost containment measures. Several schools of social work have responded to the tightening of placement opportunities and parallel cuts to university budgets by reducing the variety of field education requirements and opportunities for students, along with reductions in liaison and support activities.

It was in the above context, of educational, organisational and fiscal challenges, that the review of the field education program at VUT was undertaken.

### Review of One Field Education Program

The review was undertaken after the initial four years of the BSW course at VUT to inform ongoing development of its field education program.

This course was established in response to long-standing lobbying by agencies and residents of the western metropolitan region of Melbourne. That pressure reflected ongoing difficulties in recruiting social workers who understood, and were committed to addressing, the issues of social justice and social change in the diverse and often disadvantaged communities of the region. Consequently, the field education program is part of a BSW course which is shaped not only by professional accreditation requirements, but also by major commitments to strengthening local communities and to enhancing practice which is based on critical and structural analyses of issues. It is predicated on the concept of reciprocity between the BSW program and its supporting local communities.

The review examined perceptions about the strengths and weaknesses of the BSW program in terms of preparing students for field education placements, and in terms of identifying links between field education and preparation for professional practice. All people who had been involved with the field education program in its first four years - past and current students, agency field educators and university staff - were invited to comment on effectiveness and operation of the program.

The review was a means of reflecting on and further developing this program. Whilst the response rate of 18% (of 293 participants) did not allow for statistically significant analysis, the consistency across comments did provide two valuable themes. One affirms past research on field education as an important process in developing social work skills and knowledge. The second has been much less explored. This theme focuses on field education in a market-place context.

### Field education as a process of developing social work practice for students

Responses of students and educators (from agencies and from the university) in this review were consistent with concepts of acquiring professional knowledge and complex skills which hold that development of consolidated professional knowledge and competence requires a variety of experiences interconnected with reflection and formal cognitive learning (Schon 1983; Kolb 1984).

Some field educators highlighted the importance of field education as a way of students adapting to the realities of practice '(the) field education program provides them with the opportunities to 'do some reality testing' (field educator). Such realities were described as encompassing agency conditions (pressures, constraints and tensions) as well as client situations. They extended such learning to the subtle and elusive skills of working with competing priorities and deadlines, and of learning to respond to unpredicted demands and to client situations that are not immediately resolvable. They also nominated student experience of the operational culture of professional practice and of agency dynamics as further dimensions in the importance of placements as a learning vehicle. As one field educator stated, '(the) field education program introduces students to the work culture, often for the first time.'

For students, the acknowledgment and affirmation of their own development, values and skills through placement experiences was also important. They listed elements such as enhanced professional confidence as they apply their skills, overcoming their sense of powerlessness and developing strategies for dealing with real problems, issues and dynamics. Placement experiences were perceived as time for 'realising my confidence and ability' (student).

This theme reinforces the critical importance of field education as a key link between learning within the academic institution and in the field. Students and field educators emphasised that field placements required integration of class-based learning within practice as experienced. As one student stated 'practice often clarifies theory for students.' Students acknowledged and affirmed this integration with the development of individual understandings of their own values and skills that enhanced their professional practice and enabled them to critically appraise formal theories.

### Field education in a 'market-place' context

Economic rationalism and managerialism can be viewed as parallel ideologies, sharing an acceptance of objectively measured performance as the dominant indicator of success (Hughes 1994; Rees and Rodley 1995; Dominelli and Hoogveldt 1996). Their basic assumption is 'the main route to social progress lies through the achievement of continuing increases in economically defined productivity.' (Pollitt 1993, p.8).

Market-place technologies of economic rationalism now dominate contemporary management and practice of most of our human service organisations (Jones and May 1992; Hughes 1994; Alford and O'Neill 1995). These are often construed as obstacles for field education in that many agencies have limited their offers of placements, perceiving supervision of students as lying well outside their recognised core functions. 'Outputs' of student placements are not seen to be readily or simply measured; nor are placements 'cost-effective'.

Nevertheless, responses from students and from field educators within this review suggest field education can be reframed within the dynamics of the 'the market place'. Placements have the potential to offer marketable attributes in addition to their educational value. They can be viewed as channels of employment and staff recruitment, as sources of benefits to agencies and as avenues of benefits to agencies.

- *Placements as channels of employment and staff recruitment*

    Potential employment was referred to by students and field educators as an anticipated outcome of field education either through students' development of networks amongst relevant agencies or from direct offers of employment from their placement agencies:

    > The community services network is relatively small in (the region) and students who come recommended by their placement agency and/or can access networks developed through their placement experience, have a significant employment advantage (field educator).

    Field educators extended their comments by noting that students from this university are 'more employable because of these types of placements'.

    From the other side of the potential employment relationship, students noted that placements provide opportunities for them to experience different organisations: "The program gave me an awareness of what areas that I may want to or not to pursue in future employment' (student). Aspects of this view included student experience of particular agencies, a variety of practice experiences and insight into specific areas of social work (eg. policy making and organisational dynamics).

- *Benefits of placements to agencies*

  Competent completion of needed projects was listed by some field educators as a significant contribution by students, eg. the student 'enabled us to carry out a...project that had been on the back burner for some time ' (field educator). Thus the availability of student resources (time, knowledge and skills) contributed to agencies fulfilling responsibilities that otherwise might have remained uncompleted.

- *Enhanced practice in agencies*

  Field educators indicated benefits for themselves also. They designated supervision of students as a source of contemporary professional knowledge. Student placements required them to review and develop their own understandings of their theory and their practice, and also exposed them to current debates and research. One field educator put it as '...keeping in touch with developing methods of practice'.

  Other aspects of their practice listed by field educators included opportunities to enhance their supervision skills and to strengthen their networks through participating in workshops associated with the field education program.

  Briefly put, experiences of students and field educators reflected in this review indicate that field placements can be re-framed within market-place constructions as:

  - demonstrating explicit outcomes for agencies in terms of enhanced supervision skills and contemporary knowledge for agency staff;
  - operating as a channel for linking organisations with one form of required resources - competent practitioners;
  - providing a process by which resources are exchanged - experience, knowledge and legitimacy in return for completion of some of the organisation's functions; and
  - acting as a quality assurance mechanism through preliminary gauging of skills and values by organisations of potential employees and, reciprocally, by students of potential employers.

## Implications of Re-Framing Field Education to Market-Place Dynamics

Such re-framing offers some arguments for agencies to continue their participation in field education at a time when they and governments are focusing on 'value-for dollar' and provision of sharply-defined, 'core-services only. But such re-framing is preliminary and requires close examination. What might be the implications of this market-driven emphasis for social work as a profession committed to social justice and equity, and its associated educational programs?

Examination of market-place ideology raises initial warning signs. From its valuing of competition, segmenting of people's experiences and reducing public responsibility for services (Meutzelfeldt 1994; Scott 1997; Davis 1997) market discourse has been presented as a derivative of classic liberalism and public choice theory. In turn, these are predicated on a social theory in which individuals are perceived to be born flawed and in which social and economic progress is driven only by the operation of individual self-interest (Marginson 1992; Leach 1993; Mills 1996). Significant assumptions of this paradigm are that:

- individual freedom (defined in terms of the absence of coercion) is synonymous with economic growth and the progress of civilisation;
- society and notions of common good beyond individual self-interest are an illusion;
- inequity is natural, desirable and necessary to productivity and evolutionary progress (a form of economic and social Darwinism) (Marginson 1992).

In contrast to these are the assumptions on which much social work is predicated, that:

- people are valued as whole individuals who have rights to be protected and to be participants,
- services are interactions which offer many subtle and diverse outcomes,
- communities and the state carry some responsibility for disadvantaged and marginalised people. (see, for example, Howe 1987; Coulshed 1991; AASW 1993; O'Connor, Wilson and Setterlund 1995)

Processes of tendering and funding add a further dimension to ways in which social work practice might be re-configured by market dynamics. There is a danger that the ongoing survival of agencies becomes dependent on meeting numerical outputs as specified in their service contracts. Consequently, they come to define their services only in terms of those outputs, such as numbers of employment placements, of counselling sessions or families supported and discharged in a given period (Hough 1995). This emphasis without critical reflection, may convey to students that '(the) social work task is moved away from relationship building and focused on the discrete delivery of specified highly technocratised skills' (Dominelli 1997, p.172). In this context, analyses of structural dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation of people, or action that challenges the status quo, becomes superfluous to measures of sound practice. What happens then to integration of services, advocacy and anti-discriminatory practice?

Thus, students are likely to be entering political and workplace environments which increasingly operate from ideologies that are inconsistent with social work objectives of social justice, equity and social change (Parton 1994; Novak 1996; Dominelli 1996). Unless prepared with critical understandings and vision (in addition to skills and knowledge) for locating themselves as potential agents for social change, students may become bound by the lowest common denominators of contracted and segmented technical competencies.

In such a context, multiple and structured field education experiences become even more significant educational formats by which students prepare for reflective and critical practice which can deal with the inherent contradictions and tensions of human services:

> one learns, not through accumulating tested propositions about the objective world, but through participation in social practices, by assuming social roles, by becoming familiar with exemplary narratives and typical characters who illustrate a variety of patterns of behaviour. One does not feel like an autonomous subject learning facts about an objective world out there. One becomes what one knows. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton 1991, p.158, quoted in Goldstein 1993, p.173)

## Conclusion

The rise of economic rationalism and market dynamics for human services has contributed to the re-emergence in many agencies and universities of earlier debates about the role and format of field education in Australia. Insights from this review of one field education program support arguments for the maintenance of field education, despite the considerable pressures on agencies and universities to curtail it.

Not only is field education seen to continue as a significant process by which students develop skills and knowledge for complex professional practice, comments of participants in this review indicate to the authors that some benefits of the program could be re-framed within the paradigm of the market-place. In so doing they recognise that it may be possible to address the reluctance of some agencies to provide placements. But they also suggest that such re-framing threatens the framework of social justice and social change which underpins social work practice. Such threats heighten the importance of field education programs that are integrated within critical frameworks and which have the capacity to prepare students more fully and realistically to critique the values and tensions embodied in market-place practice.

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