

# Partnerships with the Community:

Social Work Field Education  
during the Covid-19  
Pandemic

2e

Edited by  
Ronnie Egan  
Betty Haralambous  
Patrick O'Keeffe

RMIT University in partnership with Informit Open

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## SUGGESTED REFERENCE

Egan, R, Haralambous, B & O’Keeffe, P. (Eds). Partnerships with the Community: Social Work Field Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Melbourne: RMIT University in partnership with Informit Open, 2022.

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Published by: RMIT University in partnership with Informit Open  
Level 11, 235-251 Bourke Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000  
Australia

Cover design by Lumina Datamatic, Inc.

Cover illustration: inspired by original design by Hope Lumsden-Barry and Ryley Lawson for Partnership with the Community: Forty-five Years of Social Work Field Education at RMIT

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# Foreword

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Associate Professor Robyn Martin

Partnerships are central to social work and underpin its core values and principles. These partnerships involve social work practitioners, field educators, health and human services agencies, students, academics and administrative staff. Field education reinforces the significance of partnerships while also emphasising the nexus between student development and learning, academic and practice standards, and contemporary trends and issues.

COVID-19 has fundamentally changed lives across the globe, amplifying exclusion, disadvantage and privilege. The everyday activities considered core to social work practice and education have been disrupted, overturned, and reimaged. These past few years have demanded a rapid reorientation to social work education and practice; observed most sharply in field education.

This edition of the *Partnerships with the Community: Social Work Field Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic* is a testament to the intentional relationships that underpin social work field education. Central to these partnerships are reciprocity, innovation, deep listening and curiosity. A key learning from the last few years is the need to reimagine how social work situates itself alongside key stakeholders including service users and other marginalised groups. It is a privilege to introduce the second edition of this book which highlights the reciprocal nature of field education partnerships, across a range of sites of practice with a wide variety of service user groups. This text provides evidence of how social work field education responds to industry needs and emerging issues within a rapidly changing social, political and culture landscape.



## CHAPTER 1

# The value of partnering with the community

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Ronnie Egan, Betty Haralambous and Patrick O’Keeffe

The catalyst for the second edition of this book emerged from RMIT’s Partnership Reference Group in response to the impacts of the global pandemic on field placement supply and delivery. There was collective agreement that the long-term relationships between RMIT Social Work and the field through field education and beyond allowed us to rapidly respond to the needs of students, agencies and the community and continue to provide social work field education over 2020 and 2021. This book is a testament to the strength of these relationships demonstrated in the trust, respect, shared vision, flexibility, and reciprocity exhibited during this period. The book brings together the narratives of the RMIT Field education team and eleven of our industry partners about their experiences of providing social work placements during a global pandemic.

Field education continues to be integral to the delivery of Social Work programs and is identified by students as their most significant learning experience (Garthwait, 2008; Lam et al., 2007; Maidment & Crisp, 2011; Smith, Cleak, & Vreugdenhil, 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the provision of field education placements in many countries, including Australia (Crisp et al. 2021). The pandemic has caused placements to be cancelled, postponed and terminated early (Archer-Kuhn et al. 2020; Davis & Mirick 2021; Mitchell, Sarfati & Stewart 2021). As highlighted in chapter 2 of this book, Social Work departments have needed to develop university-based placement models, facilitated and supervised by

faculty staff (Davey et al. 2020; Mitchell et al. 2021; Crocetto 2021). This is undoubtedly an important innovation in field education. However, we suggest that the pandemic has reiterated the need to work collaboratively and redesign field education delivery with the sector.

Agency closures and working from home arrangements have changed the face of the human service sector. Social Work Education regulations and standards at national and international levels have been adjusted to the changed circumstances (Crisp et al. 2021). An already stretched field education environment which struggles with the economic imperatives of higher education enrolments and resultant increase in placement numbers, sector constraints which decreases the number of available quality placements, and the regulatory context has been further exacerbated by the pandemic (Egan, Hill and Rollins, 2021). What has been highlighted in the current environment is Bogo's (2015) claim that the future of social work field education lies in closer relationships between universities and the field. At RMIT this closeness has led to a rapid response that has allowed all students, wanting to be placed in the pandemic, to complete their placements. This book highlights the significance and value of the RMIT partnership approach throughout the pandemic, making an important contribution to international debates around the redesign of field education. Whereas many responses to the pandemic have illustrated the potential for university-based field education as a more sustainable model of field education, the contributions in this book suggest that mutually beneficial partnership arrangements with agencies can provide meaningful, quality and sustainable placements, even during crisis periods.

The history of and the current approach to RMIT social work partnerships has been documented in the first edition of the partnership book (Egan, 2018). The RMIT partnership approach has been informed by its history of relationships with the human service sector, confronting the crisis of finding enough social work placements, producing quality and transformative learning experiences for our students and drawing on the key characteristics which inform effective Community-Academic – Partnerships (CAPs) (Drahota et al, 2016). CAPs have been developed for research purposes however these key characteristics are foundational to social work



values, ethics and practice and have been demonstrated in our partnerships during the pandemic. Without our partners RMIT social work could not have navigated this challenging time. Partners had to rapidly adapt to address real world problems confronted by human services during the pandemic working with some of the most disadvantaged communities, whilst also providing quality placements. The RMIT Partnership Reference Group, consisting of our partners providing most of our placements, continued to meet during the pandemic and the focus for this year was the development of this second edition book. The Group has transcended the education and training of students and offers organisations ways of addressing their workforce development challenges through the employment of work ready and orientated graduates as well as ongoing professional development opportunities, research projects and access to university resources.

The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the impact of Covid-19 on our partners as well as an outline of the internal RMIT placement project and the structure of the book. In detailing the impact of Covid-19 we highlight the risk assessment process including the vaccine roll out, the development of online placements and innovations in this space and the centrality of offsite supervision.

## **Impact on partners**

Prior to the pandemic RMIT began 2020 with an excess of social work field education placements reflecting the strong relationship between RMIT and Industry Partners. The RMIT field education team along with the administrative Global, Urban and Social Studies Work Integrated Learning (GUSSWIL) team were in a privileged position of strong associations with a cross section of the health and community services sector.

The initial impact of the pandemic, when it occurred in early semester 1 with 2020 students on placement only for about six weeks, was unknown. There was no sense of the length of the lockdown nor the magnitude of the situation. An initial reactive approach was required and appropriate as we waited for the situation to unfold. As it

progressed, directives and new requirements and regulations were emerging from state and federal governments, the university and national association of Social Work. Adhering to government health directives, University directives, government initiatives, agency policies and student needs was a major challenge.

### **Risk assessments**

In semester 1, 2020, in response to Covid-19, RMIT implemented compulsory risk assessments for all agencies involved in student placements. This occurred where students were working in agencies either with or without direct client contact. This was a new process for RMIT, the social work field education program and partner agencies. It was a time consuming and demanding initiative but nonetheless a critical aspect of the field education experience at the time. It required additional inhouse administrative preparation, management endorsement, discussion with students by field education coordinators and discussions with agencies, including collection and review of agency documents such as Covid-19 Safe Plans.

In semester 1 2021, as agencies transitioned from working remotely to returning to offices, this was also the case for placements. Placements included face-to-face only, remote only, and combinations of both. If there was a face-to-face element in the placement, RMIT required a risk assessment to be completed. As this situation improved in Victoria this was no longer a requirement of the University in 2021. All that was required from RMIT in semester 2, 2021 was a copy of each agency's Covid-19 Safe Plan.

### **Online placements and liaison/OSS supervision**

The suspension of face-to-face placements during semester 1, 2020 and then the University decision to endorse only remote placements in semester 2 had a major impact on the planning and delivery of placements. Traditionally all placements with partner agencies were face to face, including direct practice and project or research-based placements.

As the pandemic worsened in Victoria, all semester 2 2020 Social Work RMIT placements were provided remotely. This meant students were not able to attend an agency on site but undertook a placement from their own homes. These tasks included project work, client support work, community development activities, supervision, meetings. This process and the adaptability of agencies to continue to support students via online platforms was again a reflection of the strong relationship between RMIT social work field education and the sector. Liaison and supervision was also conducted remotely. This was consistent with other RMIT practices in response to the Covid-19 situation. It was also consistent with AASW responses to Covid-19. It provided for a more flexible approach for supervisors and liaison staff and agencies provided positive feedback about the experience.

### **Innovative placements**

Agencies considered a range of flexible practices in the remote environment and worked in partnership with RMIT to provide a range of student opportunities. These included:

- Develop agency resources
- Develop tip sheets or guidelines
- Undertake literature review
- Develop policies or guidelines
- Write case studies related to direct practice experience
- Assisting with the development of an agency policy (e.g., volunteer policy)
- Contributing to review & implementation of policy
- Contribute to the development of a new program
- Evaluate a new service and document the process
- Survey administration (via phone or email)
- Data analysis
- Client phone welfare checks
- File review
- Support strategies: staff and clients
- Media analysis and client group
- Use social networking apps (e.g., What's App) to create social activities such as paint-by numbers, book club, health and wellness education for adolescent and aged care populations

- Complete virtual or telephone check-ins for older adults in assisted living facilities and nursing homes with limited social contact
- Facilitate virtual peer support groups for displaced students and/or community member
- Design a group curriculum for virtual or future face-to-face sessions (e.g., managing anxiety, employability and job skill development, navigating online classrooms)
- Develop agency training on various topics (e.g., ethical decision-making, cultural competency)
- Research potential grant opportunities and prepare aspects of the grant in response to the pandemic
- Participate in resource mapping for the agency
- Organize or support community drives for needed goods and services
- Initiate a social marketing campaign on social distancing, self-care
- Write an opinion piece on ethics and telehealth for publication in social work magazines and/or local newspapers
- Covid-19 specific ideas
  - How agency has responded to Covid-19, implications for client group?
  - Strategies for transitioning from face to face to online service provision
  - Research and compile a list of Covid-19 community resources for digital and other social media content for information-sharing and education
  - Review local, state, and federal policies on emergency preparedness and create a Covid-19 policy for the field agency

Online/remote placements offer good opportunities for agencies to undertake that long awaited policy, project or evaluation work that has not been able to be completed in the past due to other demands.

## **Vaccinations**

As the government responses to the pandemic moved in and out of different phases, our responses did too. Our most recent priorities, in 2021, were responding to the vaccination directives and working with agencies to meet their requirements prior to and while students were on placement.

This has added again a new dimension to the compliance requirements of the field education program and the agency.

## **Outcomes and learnings**

The pandemic has produced a range of outcomes and learnings which are outlined in this book. Social work education has demonstrated its adaptability in a climate of innovation and change. Internationally and nationally regulations and standards governing social work field education practice have suddenly changed and shifted in the pandemic environment. These changes have generated principles and parameters to redesign field education, reflecting the values and principles of best social work practice. These relate to concern and compassion around student wellbeing and community safety as the foundation for all decision making, the need for flexibility in adapting to dynamic and challenging environments, recognising, and advocating the positive contribution that placement makes to communities and workplaces, the significance of partnerships and collaborations and generating new knowledge through the documentation of experiences of innovative responses (AASW 2020). The innovations include the reduction of placement hours, more flexible placement models, greater acceptance of external supervision, online/simulated learning and academic models of placements provision. It highlights that previous resistance to long held conceptualisations and provision of field education can be revised and reimaged, in the light of developments produced in the pandemic environment.

## **RMIT Placement Project**

As part of the response to the impact of Covid-19, RMIT Social Work Field Education developed a series of internal placement projects for students in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Students participating in these projects were supervised by RMIT Social Work academics and this was the first time such placement opportunities had been undertaken at RMIT. A focus of these remote placements was ensuring that student connections with industry partners was developed. Despite the placements being managed ‘in house’, our intention was to provide

students with opportunities to engage directly with industry. While these projects were predominantly research-based, students built connections with social workers and legal professionals working in a range of organisations throughout Melbourne.

This book is the outcome of one of these projects. This project involved four Masters of Social Work students at RMIT and three academics. The key aim of the project was to understand how RMIT social work's partner agencies had experienced, and responded to, the Covid-19 pandemic. This placement had two key aims. First, to conceptualise and manage the publication of this book, as an important contribution from agency partners around the impacts of Covid-19 upon their services, their staff and people who access their programs. Second, this project aimed to complete a scoping study, involving interviews with agency partners. These interviews sought to understand the challenges agency partners had experienced, the creative and innovative ways that agencies had responded to the Covid-19 lockdowns and other health and safety related measures, and to understand how placements were managed by agencies, in partnership with RMIT, through this time.

The student placements commenced in July 2021. These placements were intended to be completed face-to-face. It was envisaged that students would visit participating partner agencies, spending time within the agencies to interview agency staff and RMIT social work students on placement. Through ongoing communication and on-site visits, students would also liaise with agency partners, assisting partners to complete chapters for this book. Unfortunately, after four days of on-site orientation to the placement, the Victorian Government announced a sixth lockdown for Melbourne, which would continue until the end of October. This meant that students worked remotely for the remainder of the placement, and were required to organise remote interviews with agency representatives.

A key strength of the project was the student collaboration. Students met each week with the supervisory team, and also met individually with supervisors and placement liaisons. However, the support students provided to each other was critical to their success throughout the project, at a particularly difficult time. Students met as

a group every day, to discuss their progress on assigned tasks, to workshop ideas, to debrief as a group following interviews and to provide moral support. Students shared chairing responsibilities for these meetings, and for group supervision meetings, developed agendas and shared minute taking responsibilities. The students and supervisory team worked on establishing group expectations, discussed group roles and group dynamics. This was another important element to the success of the project, as students were able to reflect on their own ways of working in groups, and to consider how their approach might work most effectively alongside other ways of participating in group work.

### **The Scoping Study: Interviews with partner agencies**

With the assistance of supervisory academic staff, students managed this research project, which had received prior course work ethics approval from RMIT College Human Ethics Advisory Network. Students completed a review of the literature and identified key themes to focus the study. Students then worked on developing an interview schedule and conducted pilot interviews to test questions and organising the interviews. The students also created a participant information consent form, with feedback from academics. Concurrently, field education academics developed and issued a short questionnaire for agency partners to gauge interest in participating in the scoping study, and the Partnership with the Community book. Approximately half of RMIT social work's partner agencies indicated an interest in these projects.

The students contacted partner agencies who had expressed interest in the project to organise interview times and seek consent from participants. Interviews were conducted and recorded through Microsoft Teams. Two students attended each of the interviews, with one student as lead interviewer and the other student present to provide support and ask additional follow-up questions where appropriate. This was intended to provide a support mechanism for students, and also to allow for peer feedback. Following each interview, the students debriefed online, with the student in the observer role providing feedback to the lead interviewer. This helped students to identify with

their own strengths, and for possible areas for development to be highlighted. In addition, this enabled students to both give and receive feedback, with group supervision used to model feedback and discuss what good feedback should feel like, and what it should be aiming to achieve.

Using interview recordings, students also transcribed interview data, and conducted thematic analysis of this data. Students used mind maps to illustrate the key themes emerging in the interviews conducted with each organisation, and how these themes intersected. In each instance, students wrote an outline of the research study including rationale and aims, and methodology. Students then summarised the findings of each study, using key quotes to illustrate salient points made in these interviews, also including the mind maps of the respective interviews. These summaries were provided to each of the agencies, with the intention of providing each partner with something tangible to take from the interviews. In addition, students will work with academics with the intention of publishing a series of articles based on this research.

## **Partnerships with the Community**

Working with the supervisory group, students developed the frame for the contributions made by agencies to this book. Agencies were asked to describe their work, the impacts of Covid-19, what innovations were adopted to respond to the various challenges presented by the pandemic, how placements were continued and what students did in their placement work. Students then liaised with placement agencies to complete drafts of these chapters, and complete consent forms relating to an intellectual property of the agency (such as images and logos).

This book highlights the value of partnerships between social work departments and human service agencies. This value can be understood in a number of ways, including the facilitation of quality placements for students during a period of crisis, and a commitment to ongoing industry experience in field education placements. The valuable contribution made by this book, is in hearing from agencies about their experiences of Covid-19, innovative adjustments to service delivery and how the partnership model with RMIT Social Work has helped



sustain placements throughout this period. Contributions by representatives of human service agencies underscore the value of partnerships, and the innovations and adaptations, by agencies and university staff which have helped maintain service delivery and placements through crisis periods. Agencies also highlight the importance of an organisation-wide approach to supporting self-care practices for students and staff, and the value of flexible and empathetic leadership. Strong lines of communication between university and agencies, as well as within agencies, is also a common theme emerging across the contributions to this book. The value of off-site supervision, as well as the support provided by the university staff towards supervision provided by agencies is emphasised by a number of authors.

Each chapter in this book makes an interesting and important contribution to broader discussions in Social Work regarding service delivery and also industry placements throughout the pandemic. In chapter 2, O’Keeffe, Heales, Baskarathas, Thompson and Jerono highlight how the voices of human services agencies are yet to be fully heard in the academic research. As Windisch and Cunningham outline in chapter 3, field education in social work throughout 2020 and 2021 in Melbourne has experienced ‘a crisis within a crisis’. As academics working in field education, Windisch and Cunningham describe these challenges, and how agency partnerships have been a key element in responding to these challenges. Selba Gondoza-Luka writes about the use of off-site supervision to support students practicing online case work with Afri-Aus Care in chapter 4. In chapter 5, Melvi Saji describes how remote placements have sought to replicate the work students would do in a face-to-face setting. Norminda Forteza, author of chapter 6, highlights the wide range of projects completed by the 15 students on placement with Australian Filipino Community Services throughout the pandemic. This includes the Physical Exercise program, Art for Wellness program and Online Singing program, involving older members of the Filipino community in Melbourne. In chapter 7, Shelley Turner of Forensicare writes about using co-design and co-creation, highlighting examples such as the ‘Digital Bytes’ program. Trevor Skerry and Jane Bakos describe Sacred Heart Mission’s work with people experiencing homelessness

in chapter 8, and the valuable project work completed by students throughout 2021. Chapter 9 features Christina Ryan and Caroline McAlister of Southeast Community Links, describing their response to the rapidly changing environment, and students' contributions to the Community Wellbeing/Emergency Relief program.

In Chapter 10, Carmel Simpson, Maree Corbo and Chay Brown from Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs describe the 'two-way learning' placement model, that supports a coming together of Indigenous and mainstream knowledges. Chapter 11, by Evelyn Dowling and Kieran Hough from Victoria Arabic Social Services, describes student involvement in the Gambling Harm program. This included a student using their knowledge of computer games to create an online training module to support workers' understanding of gambling mechanisms. In chapter 12, Ariel Couchman draws on student descriptions of placements conducted at Youth Law, while in chapter 13, Ginetta Mammarella describes the wrap around support provided to young people by Youth Projects, and student contributions to this work. Finally, Jessica Lee-Ack, of Workforce Innovation and Development Institute, describes the commitment to a supportive and inclusive organisational culture, which is seen as integral in supporting staff and placement student wellbeing throughout a challenging time.

This collection makes an excellent contribution to knowledge of how human service agencies have responded to the considerable difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. As each of these chapters highlight, the creativity, strength, knowledge and skill of the agencies, their staff, and the students on placement, is considerable. This has enabled agencies to continue providing extremely valuable support to the people that they work with, at a time when the inequalities present in Australian society have been exacerbated. This work also highlights the immensely valuable relationships that RMIT social work has with partner agencies. Partnerships have enabled placements to continue, with support provided by agencies, off-site supervisors and RMIT staff. Students, as emerging social workers, have had placement experiences with industry where they have learned key skills and knowledges, and

have made important contributions to program delivered by agencies. Finally, we extend our thanks to Caroline Jerono, Emily Heales, Sobika Baskarathas and Scott Thompson, the students who undertook this project placement. Their professionalism and commitment to this project, and for modelling good practice as supportive colleagues and group members.



## CHAPTER 2

# Challenges, opportunities and partnerships: A summary of literature exploring field education academics' responses to Covid-19

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Patrick O’Keeffe, Emily Heales, Sobika Baskarathas,  
Scott Thompson and Caroline Jerono

This chapter outlines how universities, governing bodies and agencies adapted social work field placements in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout this period, social workers, including many social work students, have been at the frontline of the public health crisis supporting those in need (Craik 2020). This created increased demands on the sector (Craik 2020). University campuses across the world were closed and teaching transitioned to online platforms (Davis and Mirick 2021; de Jonge et al. 2020), while many agencies have had to close face-to-face services and adapt to online service delivery (Craik 2020, Crisp et al. 2021). Subsequently, the social work placements of many students around the world were terminated early, cancelled or postponed (Crocetto 2021; Davis and Mirick 2021;

Archer-Kuhn et al. 2020; O'Rourke et al. 2020). As stated by Crisp et al. (2021, p.1840), this created a significant predicament for social work programs, and the industries reliant upon social work graduates to staff key positions:

*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.*

In some instances, there was added stress for the sector in providing placements for students.

Regulatory bodies such as Social Work England, the Australian Association of Social Work and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in the United States sought to modify placement requirements, to enable placements to be completed remotely, in ways that eased pressure on placement providers and students (Beesley and Devonald 2020; Crisp et al. 2021). In Australia, for example, placement guidelines were modified to enable students to work remotely from home, to allow supervision to be conducted through online meetings, while reducing required hours from 500 to 400 (Morley and Clarke 2020; Crisp et al. 2021). This reflects similar adjustments made by other governing bodies, such as the CSWE, which reduced placement hours by 15% (Davis and Mirick 2021). In other countries, such as Northern Ireland, placements were terminated and students were passed, provided they could demonstrate key competencies, to enable a quick transition to the workforce (O'Rourke et al. 2020).

However, in many countries agencies remained unable to provide student placements, based on a need to concentrate on their core activities in response to unfolding social, health and economic crises (Crisp et al., 2021). As a result, university departments responded by developing innovative placement models to address the shortfall in the number of placements on offer (Crisp et al. 2021). This involved placements provided within universities, administered by faculty staff or in collaboration with faculty staff and external partners (Zuchowski et al. 2021; Jeffries et al. 2021; Archer-Kuhn et al. 2020; Morley and Clarke 2020; Crocetto 2021; Mitchell et al. 2021), and the development of virtual placements which enabled students to complete placements with agencies (Drolet et al. 2021; Csova and Debiel 2020). The crises caused by the pandemic presented the sector with the opportunity to innovate and provide new opportunities, to test new ways of working and provide learning for future placements (Davey et al. 2021; Zuchowski et al. 2021; Jeffries et al. 2021).

Through a scoping study of literature multiple articles were produced from a search using google scholar and informit. Certain articles did not meet the relevant criteria for the literature we were interested to explore on student placement during the pandemic. We used key search terms “social work”, “pandemic” and “student placement” when conducting searches. The search included global social work placement from 2020 to 2021 looking at the impacts on students, universities, and partner agencies. We were able to identify three major themes: challenges for students, staff and agencies, innovations developed by social work departments, students and agency partnerships throughout the pandemic, and the importance of agency partnership.

## **Challenges experienced by students, agencies and faculty staff**

Students struggled with personal and practical issues relating to online placements throughout the pandemic as virtual placements have become the norm. Reflections from

students globally and from various institutes have reported that students found the initial weeks of their online field education to be particularly stressful (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Sarbu and Unwin 2020; Newberry & Macdonald, 2021; Davey et al., 2021). This experience is a result of numerous difficulties experienced through completing placements online, such as lack of boundaries separating placement work and home life, loss of connection to social networks (de Jonge et al. 2020) and physical parameters (Newberry & Macdonald, 2021). For some students, insufficient information concerning the direction of their placements was a source of stress and anxiety (Davey et al., 2021). Students identified practical barriers such as motivation issues, distractions in the home environment, such as family and children, and feelings of isolation (Zuchowski et al. 2021). For many students, the remote working in the context of the uncertainties created by the pandemic contributed to experiences of isolation while completing the placement online (Davey et al. 2021). In the example highlighted by Davey et al. (2021), students felt isolated working from home, the early weeks of their placement seemed directionless and with little communication which left them feeling demotivated and stressed (Davey et al., 2021).

The switch to online provision of services highlighted and reinforced economic and digital inequalities (de Jonge et al. 2020). Social work agencies often work with vulnerable and marginalised communities (Craik, 2020), while many social work students also experience economic disadvantage and lack access to necessary technology to connect with online platforms (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Fronck et al. 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic accentuated the financial disadvantage experienced by many students in numerous ways, with the limited capacity to connect with virtual placements an example (Fronck et al. 2021).

Students whose placements were ended early were disappointed at not being able to complete a face-to-face placement, and for the lost relationships developed through placements which were ended suddenly (Davey et al. 2021; Mitchell et al. 2021; Micsky 2021). An added challenge of navigating the virtual sphere is maintaining student and service user confidentiality, and in some cases, developing processes for protecting confidentiality and personal information (Morris et al., 2020; Mitchell et al. 2021). In

one example described by Morris et al (2020, p.1133), a participant's therapist asked a student to share their phone conversations with the participant. In this case, a consent form was developed to seek consent from the participant for this information to be shared, and then discussed with the therapist (Morris et al. 2020, p.1133). Similar concerns have been raised regarding students' use of personal phones and devices to conduct conversations and access confidential data and information. As Mitchell et al. (2021) describe in relation to a clinical setting, students completing remote placements had limited access to key information due to privacy and security concerns. Mitchell et al. (2021) highlight how this created the need for social work academics to develop responses, such as a "patient-less" clinical experience, which would provide students with the opportunity to develop key skills and competencies (Mitchell et al. 2021, p.2).

During the pandemic field education staff undertook additional responsibilities, which resulted in additional time commitments than traditional placements required (Zuchowski et al., 2021). Field educators supported students as they struggled with projects which required creating new knowledge rather than building upon pre-existing knowledge (Zuchowski et al., 2021). They were able to provide support by facilitating critical reflection as students initially felt that remote placements were not 'real' placements (Zuchowski et al., 2021). Hence, educators played a key role in supporting students throughout placements as did agencies. A further limitation in some articles could be the nature of the relationship between students and universities are likely to influence responses collected through research.

While a significant body of research has examined students' and social work educators' insights of field education during the pandemic (Mitchell et al. 2021; Crocetto 2021; Drolet et al. 2021; Morley and Clarke 2020; Archer-Kuhn et al. 2020; Jeffries et al. 2021), there has been little research from agency perspectives.

## **Development of innovative placement models and projects**

Placements that were not able to proceed had a flow on effect for students and the social work departments as it



would prevent students from graduating (Crisp et al., 2021). Furthermore, it would have consequences for the human services sector as an influx of employees were desperately needed to deal with the impact of the pandemic (Crisp et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled social work programs and agencies to develop creative responses to ensure that placements could still continue, despite remote working and agency closures (Mclaughlin et al. 2020). These innovations are demonstrated in several unique placements and teaching innovations in Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, Chile, the United States and Hungary (Mclaughlin et al 2020). As Csoba and Debiel (2020, p.1095) describe, the creativity demanded by the cessation of familiar ways of working opened a “digital gate” for social work education. However, more than rapidly developing technological competency and enabling remote working, the pandemic caused social work departments to rethink standard partnership models.

In many cases, social work departments developed models which resulted in students engaging in online learning which allowed for simulation of key social work skills and competencies (Jeffries et al. 2021; Mitchell et al. 2021; Crocetto 2021). These examples were frequently offered to students in instances where placements had been terminated early, or where placements were not able to proceed. These models necessitated the development of teaching resources by faculty staff, who provided training and support to students through simulation and role play. In other instances, self-directed practicum placements were offered, which combined online teaching units with volunteer hours, where students gained direct practice experience (Asher-Kuhn et al. 2020; Crisp et al. 2021).

For example, the University of Tasmania created a placement with the Red Cross based on 24 first and 24 second placement students making phone calls to people who were disconnected and isolated during initial stages of the first COVID 19 lockdown (Crisp et al., 2021). These 48 students made around 6000 calls to individuals who required food, medical resources, psycho-social supports, and a person to chat with, and as a result these students played a vital role in aiding vulnerable people at a crucial time, thus gaining a valuable and rewarding placement

experience in line with a Social Work ethos (Crisp et al., 2021). This opportunity would not have arisen in pre-covid times and showed the ability of social work departments within universities to have the ability to be able to adapt (Mclaughlin et al., 2020).

Other innovative placements involved students completing research projects focusing on contemporary issues in social and environmental justice (Mclaughlin et al., 2020), and international activist projects conducted via zoom, which demonstrated how using online space could bring down geographic boundaries within social work practice (Crisp et al., 2021). In Australian universities such as the Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane) and James Cook University (Townsville), despite very few Covid cases relative to other parts of Australia and in other countries and limited restrictions being applied, research placements conducted 'in-house' were adopted as a key response to the broader challenges created by the pandemic (Morley and Clarke 2020). The James Cook University Social Work department created the innovative 'Community Connectors Project', where 20 social work students completed placements contributing to research projects (Davey et al. 2021; Zuchowski et al. 2021). Similarly, Morely and Clarke (2020) highlighted the use of research placements, administered by academic staff, to support student learning. In an Australian context, the challenges for social work departments in securing placements has caused a number of academics to reflect on the value of simulation, remote working and university-administered research placements as providing a sustainable model for field education (Jeffries et al. 2021; Zuchowski et al. 2021).

In addition to placements delivered by social work academics, student-directed and student led placements, drawing on an action learning model, were employed in placements offered to students (Morris et al. 2020). As Morris et al. (2020) describe, graduate students from Stoney Brook University in the United States created a project called GiftsofGab.org to address two main goals during their field placement. First was to address the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness of older people, which was exacerbated due to the pandemic. This project aimed

“to respond to the pressing issue of isolation and loneliness among older adults due to the enactment of mandated stay-at-home orders” (Morris 2021, p.1128). Essentially, this project was “a volunteer, call-based companion coordination project that connects social work students with those in need of social interaction” (Morris 2020, p.1128). A second aim of the project was to provide displaced social work students at Stoney Brook the opportunity to complete their required field placement hours. This project provided social support, addressing the feeling of depression and isolation, while allowing participants space tell their stories to someone. GiftofGab.org provided the students with experience in community-based field work within the model of action learning field education (Morris et al. 2020).

Collaboration between academic staff within faculties, with other faculties, between students and also among universities and external partners was described as a critical factor in the success of the innovations highlighted in this research (Asher-Kuhn et al. 2020; Zuchowski et al. 2021; De Fries et al. 2021; Drolet et al. 2021). However, while the innovations discussed here offer potential opportunities for advancing field education, it should be noted that the resourcing required to support academic staff to deliver these models would require attention by universities (Crisp et al. 2021). In many instances, staff experienced a high degree of stress and exhaustion (Asher-Kuhn et al. 2020; Fargion et al. 2020), suggesting that while in-house placement models may ensure greater sustainability in terms of placement availability, the potential staff burnout in response to workload pressure may itself undermine sustainability.

## **Importance of Partnership**

For many universities, partnerships involving universities, government and community-based agencies have been vital in providing quality placements for social work students (Jaquier et al. 2021; De Fries et al. 2021; O’Rourke et al. 2020; Egan 2018). The commitment of all partners to these relationships have helped ensure that there are placement opportunities for students. Crisp et al. (2021) suggest that for many social work departments, the Covid-19 pandemic underlined the need to reduce reliance on external

partners for agencies, while other studies have suggested the provision of placements by university departments represents a more sustainable placement model (Zuchowski et al. 2021; Asher-Kuhn et al. 2020). However, a number of studies reflecting on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic have highlighted the value of partnerships between universities and social work industry partners for the continuation of student placements throughout the pandemic (De Fries et al., 2021; Beesley and Devonald 2020; Drolet et al., 2021; Jaquiere et al., 2020, Sarbu & Unwin, 2021).

Community based agencies in New Zealand continued to take on the responsibility of field education throughout the pandemic as they saw value in having students at their agencies and assisting the next wave of social workers in their learning experience (Jaquiere et al. 2020). Jaquiere et al. (2020, p.69) noted “The importance of relying on strong professional relationships during crises”, which contributed to the flexibility of placements during this time, with some transitioning online and others having more of a project focus (Jaquiere et al., 2020). As Jaquiere et al. (2020, p.66) state, the partners “willingness to provide placements for students during this difficult time is significant, as they continued to provide a service for which there is no financial gain or recompense”. This relationship was not only beneficial for the students; the agencies also benefited from having students contributing to the agencies’ work. Placement students helped fill gaps left by staff members who had to take leave as a result of isolation requirements (Sarbu & Unwin, 2021).

Transforming the Field Education Landscape (TFEL) was formed in 2019 as collaboration between social work educators and practice agencies in Canada to work towards addressing the challenges of field education (Drolet, 2021). As a result of safety concerns for students, staff and faculty during the pandemic, TFEL had to shift to a remote model which created new and innovative ways for the partners to collaborate. During this time, they were able to host a virtual field education summit. The online delivery of the summit meant 600 people were able to attend, as attendance was not restricted by the size of the venue (Drolet et al. 2021, p.4). One student involved in the TFEL partnership reflected on the expansion of their social work skillset, as the partnership

gave them the opportunity to connect and be mentored by professors across multiple universities in Canada (Drolet et al. 2021, pp.6-7). The reach of the TFEL network only grew due to the flexibility and adaptations that resulted from the global impact of Covid 19 (Drolet et al., 2021).

Social work field education in Pacific Northwest America had to transition to a fully remote placement delivery as a result of the pandemic. The shift to a virtual placement in response to the pandemic “relied on the ability of field education programs to work in partnership with community agencies to imagine and operationalise new models of teaching and learning” (De Fries et al., 2021, p.2). These new models saw the social work agencies provide flexibility in the way they virtually onboarded placement students and the remote supervision they provided. The pandemic highlighted the critical need for social workers to assist the most vulnerable populations especially during these times. As a result, innovative methods of field education delivery were created between universities and partner agencies, to ensure field education continued during the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

In this literature review we identified three major themes in relation to social work field education during the Covid-19 pandemic: challenges experienced by students, faculty staff and agencies, the development of innovative models and placement types, and importance of partnerships with external agencies, universities and government. While many of the experiences across different countries were similar, such as the cancellation or early termination of placements, the stress and uncertainty experienced by students and university staff as they responded to the crisis, and the need to develop creative responses to these challenges, the impact of Covid-19 has been uneven throughout the world, and within countries. In addition, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities in education, between countries and among student populations. For example, in Australia the pandemic has had different effects even within Australia, each state had different restrictions, as certain states within Australia such as WA (Western Australia), QLD and Tasmania have had relatively minimal exposure to

the COVID-19 virus compared to Victoria and New South Wales who have had prolonged lockdowns. The difference in restrictions and the number of lockdowns highlight the different experiences. For example, some articles identified remote placements as those with no direct link to industry which is very different to the central place industry played in helping to maintain placements throughout the pandemic, as described in other articles. This emphasises the importance of understanding the role of partnerships in covid placements as explored throughout this book.

This chapter draws together a selection of the extensive literature which has been developed by social work academics in relation to field education responses to the pandemic. However, despite some exceptions (Csoba and Debiel 2020; Davis and Mirick 2021; Fargion et al. 2020), the majority of these studies involve social work academics reflecting on and analysing their responses to placement cancellations and terminations. This is understandable, and is very valuable research which shares and reflects on the immediate actions adopted by academics in a rapidly changing environment. As numerous authors have also stated, the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic created the opportunity to test new models and approaches, which may shape the delivery of social work field placements into the future. However, it is also worth questioning the balance of these studies, and emphasising the caution that needs to be exercised when considering the extent to which this research may be used to redefine social work field placements. This book highlights the placements undertaken by RMIT partners during 2020 and 2021 and adds to the knowledge base in relation to challenges experienced by students, academic staff and external agencies, the opportunities for innovation and creativity in relation to placements, and the important role of partnering.



## CHAPTER 3

# Field Education and Covid-19: How RMIT responded to a crisis within a crisis.

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Margareta Windisch and Rob Cunningham

This chapter reflects on RMIT Social Work's approach to managing student placements during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-21. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the challenges experienced, the strategies implemented to manage these challenges, and lessons learnt by the RMIT Field Education team.

### **Background: Covid-19 and Melbourne**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a global impact; over 260 million people have contracted the virus and over 5 million people have died (WHO, 2021). Social Work Field Education programs throughout the world have continued to operate during the pandemic, however, just like the impact of Covid-19 on a wider global scale, how Field Education programs have been impacted by the pandemic has been influenced by geographic location. The impact on Field Education programs has not only been influenced by the country the program is based in, but also the state and region within the country. As an example, in Australia, the state

of Victoria accounts for 58% of the total Covid-19 cases in the country, and 66% of total deaths (Department of Health, 2021). Victoria’s capital city of Melbourne has experienced six lockdowns for a combined total of 262 days throughout 2020-21. Table 1 details the number, dates and duration of Melbourne lockdowns in 2020-2021.

**Table 1** Melbourne Covid-19 Lockdowns 2020-2021

Lockdown	Dates	Total Days
Lockdown 1	March 30 – May 12, 2020	43
Lockdown 2	July 8 <sup>th</sup> – October 27, 2020	111
Lockdown 3	February 12 – February 17, 2021	5
Lockdown 4	May 27 – June 10, 2021	14
Lockdown 5	July 15 – July 27, 2021	12
Lockdown 6	August 5 – October 22, 2021	77 (262 days in all)

At the time of writing this chapter the people of Melbourne have endured more days in lockdown (262) than any other city in the world (Boaz, 2021). State imposed lockdown measures included strict stay at home orders, restrictions on economic and recreational activities, limitations on travel and movement and the imposition of nighttime curfews. These lockdowns required significant sacrifices and a major reorientation of personal, professional, and economic life. The impact has been manifold and often traumatic, with major implications for the people of Melbourne, including students and university staff, and the social services sector.

It is important to situate our experience within this unique locality-based context. How RMIT Social Work Field Education was able to provide students with quality field experience within a global pandemic, in the most locked down city in the world, should be of interest to Social Work Field Education programs globally. This knowledge can be used by Field Education teams to support and maintain student placements within a crisis.

## Field Education

Field Education is considered a ‘distinctive pedagogy’ of social work education and is considered one of the most memorable components of a student’s learning experience

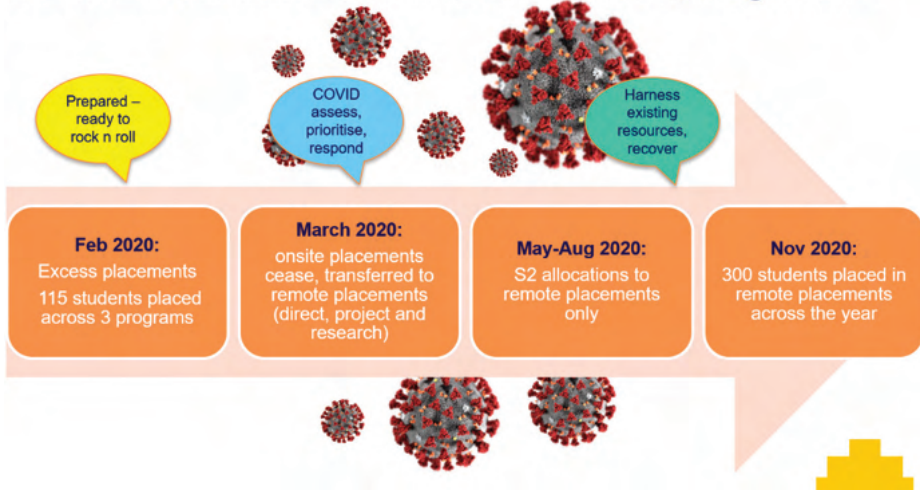


(Egan et al. 2018). It is where teaching and learning leave the controlled and formal classroom environment and students are confronted with the messiness of real-life scenarios in the workplace; or ‘where the rubber hits the road. In other words, Field Education plays a critical role in developing social work students’ professional identity, their competencies and understanding of ethical practice (Bogo 2015).

RMIT Social Work, like many other social work programs nationally and internationally, has faced challenges in sourcing sufficient field education placements due to a highly competitive tertiary education market, characterised by an ever-increasing student cohort and a growing number of social work schools vying for placement opportunities. Neoliberalism and decades’ long structural neglect of the welfare sector has further compounded the pressure on universities and organisations to provide adequate staff resources to ensure successful placement provision (Egan, Hill & Rollins 2020).

While RMIT has a rich 45 year history in collaborating with the social work industry to provide student placements, the past decade has seen a persistent focus in developing these relationships (Egan, 2018). This has resulted in the current RMIT Social Work Field Education Partnership Model, whereby partner agencies provide a minimum of ten placements per year. The partnership includes financial support and the provision of off-site supervision by RMIT, training and professional development sessions, as well as building research and project capacity. A partnership reference group was also set up to ensure a reciprocal and active relationship is maintained between RMIT and industry partners. This reference group has input into placement provision, monitors and evaluates student placements to ensure they are adaptive to changing circumstances (Egan, 2018). The partnership model has been instrumental in providing a stable number of social work placements each year that meet AASW accreditation requirements, as well as providing a quality and rich learning experience for students. The partnership model has proved vital in the sustainability of the RMIT Social Work Field Education Program in a competitive market.

# COVID—MEANING MAKING and crisis management



**Figure 1:** COVID-19, Phase One, 2020

Novel Coronavirus Images by CDC on Unsplash

This partnership model combined with a crisis management approach proved critical in helping us contain the Covid-19 pandemic fallout, navigate through the significant challenges posed by associated restrictions, and offer viable placement opportunities for all students. Figure 1 outlines the RMIT pandemic responses during 2020.

The RMIT field education team started 2020 with a placement surplus, which was reflective of our well-established industry links and a dedicated Professional Practice Coordinator who has been able to nurture existing partnerships and build new relationships with agencies. By the time the Victorian state government declared a ‘state of emergency ‘on March 16, 117 students across three programs (BSW, BSW/Psych and MSW) had started placements. The imposition of a broad suite of Covid-19 pandemic related restrictions severely restricted most agencies ability to continue onsite service delivery, including the capacity to host students. While our partners were busily working out how to best navigate and adapt to this unprecedented situation, RMIT university had to develop new safety procedures for its student cohort engaged in field education activities. The combination

of emergency restriction, agency pressures and RMIT’s duty of care to its students meant all semester 1 2020 onsite placements ceased and a decision was made to offer semester 2 placements on a remote basis only. All up RMIT placed 305 students during 2020. Table 2 provides an overview of the 305 student placements offered in 2020.

**Table 2** 2020 Social Work Placements at RMIT

Placement Program, Supervision and Mode.	Number of Students
Total Number of Placements in 2020	305
Master of Social Work	117
Bachelor of Social Work	188
Field Education 1 (1 <sup>st</sup> Placement)	156
Field Education 2 (2nd Placement)	149
Onsite Supervision	156
Offsite Supervision/Liaison	151
Face to face placement	17
Remote, home-based placement	247
Hybrid – combination of face to face and remote placement.	18
Internal RMIT Projects.	10

All semester 1 placements had to be assessed on their potential to be conducted remotely (work from home) and be supported sufficiently as not to jeopardise viability and integrity. Placements were either ended or interrupted where a transfer to a remote mode of operation was not an option.

This was an extremely complex and labour-intensive period, characterised by a ‘stop and start’ uncertainty and confusion resulting from shifting processes, and continuous negotiations across all stakeholders. The rapid development of new processes and resources combined with authenticity, transparency and increased frequency in communication became a top priority to guide us through the constantly shifting pandemic terrain.

We created new information resources for students clarifying Covid-19 impacts on Field Education (Covid-19 Modules) and updated the Social Work Field Education Hub – an external facing communication site for industry

partners. These online spaces provided essential information and resource repositories and critical tools in facilitating the successful management of high levels of uncertainty. Regular newsletters, emails, and frequent drop-in sessions and Question and Answer (Q&A) sessions for students proved to be invaluable support mechanisms and helped alleviate stress and anxiety. The Field Education (FE) team were not afraid to take some risks, think and act outside the box, take up new opportunities in the unfamiliar remote placement space and create new parentships. These innovative practices are detailed within other chapters of this book.

Acting with care and being accessible were vital elements in our crisis management approach. Acknowledging the pain caused by the pandemic, the significant individual challenges experienced, hard work, and successes achieved; helped in overcoming hesitancy and reluctance regarding online learning opportunities.

When Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared a state of disaster on August 2, 2020, our field education team was well set up and ready to support its large semester 2 student cohort through their remote placements. This was consistent with RMIT policy to only support remote placements.

## **Phase Two: 2021**

Melbourne was heavily impacted by Covid-19 in 2021, again experiencing the highest level of cases and lockdown days in Australia (Department of Health, 2021). However, our 2020 experience allowed us to plan and respond to the continued challenges and changing circumstances the pandemic presented in 2021, allowing for rapid and targeted responses to changes in emergency measures affecting placements. The successful strategies of 2020 were again implemented. A focus on clear and frequent communication with key stakeholders was critical in preparing everyone for the potential of further lockdowns and changes to placement modes. The frequent communication also allowed for risk assessments and Covid-19 exposure sites to be adequately managed by the Field Education team. Collaborative relationships with partner agencies was again a priority and allowed enough placements to be sourced and for these

placements to be adaptable to any potential lockdowns. Off-Site supervision/Liaison was again important in providing students with tailored support and supervision.

**Table 3** 2021 RMIT Field Education Placements

Placement Program, Supervision and Mode.	Number of Students
Total Number of Placements in 2021	400
Master of Social Work	207
Bachelor of Social Work	193
Field Education 1 (1 <sup>st</sup> Placement)	216
Field Education 2 (2 <sup>nd</sup> Placement)	184
Onsite Supervision	206
Offsite Supervision/Liaison	199
Face to face placement	197
Remote, home-based placement	33
Hybrid – combination of face to face and remote placement.	197
Internal RMIT Projects.	6

Table 3 provides an overview of the 400 student placements offered in 2021. This demonstrates the Field Education team was able to provide a 23% increase in the number of placements in 2021 compared to 2020, with most placements returning to at least some onsite experience for students (over 90%). This was achieved despite the extended lockdowns in Melbourne throughout the year, suggesting the experience and lessons learned in 2020 provided the program with added resilience and adaptability to meet the ongoing challenges of Covid-19.

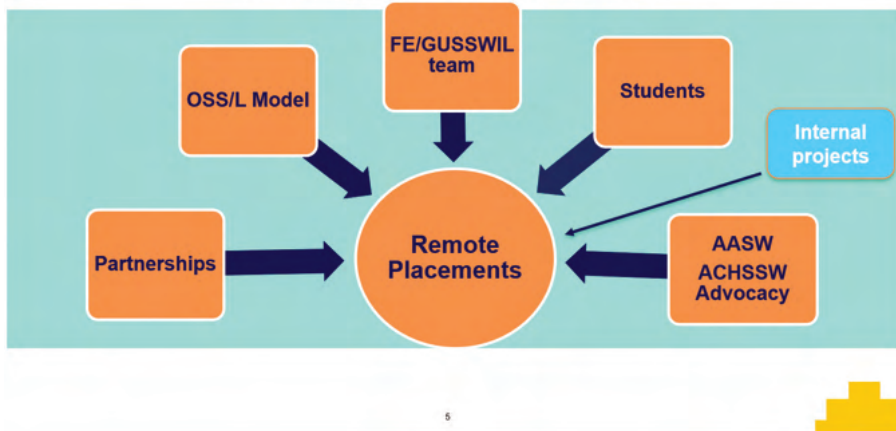
## **Weathering the storm: valuing interdependence**

We were able to meet our challenges through harnessing our existing resources and working in close collaboration with all our stakeholders. Figure 2 provides an overview of the key relationships leading to RMIT’s Field education response to the pandemic.

- 1. Partnerships:** Our philosophical approach to our industry partners of reciprocal respect, goodwill and

# WHAT MADE IT WORK: RELATIONSHIPS

## Valuing interdependence



**Figure 2:** What made it work: Relationships

shared values was fundamental and provided a solid foundation to weather the crisis. It allowed us to work imaginatively and innovatively and collaborate closely to transition from onsite to remote placements. This included the developing of creative responses of service delivery such as telehealth, online digital literacy initiatives or specific project and research-based placements. Please see other chapters within this book for examples of these collaborative and innovative practices

- 2. RMIT projects:** The RMIT social work department also responded expediently to the crisis by fast tracking the development of some projects to capture students whose placements had ceased. The strengths of the partnership model meant that we had to replace only a handful of placements with internal RMIT projects to meet our demand. Internal RMIT projects made up 4 % of total placements across 2020-21.
- 3. Offsite Supervision/Liaison Model:** The partnership model was complemented by a cohesive team of dedicated and experienced RMIT staff providing offsite supervision and liaison. The off-site supervision model used by RMIT incorporates the use of an external social work supervisor provided by RMIT, when an agency is

unable to provide a qualified social work practitioner to undertake this role. This is a dual role in which the external supervisor also undertake the university liaison role. This model uses both individual and group supervision sessions. We set up fortnightly peer catchups with staff undertaking these roles as an opportunity to support and share ideas on how to best manage placements and guide students in this unfamiliar terrain. Student group supervision took on extra importance as it allowed students to engage in group learning, substitutes for incidental learning that happens face to face and provided much needed connection during isolation periods. Feedback from students and partner agencies suggested the role of the offsite supervisor and the group supervision format was critical during lockdowns, providing added support to students isolated from an onsite team environment. This links to previous research conducted on the offsite model which demonstrated students valued the peer network, debriefing, critical reflection and supportive relationships developed during group supervision with an external social work supervisor (Egan, David & Williams, 2021).

4. **Field Education Team:** The Field education team, comprising of academics and professional staff, already had well established structures which allowed for the redevelopment of existing and creation of new processes in very short timeframes. We increased the frequency of team meetings, allowing for important information sharing and problem solving and used a collaborative and collective approach that was inclusive rather than top down.
5. **ACHSSW and AASW advocacy:** Advocacy from the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW) with the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) proved instrumental in allowing for an effective, flexible and empathetic response to the challenges the Covid19 crises posed for field education. The AASW's *Covid-19 Parameters* (AASW, 2020) response approved significant variations to their social work program accreditation standards which helped prevent the collapse of field education in states most affected by the pandemic and related restrictions. Student

placements simply could not have continued without this response. As we enter 2022 it is important the AASW's *Covid-19 Parameter* response continues while Field Education teams continue to manage the ongoing challenges of this pandemic.

- 6. Students:** A special mention must go to our student cohort, who valiantly rose to the challenge. The Covid-19 crisis hit students exceptionally hard, with many suffering significant financial hardships, as their casual jobs literally disappeared overnight. The sudden shift to online learning, a severe contraction of social life and connectedness combined with pandemic related anxieties, compounded already existing experiences of inequality and increased stress levels significantly. As one placement student put it "... there was so much to manage; loss of work, trying to manage income, isolation at home, no-one to have morning tea with like a normal placement." Students demonstrated high levels of adaptability and flexibility as they learned how to navigate the complexities and demands of remote placements. Many students were able to put their technological savviness and digital literacy to good use on placement, supporting agencies and services users alike in the pivot to online platforms for service delivery and engagement.

## Conclusion:

The Covid-19 pandemic required Field Education programs to demonstrate innovative and collaborative practice in the following ways:

- 1. Learning as co-creation** – There were many examples of Field Education students using their existing skills (particularly online and technology skills) to teach Field Educators and partner organisations. This resulted in a move away from vertical knowledge transfer to a more collaborative learning environment. Please see specific example of this in the various agency specific Chapters.
- 2. Democratising work/study opportunities:** Working and learning online has allowed for the mainstreaming of flexibility and new equitable ways to learn. For example, feedback from staff and students living with a disability



suggested the online space offered more opportunities to engage in work and learning experiences. This was supported by regional students and staff who also suggested online work had opened more opportunities for their participation.

- 3. Extending service delivery:** The extension of online technology and methods of service provision allowed the continuation of services to many client groups. These modes of service delivery were also used for individual and group supervision.
- 4. Committing to relationships:** Fostering of reciprocal relationships between universities and committed industry partners.
- 5. Advocating for justice:** For ongoing and increased flexibility to respond effectively to crises; continuous engagement with AASW, industry bodies and government.

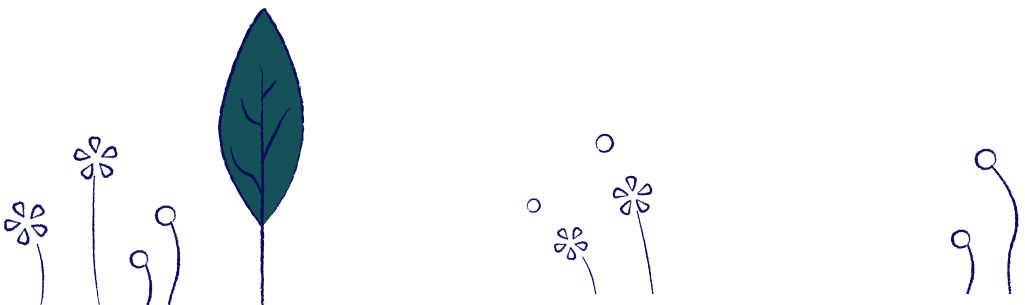
It is important the learnings created through the Covid-19 pandemic are taken forward into future practice. The RMIT Social Work Field Education Program will now focus on ensuring these innovative practices are adopted and nurtured in the long term.

While the pandemic has created new opportunities in social work field education, it is also important to note the costs of Covid-19, which have been seismic, traumatic, and profound, with the most disadvantaged community sectors and members hardest hit. It has also created significant ruptures and changes within field education. For the RMIT Field Education team the impact of the pandemic, and the workload it has created has been severe. Ensuring the continuation of student placements, working with industry partners to adapt placements, the increased compliance and risk management processes, providing emotional support and care to students; all took an emotional and physical toll on the Field Education team. The cumulative stress over the period of two years has been significant for the field education team, students and our industry partners.

This chapter has detailed the experiences of the RMIT Field Education team in managing student placements through the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have documented the importance of crisis management, including frequent and clear communication

to all Field Education stakeholders. The importance of strong and innovative relationships with industry partners was also highlighted, as was the importance of the off-site supervision/liaison role in providing additional support to students in this crisis. We also established a field education team that is adaptive to the changing circumstances of the pandemic, as well as being responsive to the needs of students was vital in managing the program throughout this period. Finally we have outlined how the pandemic has created opportunities for Field Education, such as co-creation of the learning environment, increased flexibility and equity for students, and the creation of new and innovative placement settings.

It is important to note this chapter is a reflection of the first two years of the Covid-19; the pandemic is far from over and will continue to have global consequences, as well as impacting on social work field education. It is therefore important to further examine field education in this context, not just as this pandemic evolves, but also for future pandemics, crises and emergencies.



## CHAPTER 4

# Afri-Aus Care

Selba Gondoza-Luka



### About Afri-Aus Care

Afri-Aus Care is an incorporated community charity organisation founded by Selba-Gondoza Luka in 2015. Located in Springvale South, Afri-Aus Care consists of a group of diverse professionals who provide Culturally Appropriate Mental Health assessment and a variety of support services to African Australian youth-at-risk, their families and those from other Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Afri-Aus Care offers intensive biopsychosocial and wellbeing risk assessment such as counselling, legal/court/post-release community support, alternative education, and employment pathways.

Afri-Aus Care uses UBUNTU guidelines and the Positive Change Model Methodology as foundations in the work we do to assist people to live meaningful lives (Ewuoso, & Hall, 2019; Kuyini, 2013). So what is UBUNTU?

*[U]buntu is an essentially relational ethics, which prizes relationships of interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, relationality, community friendliness, harmonious relationships and other-regarding actions such as compassion and actions that are likely to be good for others, in which actions are morally right to the extent that they*

*honour the capacity to relate communally, reduce discord or promote friendly relationships with others, and in which the physical world and the spiritual world are fundamentally united. (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019, p. 93)*

Afri-Aus Care provides Culturally Appropriate programs in all their UBUNTU community projects, and as a result, the organisation has been able to reach the African Australian community at the grassroots level. Afri-Aus Care also work in collaboration with private and public stakeholders (for example, various government bodies, Rotary clubs, and other educational institutions) to reach their strategic goals.

Afri-Aus Care provides placement opportunities for tertiary students from various educational institutions in Victoria, including RMIT, Monash University, Chisholm, Holmesglen, Swinburne University of Technology, Stott's College and Victoria University. Afri-Aus Care also works with the University of Melbourne (AREiA), the Swinburne University of Technology, and the Psyche Foundation on a number of research and evaluation projects.

## **Afri-Aus Care and RMIT Partnership**

Afri-Aus Care has been working in partnership with RMIT University since May 2019. During this partnership RMIT has assisted the organisation by providing offsite liaison staff, field educators, and supervisors. Afri-Aus Care has been providing the task supervision.

During 2020, Afri-Aus Care hosted 18 Master's/ Bachelor of Social Work, Youth Work, and Psychology students. During their placement students were able to develop and enhance their social work skills and understand culturally appropriate service provision to African and other CALD communities. Afri-Aus Care provided students with an in-depth knowledge and understanding of traditional African culture and the use of the UBUNTU philosophy and the Positive Change Model Methodology (Onsando et al, 2020; Ewuoso, & Hall, 2019; Kuyini, 2013). During the first week of placement students were given an online information session about placement at Afri-Aus Care. The students were then given a task to research UBUNTU, to enable them to understand the African belief system, and

subsequently apply the principles and guidelines learnt when connecting with members of the African Australian community for case work.

Unfortunately, at the start of 2020 Victoria went into a strict lockdown due to Covid-19. Due to lockdowns, there was a risk of all student placements being ceased. However, Afri-Aus Care's management team thought innovatively and had numerous meetings with the RMIT social work department to offer an alternative approach to placement for the students. The alternative approach was to offer online services. Culturally sensitive case work often requires face-to-face community centred engagement, so adapting to online delivery posed a challenge. The shift to online case work caused anxiety for many students. Some students were not sure whether it was the most appropriate step to take. The RMIT placement team employed a qualified off-site supervisor who worked closely with Afri-Aus Care's team and the students. This staff member conducted intensive research on UBUNTU and trauma centred practices. At Afri-Aus Care this practice is translated as the Positive Change Model Methodology.

Despite initial concerns, within a few weeks the students adapted to the online placement, supported by weekly meetings with Afri-Aus Care task supervisors and the RMIT placement team. Extensive support was provided by RMIT via regular agency and student communication. Students were encouraged to take regular breaks from the screen and to connect regularly with their supervisors. The students were then introduced to online and zoom participant health and wellbeing assessments. Once the students were familiar with the assessment tools, they were introduced to some of the participants. The transition from face-to-face assessment tools to online participant engagement provided some positive, as well as challenging situations for students and the agency.

The challenges included distributing food to multiple local government areas, supporting young people in prison (who were there because they were not able to cope with lockdown), and not all people had sufficient resources to be supported on line. We were also not able to run programs like the black Rhinos Basketball Club. Black Rhinos Basketball Club is a crime prevention basketball club; they meet at Dandenong Basketball Association

and during lockdown of course, no basketball so we had a lot of challenges. The challenging scenarios regarding online supports (where people preferred face to face) were quickly resolved by reassuring both the students and the participants that the online assessment was the only way of assisting the participants due to restrictions. For students, there were also ethical challenges such as confidentiality and client recording when they are working away from the office. Strategies were developed to manage this, including the development of procedures about how to manage client records. Some participants were able to receive support, other participants reported they no longer wanted to be supported. Students were allocated to support other participants in place of those who indicated they no longer wanted support.

One particular student had an outstanding outcome; she connected extremely well with a domestic violence participant who was homeless, had no money for rent, no food, and was disconnected from her family. The student quickly learnt and applied the UBUNTU technique of storytelling using Selba-Gondonza Luka's traumatic family violence history:

*After suffering from postnatal depression and the loss of her 7-month-old daughter, she then had to spend time in a psychiatric hospital receiving treatment for Major Depressive Disorder and Generalised Anxiety Disorder. While Ms Luka was admitted to hospital, in an unfair decision her employer terminated her employment contract. Ms Luka's job loss not only aggravated her mental health but also led to family violence which unfortunately caused the family breakdown and disconnection between her and Kwacha, her only daughter. But none of these traumatising experiences could defeat her (Kutchel 2021).*

As a result of the UBUNTU storytelling technique and assessment, the participant received culturally appropriate counselling online. She was referred to a General Practitioner where she received appropriate diagnosis, and further referred to a psychologist where she

received treatment for 12 months. Her housing situation also improved with the student's assistance under the guidance of Afri-Aus Care's staff. A private stakeholder was eventually able to provide the participant with a one-bedroom apartment, and six months' rent in advance to help her stabilise her life, Afri-Aus Care continues to monitor her situation. This participant referred her mother to Afri-Aus Care's Empowering African Women: UBUNTU In Practice program. Students from RMIT also made a video detailing Afri-Aus Care 2020 placements projects (Afri-Aus Care 2020). RMIT Social Work placement team were constantly in contact with Afri-Aus Care to ensure students were supported at the UBUNTU community.

## **Student Reflections**

The following reflections are from those students who completed placements with Afri-Aus Care in 2020:

*My first placement was with Afri-Aus Care Inc., coming from an African background it was not difficult to understand the cultural requirements, which gave me opportunity to easily offer support to people from same cultural background. However I was not aware of the power of UBUNTU mentoring. This was something that I was really excited to learn. As this was my first placement, I thought it would be structured and closely supervised but Covid-19 proved difficult. I had a lot of independence and worked closely with my supervisor and task supervisor from the agency. During my placement I was able to participate in intake, assessment and develop support plans. The main goals were to help the African community in managing mental health issues in a new country with a different culture. With the help of my task supervisor, I was able to make referrals for clients to a variety of services; this benefited community members as they could be referred to*

*culturally appropriate health services and get the assistance they required.*

*What captured my attention was the fact that the agency had an English teacher who taught the Mama's English for the Empowering African Women: UBUNTU In Practice program, Afri-Aus Care uses this program to teach African Australian women soft skills, and gets them job ready, and then also assists them in finding the women employment.*

*At Afri-Aus Care employees, students, volunteers, and members of the African Australian community participate in group community activities, where everyone comes together to partake in shared traditional African meals (Road Runner Chicken), cooking in the kitchen, gardening etc. By using the UBUNTU guidelines and participating in a collective environment we were able to help participants manage mental health related issues.*

*Afri-Aus Care community village has a homely feeling; it gives you a completely different working environment. I benefited from this project because it gave me an opportunity to improve my communication skills with the African elders, mamas, and youth. The Afri-Aus Care agency and RMIT partnership came in a timely manner. This gave me an opportunity not only to fulfil my placement hours but learn more about different cultural norms and traditions within different African communities (particularly South Sudanese communities).*

## **Key Learnings**

Field education at Afri-Aus Care provides students with a diverse range of experiences and learning opportunities. The key learnings during the pandemic are that placements can work remotely and the community can continue to



be supported. The agency can continue to support the community via zoom calls and can continue undertaking research. These learnings have strengthened the organisation and provided options for the future if and as required.



## CHAPTER 5

# African Family Services

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Melvi Saji



### About African Family Services

African Family Services (AFS) is a not-for-profit specialist organisation that was established in 2015, through the vision of two women, Kapambwe Mumba and Lorraine Baloyi. Despite Australia being a multicultural nation that constitutes people from over 190 different countries, many people from culturally diverse backgrounds experience certain challenges and barriers in accessing mainstream services. AFS was founded to address these socio-economic integration challenges, and serve African-Australian communities in Victoria, who were a new, emerging, and growing community at the time. When Lorraine Baloyi and Kapambwe Mumba started the organization, they wanted to help other African Australians; now a key part of their work is specifically focused on family and domestic violence.

At AFS, we offer multiple services and programs state-wide for community members along with other organisations and service providers. AFS provides holistic and culturally responsive integrated support services in the areas of family violence, mental health, social inclusion, community and career development. Our services aim to empower people to address their challenges effectively, and access appropriate supports. AFS bridges the gap between the community and existing services, having developed an



**Image 1** African Family Services © African Family Services.

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authentic understanding of the cultural complexities and needs that exist in African-Australian communities. There has been a rise in domestic violence with the pandemic. There are also mental health and suicide issues emerging in the community.

Working from a strengths-based approach, we offer outreach and case management support. Research and our experience highlight that people from migrant communities are often unaware of the supports available. We provide access to information and resources to all our clients to enable them to make informed decisions and enhance their safety and wellbeing. Our case management support usually runs for a period of 6 months, during which we engage with individuals or families in a collaborative manner to meet their holistic needs. During the pandemic this has occurred remotely with most services delivered online.

We offer co-case management, which involves working with other services linked in with clients to ensure their needs are identified and met in a culturally responsive manner. We advocate to other services with and on behalf



**Image 2** *African Family Services* © African Family Services.

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of clients as we place their rights and needs at the forefront. We also link individuals and families to appropriate services as required by providing information about these services, and making the required warm referrals. The pandemic has changed how this has occurred, but co-case management has continued to be provided.

AFS provides cultural awareness training and secondary consultation for other service providers, organisations, government agencies and businesses. This is to enhance knowledge sharing, improve service delivery provision, and increase their ability to engage effectively with members from African-Australian communities. We run numerous on-line training programs, and culturally sensitive workshops, in which we work collaboratively with community members to empower them by developing and strengthening their skills, abilities and resources needed to adapt and thrive in Australia.





**Image 3** African Family Services © African Family Services.

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## Placement Background

AFS has had the pleasure of partnering with RMIT and hosting social work placements since 2019. Since July 2020, AFS has been offering field education placement to 10 RMIT students per year. Students are placed primarily with the Client Services team. AFS's placement program aims to provide learning opportunities and adequate supports to help students build their professional identity and capability so that they can contribute to AFS's work.

The Executive Director of Client Services provides fortnightly individual supervision to all students. AFS also hired a qualified social worker this year to help with the planning and organisation of placements and to work closely with the students on a daily basis. The social worker has helped with general tasking; and has provided a point of contact for students for daily debriefing.

In response to the challenges of Covid-19 lockdowns, we have created our remote placements to mirror - as far as possible - face-to-face student placement experiences.

This has included allocating work phones and personalised AFS email addresses for students. Remote placements and remote work has assisted us as we move out of lockdowns because the agency has a small office and social distancing has been challenging. As the remote structures were set up the agency was able to continue its work as we were in and out of lockdowns. Remote work is challenging for clients who do not have phones, so it isn't suitable or accessible for everyone.

In terms of the pandemic, we undertook some research and found that migrant communities who are often isolated, particularly if they don't speak English, were further isolated during the pandemic. As the communities don't have strong concepts of mental health and high levels of stigma, it has created more issues. For many, it was challenging not being able to go and visit ill relatives in Africa. Building trust, being of the same cultural background and getting to know someone is the key strategy to working with the community.

RMIT has been supportive with setting up student placements, providing a seamless process. GUSS WIL have been efficient and can be approached easily. RMIT staff



**Image 4** African Family Services © African Family Services.

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have been extremely supportive in providing AFS with individual and organisational support while we provide ongoing student placement opportunities. We highly value our partnership with RMIT and look forward to its continuation.

As a not-for-profit organisation with limited resources, AFS appreciates the valuable contribution made by placement students who form an integral part of our organisation when they are with us. In addition to their time and efforts, our students bring a unique lens and experience to the work they do. Their efforts are greatly appreciated by our clients. Past students have been dedicated, innovative, willing to learn, and have adapted well to the remote nature of placement which has been required during the pandemic. Students have also been able to contribute to a positive team environment and offer peer support, which is a valuable aspect of this placement. Subject to resource availability, short-term employment and volunteering opportunities have been offered to past students upon the completion of student placement. Some placement students have also secured employment at other multicultural organisations, specialist family violence services, and community development organisations as a result of the skills and experience developed at AFS.

## **Placement opportunities at AFS**

Placement at AFS is a wonderful learning opportunity as it involves a combination of project work and direct practice. Students have been able to undertake client intake and assessment; and provide case management support. Through this, they have gained experience in case planning, attendance at care team meetings, and liaison with external services. Additionally, placement has enabled students to be involved in project work related to:

- community development in family violence and mental health,
- grant writing, and
- organisation-based research.

Through regular contact with experienced volunteers and AFS staff, they have gained skills in minute taking and facilitating meetings.

We have offered our placement students the opportunity to participate in fortnightly group supervision and reflective practice sessions. Group supervision sessions focus on enhancing the students' knowledge on areas such as case noting, working with interpreters, family violence, and working with culturally diverse clients. During our reflective practice sessions, students take turns to facilitate a case presentation, critically reflect on what could be improved, and discuss the social work theories and skills used. This provides an opportunity for students to learn from the experiences of their colleagues. Past students have been offered both external and internal professional development training to further enhance their knowledge and skills set.

Some of the positive client outcomes achieved by students include:

- Enhanced emotional and social wellbeing
- Risk management and increased client safety through the completion of a comprehensive Family Violence Multi Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM) assessment and safety plan
- Access to Flexible Support Packages worth over \$9500
- Better coordination of supports for client through the formation of a professional care team
- Improved financial stability by making referrals to various sources of financial supports including Red Cross Extreme Hardship Support Payment, Country Women's Association, and Monash University Emergency Grant
- Increased access to food vouchers & parcels, baby items, furniture, and other material aid support from successful referrals to emergency relief services, St. Kilda Mums, Big Group Hugs, and the Queen's fund
- Access to childcare, family day care, and school during Victoria's lockdown as a result of case workers providing support letters to obtain exemptions, sourcing affordable family day cares, and applying for Additional Child Care Subsidy
- Successfully obtaining employment through registering for Jobs Victoria; assisting with resume writing, job application and interview preparation; and referrals to Fitted for Work and Job Advocate workers



- Utility bills assistance through advocacy which resulted in outstanding bill waivers, setting up of payment plans and successful Utility Relief Grant Scheme applications
- Referral to community and support groups to address lack of social connection and supports

Examples of students' involvement in projects include:

- Planning and facilitation of a workshop on working with cultural diversity for all AFS staff, students, and volunteers
- Leading and conducting research into the impact of Covid-19 on family violence in Victoria's African-Australian communities
- Involvement in the planning and co-facilitation of *African Connect* webinars
- Re-development of key internal proformas
- Re-development of AFS' Privacy and Confidentiality Policy, Code of Conduct, and Induction Handbook
- Compiling a service map of key agencies in the area of family violence, mental health, alcohol and drugs, legal, financial support, and emergency relief
- Collaborating with senior staff to submit a grant application resulting in funding for a family violence prevention program
- Development of a family violence e-learning training program for community and faith-based leaders from African-Australian communities to enhance their knowledge and improve their ability to identify and respond to family violence in their community

## Student Feedback

The following quotes are from students reflecting on their placements with us:

*There are no two days alike on placement at AFS and so much to learn because there are endless opportunities to participate in project work, communities of practice meetings, grant writing, and to manage your own cases.*

**[Placement student, Semester 2 2021]**

*Placement at AFS is like having a finger in every pie* **[Placement student, Semester 2 2020]**

*At first I was sceptical of working from home as I usually need a change of environment in order to stay focussed, but I found with the support from my supervisors and my fellow placement students it was quite easy to get into a good routine and there was always something valuable to be collaborating or working on [Placement student, Semester 2 2021]*

*My task supervisor has been really good with making sure everyone is heard and checked up on in the catch up and wrap up calls... the whole environment feels more welcoming when we're able to get a sense of everyone's personality and life [Placement student, Semester 1 2021]*

*AFS has given the students the opportunity to put our theories into practice and to reach out and support African communities in their times of need. [Placement student, Semester 2 2021]*

*AFS had excellent processes in place that supported my learning while undertaking placement remotely, such as daily briefings and debriefings, a team chat and regular check-ins. [Placement student, Semester 2 2021]*

## **Innovations and Learnings**

The challenges for AFS during the pandemic were immense but were able to be turned into opportunities for the future. Learning to work remotely was a great opportunity into the future as the organisation is now set up to deal with future similar situations and managing the social distancing requirements when returning to the office. Having students provided the opportunity to undertake further research, particularly in relation to Covid-19 and family violence. As an ethno-specific organisation, the agency has been able to respond to community challenges and stigma in a culturally sensitive manner.



## CHAPTER 6

# Australian Filipino Community Services (AFCS): Mateship and Bayanihan Service Online

Norminda Forteza



*“Bayanihan. Based on the words bayan and bayani, bayanihan means sama-samang pagpapakabayani. Bayanihan happens when ordinary people come together, in unity, to help a member of the community, the whole community, or the nation in times of crisis. These ordinary people do not expect to be celebrated as heroes” (Menguin 2021).*

Mateship is similar to the bayanihan spirit that demonstrates brotherhood, equality, friendship, and solidarity. The Australian Filipino Community services, formerly known as the Centre for Philippine Concerns Australia Inc. (CPCA) was established in 1991. In the early years of the organisation,

we provided settlement, women’s advocacy, youth sports, and community visiting to ageing Filipinos living in South Eastern Metropolitan Melbourne and Gippsland Region since its inception. The organisation’s initial work in tackling the issue of serial sponsorship of Filipino women coming to Australia is an achievement we are proud of. Australian and Philippine governments changed the immigration policy to curb serial sponsorship and protect Filipino women who were victims of the “mail-order-bride” modus operandi of abusive men from Australia. CPCA programs were a lifeline to many women needing support to escape family violence. We did not stop advocating for protection and provision of post arrival face-to-face information sessions. The progressive work of AFCS among young people, seniors and newly arrived migrants in the region gave the Filipino an open line for communication, social connection and “bayanihan” or “mateship”. Our vision is to provide leadership in developing proactive services for Australian Filipinos. We are committed to respond to people in need with compassion, charity and pastoral care; to offer welfare services to disadvantaged families and individuals, aged, vulnerable women and children. We linkup migrants to other agencies by active participation in the workforce, civic life, community education and volunteering as well as preserve the Australian Filipino cultural heritage. Year 2021 is a milestone year for our service to the community. Not only that we celebrated our 30 years of volunteering, we also celebrate the 75 years of diplomatic relations between Australia and Philippines. To Aussies, it is about “mateship”, to Pinoys it is about “bayanihan.”

The Covid-19 pandemic opened an opportunity for our RMIT student placement program to engage students. Due to lockdowns and restrictions, we had to reorganise. This crisis gave opportunity to students to roll their sleeves up and help our organisation. We offered online placements to provide wellness calls to clients who need social support during Covid-19 lockdown.

We had 15 students who helped us with:

- Updating our policy and procedures and develop a Covid-19 safe plan
- Implement Wellness calls daily to ensure older clients are connected

- Provided support to Social Support Coordinators using service coordination tool template
- Assisted in Online Physical exercise program
- International Student Survey development and implementation
- Art for Wellness program during the pandemic

Our Team organised online inductions to students. The topics we discussed were:

- Organisational structure, getting to know AFCS staff and volunteers
- Tour of AFCS Website
- “Within my walls” Video presentation about elder abuse
- Dementia Film and AFCS dementia awareness programs
- Presentation of Photos and Videos of Clients and programs of AFCS

Wellness Calls:

- Tips on proper greeting and addressing of clients the Filipino way
- Demonstration of Wellness Calls
- Practice with Students (break out rooms)
- Reflection meeting with peers

The RMIT Liaison meetings, the one-on-one meetings with students and their off site supervisors were very helpful because they helped the AFCS’s task supervisors understand the Australia Association of Social Work code of ethics and professional standards that govern student professional practice, the RMIT Social work Field education manual that provides the policies and procedures for student placements and the learning plan which provides the learning areas and tasks that students undertake during their placement. The meetings also helped in clarifying issues with online placements and gave direction and redirection as needed. The discussions among liaison officer/off site supervisors and RMIT provided support and encouragement to manage the impact of the pandemic in the field placement program. There is a lot of cultural respect in these meetings and it has strengthened the partnership at a time when it is very difficult to engage clients, students, and other service providers. These conversations are supportive, RMIT staff listened and provided insights when issues during placement became challenging.

## **Our work during the pandemic**

Due to Covid-19, necessary changes were made to our programs to make access safe. All RMIT students assisted in these activities.

### **Daily prayer vigil online**

We embraced Facebook Messenger to connect online and provide opportunity to seniors to talk to each other and share their concerns. Through these vigils, AFCS reached people ranging in age from 65 to 94 years of age. There is even singing. It was a wonderful way not only to observe faith in action but also helped foster connection in the community. "We combat social isolation and address the fears of our members while putting out up to date information. But it is not without its challenges. The challenges included that only eight participants at a time can participate, more volunteers are required as mentors, participants not having the necessary technology to connect virtually. However, there was also opportunities online that did not exist in a traditional service such as the use of music now, as well as access to exercise videos on YouTube.

### **Delivering essential goods to isolated seniors**

The AFCS and its students have worked tirelessly to contact our clients individually while our frontliners delivered food and essential supplies to some of the most vulnerable members of our community. This work has been life-saving for many. The Minister for Prevention of Family Violence, Gabrielle Williams was delighted to acknowledge and support the AFCS and RMIT Students for the work they undertook during lockdown. The AFCS was provided with significant funding through the Andrews Labor Government's CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) Communities Taskforce, which was established in response to Covid-19. We reached out to metropolitan and regional areas of Shepparton, Gippsland, Geelong and Ballarat. "This funding allowed the AFCS to focus on addressing matters most pertinent to the Australian-Filipino community, including the provision of emergency relief and the communication of health information in language. As a community we are experiencing an unprecedented

period of unique and extreme challenges. It is heartening to see organisations like AFCS rising to these challenges and playing a vital role on the ground, to help understand and address the needs of our multicultural communities,” Minister Williams said. During our 29<sup>th</sup> AGM (Annual General Meeting held virtually, she highlighted the work of RMIT Master of Social Work students for their efforts in helping conduct wellness calls to isolated Filipinos in her recorded message.

## **The main activities we offered online are:**

***Physical Exercise Program-** with the support of social work students, we have reshaped the delivery of centre-based social support and it has now become an online physical exercise program led by a Filipino physiotherapist.*

***Art for Wellness program** was supported by RMIT student online with 6 sessions of art discussions and its benefits on mind, body and soul.*

*Social work students assisted in developing **Online Singing Program and narrative story-telling** to encourage seniors to share their love for singing and release the Covid-19 stress. Providing health information and communicating to Filipinos the importance of getting tested, getting vaccinated and follow the Chief Health Officer’s guidelines during lockdowns were key service activities on the frontline as well as behind the scenes.*

As our work continues, support of RMIT Student placement program remains steady. This has become a vital part of our operations on daily basis. From 15 students, we have narrowed to three students to focus on special needs projects and research because of our first substantial number of placements.

As a Chaplain, I find it rewarding to share a message of hope to all our staff, volunteers students and families during these trying times. Allow me to share with you a Scripture passage to remind us that we will get through this together: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not



crushed; perplexed, but not in despair....struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-12, NIV).

Have faith in the Almighty. Celebrate humanity.

“Kumusta ka?” How are you? This is what RMIT students greet their Filipino clients during wellness calls and to inform them that their groceries are being delivered as they speak.



**Image 5** *Australian Filipino Community Services General Meeting*

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## CHAPTER 7

# Forensicare RMIT Social Work partnership: Flourishing through the pandemic

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Shelley Turner



Forensicare

Forensicare (Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health) is a statutory agency and the primary state-wide specialist provider of adult forensic mental health services in Victoria. It sits at the nexus of the mental health and criminal justice systems, providing forensic mental health services for people with a serious mental illness involved in the criminal justice system. Forensicare also works with people at risk of offending, who pose a serious risk to themselves or others, and with people referred from the general mental health system for specialist advice or treatment.



**Image 6** *Forensicare Entrance* © Forensicare.

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Forensicare services are delivered through three interconnected streams. The first stream is at Thomas Embling Hospital (TEH), where care and treatment is offered to people classified as *forensic patients* (consumers found not guilty or unfit to stand trial under the *Crimes (Mental Impairment and Unfitness to be Tried) Act 1997*; *security patients* (consumers in prison requiring hospital treatment for mental health disorders); or *civil patients* (consumers from the community who require secure hospital treatment for their mental health. The second stream is specialist forensic mental health services provided across several Victorian prisons. These services are provided at acute, sub-acute and rehabilitation levels of care and include the Community Integration Program (CIP) to support people with a serious mental illness as they transition from prison into the community. All Forensicare prison mental health services are voluntary. The third stream is Forensicare’s Community Forensic Mental Health Services (CFMHS),

which provides programs and services for people who have a serious mental illness who have offended, or are at risk of offending, as well as those transitioning from TEH into the community. Specialist assessment and treatment is also provided for people who present with a range of serious problem behaviours.

Social work practice in forensic mental health is located at the intersections of the criminal justice and mental health systems. It involves interaction with the courts, community corrections and prisons, youth justice, and mental health services, as well as a wide range of health and welfare services connected to housing, income support, education and employment, disability and aged care services, and alcohol and other drugs. Social workers employed in forensic mental health must balance a range of so-called ‘care’ and ‘control’ issues. Specifically, they need to consider the needs of consumers, as well as the needs of families, carers, and victims in conjunction with assessing and responding to risks of harm to self and others. Of course, this is complex and people cannot be neatly categorised or labelled. Many ‘consumers’ are also ‘victims’, having experienced violence and trauma in their lives. Similarly, members of consumers’ ‘family’ may



**Image 7** *Forensicare Canning Courtyard* © Forensicare.

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also be ‘victims’ or ‘offenders’ of crime, and some do not identify as ‘carers’. Social workers need to identify, assess and manage risk; challenge discriminatory structures and practices; engage effectively in relationships with consumers and their families and carers; and identify, develop and implement strategies for intervention.

At Forensicare, social workers take an explicit person-in-environment perspective and a collaborative, strengths-based approach to working with consumers, families and carers. They aim to address both individual needs and risks, while also challenging structural inequalities that hinder personal recovery and contribute to the stigmatisation of people in forensic mental health. Social workers work in multi-disciplinary teams, contributing to all major stages of consumer care pathways:

- Assessment - of individual strengths, needs and risks, family violence, child safeguarding, nexus between offending behaviour and mental illness, using accessible language;
- Planning - develop and contribute to long and short-term care plans that respond to the person-in-environment and are orientated towards personal, clinical, wellbeing and offence-specific recovery and meaningful community integration;
- Intervention - provide appropriate direct rehabilitative interventions (e.g. individual or group work, family work) and indirect interventions (e.g. reports, service referrals, brokerage, case and service coordination, advocacy to access mental and other health assessment and treatment, housing, legal, financial, and alcohol and other drug services), and identify and advocate the least restrictive option commensurate with community safety;
- Review - monitor, evaluate and adjust care plans in response to changing individual or environmental needs and circumstances, in collaboration with consumers, families and other professionals.

The social workers manage interagency negotiation and networking across professional boundaries, making links with local services and communities and identifying resources for consumers, families and carers. They engage with consumer, carers and families to ensure they



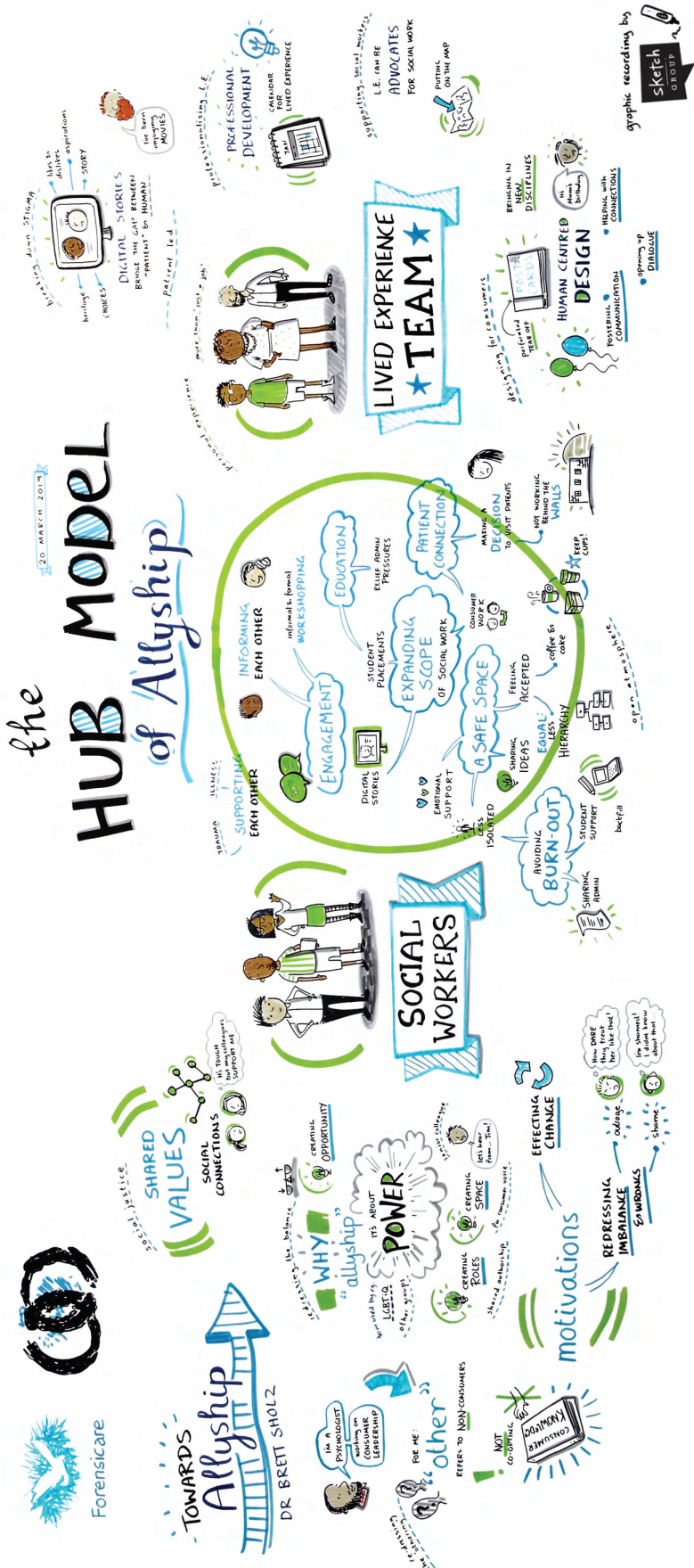


**Image 8** *Forensicare Even on your darkest days...There's always hope* © Forensicare. This image is used in this book with the permission of Forensicare and is not to be reproduced without permission. For more information, go to <https://www.forensicare.vic.gov.au/>.

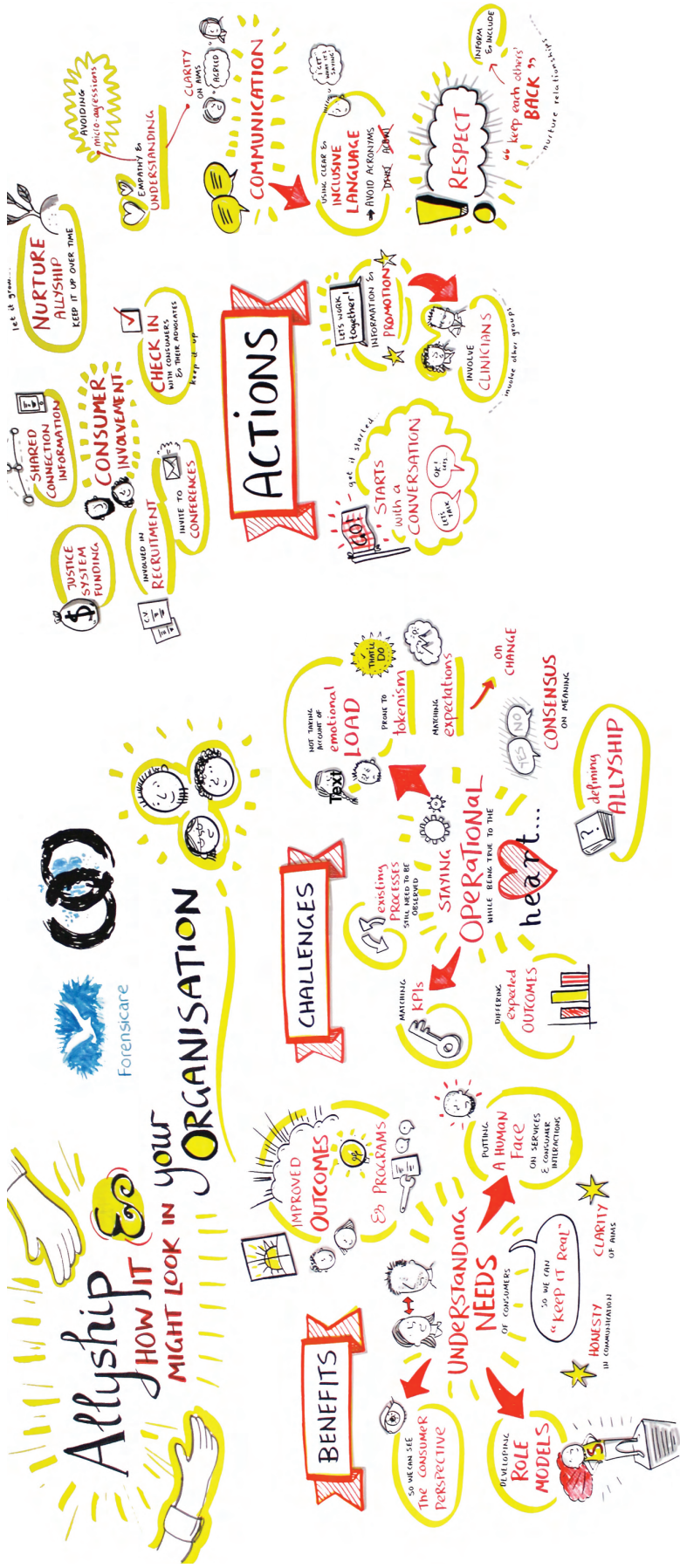
understand how systems operate and their rights within those systems.

Forensicare Social Work has been hosting RMIT students on placement since 2010, through a combination of traditional direct practice social work placements and more contemporary, innovative approaches to engaging in macro-level practice and practice-based research. This year was no exception, despite the numerous and substantial disruptions to service caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and multiple, lengthy lockdowns in Victoria. In semester 2, 2021, three final-year social work students from RMIT undertook their placement at Thomas Embling Hospital. They were each placed on different units with different social work Task Supervisors and Field Educators for 3-4 days of each week, undertaking direct practice with consumers. For the remaining 1-2 days of each week, students worked on a practice-based research project.

Since 2017 social work students completing placements at Thomas Embling Hospital have contributed



**Image 9** Forensicare Hub Model of Allyship © Forensicare. This image is used in this book with the permission of Forensicare and is not to be reproduced without permission. For more information, go to <https://www.forensicare.vic.gov.au/>.



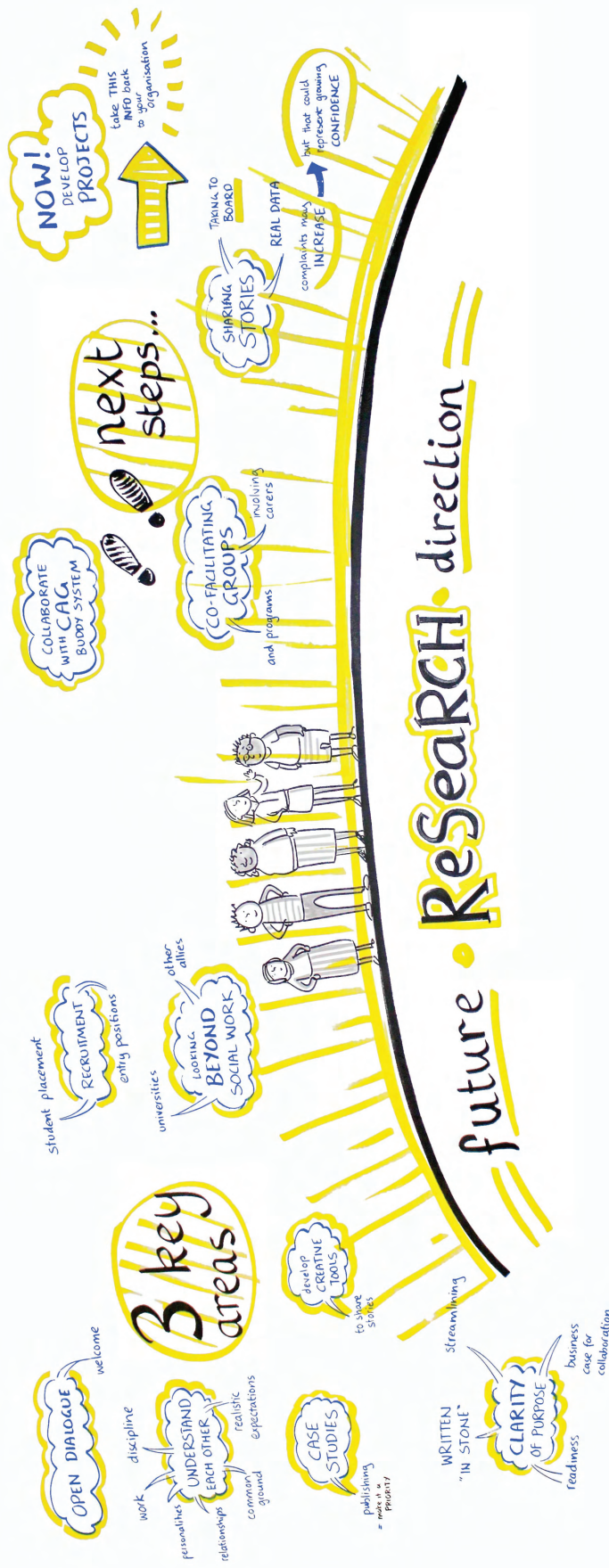
**Image 10** Forensicare Allyship © Forensicare. This image is used in this book with the permission of Forensicare and is not to be reproduced without permission. For more information, go to <https://www.forensicare.vic.gov.au/>.

to a project known as Digital Bytes. The Digital Bytes project involves co-creating stories, using digital methods with consumers. The 'bytes' are electronically recorded or 'digital' short stories (3-5 mins duration), co-created by a consumer at the hospital with support from students. The consumer determines the focus of the story and often, stories are about the person's own hopes for the future, their recovery and self-identity. This person-centred and strength-based approach aims to co-author new and positive self-narratives that challenge dominant or harmful public discourses about the nature of the person or their circumstances. The social work team at Forensicare had identified this as a complex issue affecting their client group, as well as the families and carers of these clients. Mainstream media reporting of patients within Thomas Embling Hospital is often highly sensationalised, distorting the facts of an event in order to emphasise the idea that there is some danger to society. These destructive media narratives cause enduring distress to patients and their families, who endure the double stigma of involvement in the mental health and criminal justice systems.

Research is now being conducted by a social work student from another university, with combined support and supervision from Forensicare and RMIT Social Work, to obtain a better understanding of the impact and utility of the Digital Bytes project at Thomas Embling Hospital. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with Forensicare staff and previous social work students involved in the development of the Digital Bytes. A thematic analysis will be conducted to identify patterns in the data.

In 2021, Social Work students from RMIT also played an essential role in re-establishing the Thomas Embling Hospital Consumer Advisory Group (CAG), which is an essential part of the Consumer Participation Program at Forensicare. The CAG provides a forum to engage and consult with consumers for improving service quality through consumer input and feedback. This includes identifying service gaps and facilitating consumer collaboration with management and staff across Forensicare and incorporation of consumer perspectives in Forensicare services. The student also undertook discrete service development projects, such as a comprehensive update





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of the child visitation process and forms to account for legislative and policy changes related to child safeguarding and family violence. This included the development of a guide for workers to navigate the various legal complexities in this area of practice.

Field education at Forensicare offers RMIT students a challenging and enriched learning experience. Students develop skills in both micro- and macro-level practice through a combination of traditional casework, practice-based research, and social justice advocacy. The partnership between Forensicare and RMIT Social Work continues to flourish, characterised by an egalitarian partnership and constructive working relationship. Together, Forensicare and RMIT Social Work are promoting a co-design approach with students, staff, consumers, and families to generate new knowledge and ethical practice in forensic mental health social work and social work education.



## CHAPTER 8

# Sacred Heart Mission

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Trevor Skerry and Jane Bakos



## Background and History of Sacred Heart Mission

Sacred Heart Mission (SHM) was founded in 1982, to respond to the immediate needs of the St Kilda community. Since then, we have evolved into an innovative organisation, providing support, care and nurturing to alleviate and prevent homelessness, poverty and social isolation, regardless of race, religion, sex or age. We are now a well-recognised community service organisation, with Incorporated Association status, a board of governance and a range of complementary, innovative services all focused on addressing the issues of homelessness, social isolation and disadvantage. We work with people with a background of complex disadvantage, people who have experienced multiple episodes of trauma and sometimes decades of homelessness. Everyone is welcome at our table.

Our vision is of an inclusive, fair and compassionate community, which enables people to overcome disadvantage and realise their full potential. In everything we do, our aim is to build people's capacity to secure stable housing and enjoy a safe, independent and active community life. We recognise everybody is unique. No matter where people are in their journey, we are here to assist them, and we do

not give up. We offer more than 20 programs and services, delivered in collaboration with a network of specialist, referral and service partners to provide wraparound support for our clients. We rely on the continued support of government, philanthropy, community donations and volunteers to deliver these programs. Every year SHM offers up to 10 RMIT social work placements across the organisation, in a wide range of programs. These are divided into two main categories, Engagement Hubs and Individualised Planned Support, and Ongoing Support.

## **Engagement Hubs**

Fundamental to our services are our Engagement Hubs, which include the Women's House and the Dining Hall/Sacred Heart Central, all located in St Kilda. The Engagement Hubs provide a safe space that is welcoming and supportive, and access to the necessities of life - healthy food, a shower and laundry facilities. Sacred Heart Central includes the Meals Program which provides hearty, nutritious meals 365 days of the year. It is a program that does far more than feed people. It also provides opportunities for people to reconnect to and develop a sense of community and belonging. In 2020-2021, the Meals program provided 169,417 meals to clients (served as takeaway due to the Covid-19 pandemic.) Case management services are provided at Sacred Heart Central, as well as the Resource Room, a confidential space where people can ask for specific advice and support from a duty worker; and is often the first place people come when seeking support in crisis. Co-located at Sacred Heart Central is the Wellness Place, which offers a wide range of complementary therapies in a warm and welcoming atmosphere, such as optometry, nutrition and podiatry. Our therapists are qualified practitioners who volunteer their services at the Wellness Place. The Women's House provides a safe and supportive environment for anyone in need who identifies as a woman. Women come to seek support, a meal, a shower, a pathway out of homelessness, and a place to rest. In an average year the Women's House opens its doors more than 7,000 times.

## **Individualised planned support**

- GreenLight – Supportive Housing Program was funded in 2018 to address rough sleeping in Melbourne and help people to settle into and sustain housing over a two-year period. GreenLight is delivered in partnership between Sacred Heart Mission, VincentCare and the Salvation Army, assisting people sleeping rough across inner Melbourne to settle into their new home and community and stay housed.
- GreenLight Plus provides pathways to stable housing, as well as brighter and more stable futures for people caught in a cycle of homelessness, who had been temporarily housed in hotel accommodation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The program is delivered in partnership with Housing Choices Australia and the Salvation Army
- Homefront is a state-wide crisis accommodation service for women (Cis and Trans) aged 25 and over, without accompanying children. Homefront provides a safe and supportive environment for women who are experiencing homelessness as a result of a crisis.
- Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI) – is nationally recognised for its success in addressing chronic homelessness, providing three years of intensive case management and service coordination for people who have experienced long-term homelessness.
- Bethlehem Community offers a two-year therapeutic recovery-focused service, with an emphasis on mental health response and trauma-informed practice in a residential setting for vulnerable women (Cis and Trans) of all ages and backgrounds.

## **Ongoing support and accommodation**

- Sacred Heart Local links socially isolated, disadvantaged people into receiving the My Aged Care (MAC), National Insurance Disability Scheme (NDIS) or Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) services they need to live well and independently.
- Sacred Heart Community supports people as they age within their local community. The service provides support for up to 97 people who require low to high care at Sacred Heart Mission's residential facility at 101 Grey

St, St Kilda. We provide a home for life for residents, through our unique and award-winning model of care “My Community, My Way” which engages our residents in planning and decision making in all aspects of their residency and support.

- Rooming House Plus Program enables people with histories of chronic homelessness to break the cycle of disadvantage through long-term accommodation and the support needed to maintain housing.

## **Our Service Model and Approach**

We understand that everyone’s journey is unique, and we work to provide people with support that is effective and carefully tailored to their individual needs. We acknowledge the high incidence of trauma experienced by the people accessing our services and understand that a complex relationship exists between the impact of trauma, homelessness, mental health, and social disadvantage. To provide an effective response, our interactions with people are guided by the principles of trauma informed practice.

In all cases, the objective is to create a relationship of trust whereby people know that they can receive a quality and responsive service that meets their needs. Our Service Model (Sacred Heart Mission 2016) is aligned with our vision, mission and values, we put clients at the centre of our service delivery and work with them to achieve real and sustainable changes driven by their aspirations. We introduce the Service Model to our students and expect them to understand and work with the model as part of their placements.

## **Student Placements at SHM in 2020 and 2021**

Placements at Sacred Heart Mission in 2020 and 2021 have reflected how the Covid-19 pandemic was being managed within the Victorian community, and in the organisation at different times. As all community organisations experienced, we had many challenges impacting on our ability to deliver services to clients. In the early stages of the pandemic, several of our programs were paused or quickly modified to

ensure, where we could, that we continued to provide safe and accessible services to the people we support.

The ripple effect of this created some potential issues for students who were about to begin placements with us, including how to market student placements to programs that were traditionally face-to-face, and whose staff were experiencing Covid-19 fatigue. When government restrictions and university requirements meant face-to-face placements could not be undertaken, we saw opportunities to develop an alternative placement model that could be completed remotely by reviewing our 10 Year Strategic Plan, Diversity Frameworks, trauma-informed practices and program logics.

We noted gaps where work was required but the organisation had previously lacked the opportunity and time to complete. With support from RMIT, we moved to project-based placements of interesting, relevant and useful work that would be beneficial to the students' learning, and the organisation's knowledge and resources.

### **Projects undertaken included:**

- developing a resource pack for working with people experiencing hoarding and squalor
- developing a proposal and prototype for a home-based client file
- reviewing and re-developing our Trauma Informed Care Training Model
- contributing to the implementation of a family violence training package in line with legislative requirements
- developing a position paper on the need for Rainbow Tick accreditation
- researching the links between homelessness, death and dying, and
- reviewing our Quality Framework.

We prioritised keeping everyone as safe as possible, while still maintaining social connection and support. The organisation quickly implemented remote-working technologies, such as Zoom, but this was not without its' challenges. We supported students in this environment by either pairing students with each other or providing a buddy to connect with; daily check-ins (rotated amongst task supervisors), 2 x 2-hour group sessions (supervision/

team meetings) per week, weekly dedicated peer support time, a messenger group for students to connect with each other, individual supervision with the field educator or task supervisor and regular contact between field educators and task supervisors.

The framework was designed to ensure students were connecting with either a peer or supervisor at the beginning and end of every day. It was a truly amazing to observe the development of the group, their practice, and their knowledge despite not ever physically being together.

Placements in 2021 are different again. Our Engagement Hubs have been unable to host a student this year due to the fatigue of staff and the vulnerability of clients. Whilst students are able to be on site and work with the people we support directly, each program's Covid-19 safe plan is different. Outreach teams are working in a hybrid model with split teams, resulting in students also needing to work remotely, and for some, never meeting their teammates face to face. Alternatively, those students placed in a residential context are onsite all the time. As a result, all group supervision and training sessions are conducted online; and students have either in-person or online individual supervision depending on which program they are placed in. Covid-19 outbreaks change the landscape again, either through students needing to isolate, placement being put on hold or needing to work remotely whilst the office is deep cleaned. Currently, students are unable to move between sites and have not yet met each other in person and may not be able to until placements are finished.

SHM's capacity to run placements would not be possible without the RMIT dedicated Student Placement Program, particularly during the pandemic. The program is coordinated by the Student Placement Officer and includes a learning unit that is designed to be a separate, but integrated, learning space where the students spend up to a day a week together for group supervision, professional development, and peer support. The program also offers field educators and task supervisors the opportunity to meet once a month during the placement to discuss operational issues and reflect on supervision or their own peer support needs. Without RMIT's placement support we would not be able to offer such an enriched learning experience. The Field



Education Team at RMIT are an integral part of the program right from the initial matching, ongoing support, training opportunities and regular contacts. The theory students bring from class links back to what is happening in the workplace, resulting in synergy between the two.

At SHM we have employed close to 75% of all students who come into our program into ongoing roles across the organisation, and after so many years of working together, our original students are now supervising the current students. We have named this our “student inter-generational learning model” and it makes our program even stronger.

Here is what students have said about their placements at Sacred Heart Mission:

*My time at Sacred Heart Mission was not only beneficial to my studies, I believe it made me a better person and perhaps more tolerant toward the particular needs of the wider community.*

*I had an epiphany, that after four years of studying and after trying to imagine what social work is all about, I finally understand how social work fits and have confidence that I can be and feel I will be a social worker.*

*Sacred Heart Mission is the most generous organisation I have had the privilege to be part of, you really feel a sense of welcome and community here.*

*Every staff member truly lives the organisation's values and is united in challenging the societal structures that lead to disadvantage.*

We believe that students are the future of the community service sector and seeing them graduate as social workers and community service professionals is one of the most satisfying parts of our job.



## CHAPTER 9

# South East Community Links

Christina Ryan and Carolyn McAlister



Responding to the needs of local Australian communities where over half the population is born overseas is critical for social and economic inclusion (ABS, 2017). The South Eastern suburbs of Melbourne are one of Melbourne's highest multicultural areas. Placements in this area provide students with the opportunity to increase their understanding of cultural diversity and inclusion and to contribute to better social and economic outcomes for people in our community. South East Community Links (SECL) provides students with this chance.

SECL was formed in 2015 and currently operates out of three sites, Dandenong, Springvale, Noble Park and several co-located sites within the City of Casey, with a combination of staff, volunteers, and students. SECL delivers a wide range of services to meet the needs of people in our community including emergency relief, case work, housing support, microfinance, youth and family services, financial counselling and resettlement services for refugees and asylum seekers. Our service model is based upon ensuring people in our community are provided integrated



**Image 12** SECL Staff © South Eastern Community Links.

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services, linking services to client needs. As disadvantage has many root causes, only an integrated understanding of these causes can support people to achieve their social and economic goals. In turn, these achievements contribute to economic and social development in our community.

In July 2015, SECL commenced a new student placement approach because providing the social work supervision required with limited trained social workers within our small service created challenges. Rather than employing a qualified case worker, undertaking two days per week of case work, we employed a qualified social worker, with experience supervising students, as a student supervisor, while carrying a small case load. This allowed the social worker to provide group and individual supervision to students, mainly from RMIT, while another worker, who co-ordinated volunteers, provided task supervision. Through this approach, we were able to provide up to 10 student placements per year for a mixture of Field Education 1 (FE1) and Field Education 2 (FE2) placements. This model allowed the organisation to undertake more



**Image 13** *SECL Youth Sports Fest* © South Eastern Community Links.  
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generalist casework with 3 to 4 students increasing capacity with case work services provided 4 to 5 days per week.

Throughout the last 2 years, SECL had 40 students on placement each calendar year; half of those students were from RMIT. SECL values students and sees them as an integral part of the organisation. Students bring new knowledge and perspectives into the organisation, increase the capacity to deliver direct client services and undertake vital research, policy and project work that would otherwise not be undertaken. For the last four years, students have taken on the task of designing and undertaking our annual volunteer survey. The literature research on volunteer satisfaction and standards has helped inform our planning for volunteer recruitment, retention and training. We also undertake staged projects with students – one group undertaking the initial phase of a project, then subsequent students working on the next phase and so on.





**Image 14** SECL Staff © South Eastern Community Links.

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Students at SECL are assigned a paid staff member to be their Task Supervisor, who assists them through induction and advises them on what work is expected to be undertaken as a student within the program. The task supervisor also provides dedicated reflective supervision, however, students are encouraged to consult with any of the paid staff members available at the time. SECL views the learning for students as a collective responsibility, and students are able to reach out to members of other program teams for information if required. It is sometimes possible, depending on staff availability, for students to spend some time within another program if they have a particular interest or learning requirement. During 2021, some students were working within programs that were unable to continue due to the pandemic eg: youth programs that were largely based around groups, and were therefore working offsite. In order to provide some client facing experience, these students were rostered to come onsite one day a week to work within the community wellbeing team/emergency relief program

and gain experience working within the agency environment as well as learning client skills.

2020 and 2021 proved to be both challenging and emotionally complex as we navigated the ‘new normal’ during a worldwide pandemic; of continuing our placement in an online environment. Students who worked within the SECL Community Wellbeing /Emergency Relief program during the pandemic gained unique experience in a changed environment. SECL was committed, despite many other emergency relief services closing down, to providing uninterrupted emergency relief services to the community. Staff, volunteers and students needed to adapt and change their service delivery processes while continuing to maintain composure as our community experienced increased panic and anxiety as case numbers and deaths due to Covid-19 increased. The Community Wellbeing program was taking 80-100 calls each day from participants seeking emergency relief, many of the volunteers who had previously worked in the community wellbeing program did not return, staff from

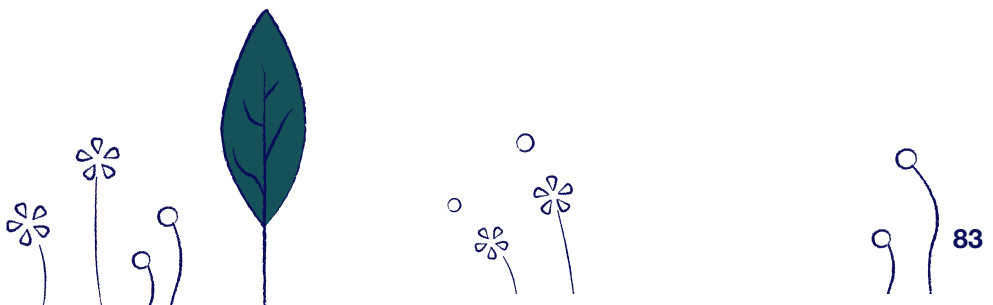


**Image 15** SECL Staff © South Eastern Community Links.

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other programs were seconded to community wellbeing to assist with assessments, processes for delivery of assistance were being written as they occurred, communication of processes and maintenance of communication was suddenly through phone calls and zoom meetings -all a complete change for a team that usually works closely in an open plan office, providing strong collegial support. In all this change, students were inducted, trained and supervised online. Processes were put in place so that students could participate in assessment interviews over the phone via conference calling, eventually leading them to be independent in conducting assessments and providing well-needed support to the team already stretched by the overwhelming crisis needs of the community. This did come with many challenges however we have now benefited from the opportunity to offer greater flexibility to students working from home so that they are better able to manage their studies, placement, and other commitments

When lockdowns were lifted and participants were permitted to enter the site, the students were able to experience client-facing work, as well as the important aspect of working within a team environment. SECL continues to offer placements for RMIT students who have a desire to learn more about place-based community organisations and the important role they have in their local community; students at SECL are highly valued for their contribution and are often relied upon to ensure services to the community can be maintained; this has been demonstrated particularly within our Community wellbeing team where we currently have four former students employed.



## CHAPTER 10

# Tangentyere Council

Carmel Simpson, Maree Corbo and Chay Brown



Tangentyere Council began operating in the early 1970s and was established to assist Aboriginal people to gain some form of legal tenure of the land they were living on in order to obtain essential services and housing. The resistance evident in the political history and struggle of Tangentyere Council speaks of resilience and determination. Through a long-term fight with local, Territory and national governments there are now sixteen Town Camps on special purpose leases. There are approximately 1600-2000 town camp residents, plus many visitors from remote communities. The overall population increases during football tournaments and other special events. Each Town Camp comprises a largely distinct Indigenous community based on language and kinship groups. Other Town Camps have residents belonging to other language groups, whose traditional lands are further out of Alice Springs, but who have moved to Alice Springs over a period for various reasons. Town Camps residents often have strong links with remote communities and there is substantial mobility between bush and town Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation is a community-controlled grass-roots not for



profit organisation delivering human services and social enterprise activities for the benefit of Aboriginal people from Central Australia. Tangentyere Council has 16 Town Camp corporate members, over 600 individual members and provides services to in excess of 10,000 people from a region that covers approximately 873,894 square kilometres. Tangentyere Council was originally a Community Housing Organisation and while housing continues to be major source of advocacy, Tangentyere has now expanded to include a broad range of Human Services including the following: 1) Child safety; 2) Aged and Disability; 3) Youth; 4) Employment and Training; 5) Family services; 6) Alcohol and Other Drugs; 7) Community Safety; 8) Secretariat Support; 9) Chronic Diseases; 10) Family Violence Prevention; and 11) Social Enterprise Development (Foster et al, 2005).

Tangentyere Council has had a partnership with RMIT University social work since 2015. This partnership has been built predominantly on social work student placements but has included multiple collaborations including training, research projects, publications and consultations. Between 2015 and 2021 the Tangentyere Family Violence Preventions Program have hosted over 40 social work students to undertake their placements at Tangentyere Council. Students have had placements opportunities across multiple programs including organising forums, developing short videos, planning community events and marches, planning advocacy trips to Canberra, writing grant and funding applications, developing resources, contributing to the support of the Leaders of the Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group and building strong and lasting relationships.

The Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program (TFVPP) where most students undertake their placements, began in 2014 and comprises four programs: Tangentyere Women's Family Safety Group (TWFSG) (Primary Prevention and Early Intervention); Tangentyere Domestic Violence Specialist Children's Service (Early Intervention/ Response); Tangentyere Men's Behaviour Change Program (Response), Men's Outreach Assessment and Referral Service (Response) and the Strong Families Program (Early intervention and Primary Prevention). The

Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program (TFVPP) acknowledges the high-risk nature of Family Violence in Town Camp communities and at the same time recognises the range of additional contributing factors that impact on men's use of violence, such as physical and mental health issues, homelessness, housing overcrowding, alcohol and drug issues, education and employment issues plus socio economic and historic disadvantage often contributing to serious harm in their relationships. The program acknowledges that these factors adversely impact on the relationships that men have with their partners, children and in their community and as a result the TFVPP's response to Family violence is holistic recognising the additional intersectional barriers and oppression many of the families we work for experience (Brown, 2019).

## **Tangentyere Placement Model**

The TFVPP group describe our placement model as “two-way learning”. The leaders of the TWFSG describe the intersection of two-way learning between workers and communities as: Two-way learning is Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people coming together to build a safe and strong community through working together. The principle of “two-way learning” is the equal sharing of skills and knowledge between our students and community members by developing future social workers who can genuinely participate, listen and learn from Aboriginal community while at the same time our students share their skills and knowledge with Town Campers (Brown, 2020).

In the Northern Territory, ‘two-way learning’ as a concept has been used synonymously with bilingual education (Muller, 2012), but the idea has since expanded and come to mean a collaboration between different worldviews. ‘Two-way learning’ is the idea that Indigenous peoples must be recognised as having their own knowledge, systems, and worldviews already in place and are not ‘blank slates’ when they enter the classroom or workplace (Fleer, 2002). Indigenous people's knowledge is being increasingly recognised as a strength and asset to Indigenous learners, workers, and leaders (Fleer, 2002). Historically, Indigenous and mainstream knowledges were considered almost diametrically opposed – whilst Indigenous knowledge

emphasises the transference of knowledge through experience, immersion, and storytelling in a relational and holistic worldview, mainstream knowledges emphasise separation, ‘facts’, testing, and objectivity (Muller, 2012; Loppie, 2007; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005)

Increasingly, however, ‘two-way learning’ has come to be conceptualised as a collaboration between Indigenous and mainstream or Western knowledges, which when used in tandem can yield its own unique insights (Muller, 2012). ‘Two-way learning’ means that both knowledge bases sit alongside each other and are used symbiotically, one is not placed above the other (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). One of the best ways to conceptualise ‘two-way learning’ – which has been used by Batchelor Institute among other education institutions and ecological programs – is the Yolngu Ganma metaphor (Bat, Kilgariff, & Doe, 2014). Ganma means a place where salt water and fresh water meet and mix – in this place, the streams serve to strengthen each other and there is a unique biodiversity that exists in these places that does not exist elsewhere (Muller, 2012). In the same way, when Indigenous knowledges and mainstream knowledge are used in equitable collaboration, they strengthen one another and create a meaningful exchange (Muller, 2012). In this is stark contrast to the history of exclusion or dismissal of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). ‘Two-way learning’ therefore seems to redress historical power imbalances and create a culture of meaningful collaboration where everyone can learn and everyone can teach (Fleer, 2002).

In 2019 Tangentyere Council and RMIT University undertook a collaborative ‘Two-way learning’ research project. It sought to examine the extent to which non-Indigenous social work students benefit from ‘two-way learning’ during their placement at TFVPP. In this way, the key beneficiaries of ‘two-way learning’ are people coming from a largely Western or mainstream knowledge base and culture. The research project sought to conceptualise ‘two-way learning’ from a Central Australian perspective and examined how it manifested in the learning experiences of RMIT social work students. The findings from this project are currently being published for wider distribution

(Brown, 2020). The research identified that students are overwhelmingly positive about their learning experiences at TFVPP, and they report that they gained a lot from their student placements. Although the context is challenging and confronting, students are well prepared to be open to the diverse nature of the placement and to be as flexible as possible. Students felt that their expectations were exceeded, and they did not expect to be given so much responsibility and varied opportunities whilst on placement with TFVPP. The TFVPP benefit from the practical support students provide, as well as the project work created by the students and the students benefit from the experience and context of TFVPP. The two parties each have a knowledge base to share: The Leaders of the TWFSG have lived experience, knowledge, culture and context to share, the staff in the TFVPP have practice based experience, theories and frameworks to underpin the work and practical application while the students' have recent academic theories and



**Image 16** *Tangentyere Council Art Workshop* © Tangentyere Council.

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frameworks to share that keeps the work of the TFVPP current. Participants in this research project understand that ‘two-way learning’ is the ongoing sharing of culture, story, experience, and knowledge in a balanced and open way that leads to the forging of a strengthened relationship. This exchange requires both parties to be trusting and respectful, and willing to balance the power between them. Participants know that ‘two-way learning’ benefits both parties, and there is a strength produced from this symbiosis that has the potential to provide unique and creative solutions. All parties benefit from the relationships and connections that are formed and strengthened through student placements, which have shown to become an asset that can be drawn upon in the future, in both professional and personal capacities.





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## Impact of Covid-19

Since 2015, 2020 was the first year Tangentyere Council did not host RMIT social work students, due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. For the Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program, the absence of students was a disappointing but necessary result of border closures and action to keep some of the most health vulnerable members of the Northern Territory community safe. At the time of writing, the Northern Territory is one of the few territories in the world to see limited community transmission or Covid-19 deaths.

2020 also highlighted the vulnerability and systemic under resourcing that many Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO's) have been emphasising for many years. Systemic issues such as a shortage of

housing, under resourcing of health services and food insecurity coupled with border closures all led to a very concerning time for the Northern Territory in 2020 and 2021.

In March 2020, under the advice of Aboriginal Land Councils, ACCOs and Aboriginal Health Organisations, the Northern Territory Government, through the Commonwealth Biosecurity Act 2015, established bio-security zones for anyone entering the NT and for anyone wanting to travel to any of the remote Aboriginal Communities of the Northern Territory. These bio-security zones lasted for 3 months until June 2020. For the majority of 2020 and 2021 there were also restrictions for NT residents on interstate travel and quarantine requirements upon return. These restrictions have been a public health measure designed to keep some of Australia's most health vulnerable people isolated from infection of Covid-19 until vaccines became available.

Tangentyere Council staff have worked to support Aboriginal communities and people of the Northern Territory in a myriad of ways, including transport to return people to Country, provide emergency relief for people experiencing domestic violence which saw an increase during Covid-19 lockdowns.

## **Student Placements**

The partnership between Tangentyere Council and RMIT social work is underpinned by 'two-way learning'. Students can participate in diverse activities and programs including immersion in the community and multiple learning experiences including direct practice as well as group programs and contribute to a wide range of projects.

The following provides an overview of some of the projects that students have assisted in supporting:

Short videos:

- Stories of Hope and Healing (Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program 2017a).
- Mums Can Dads Can Italk (Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program 2019).
- Music Videos through youth work camps (Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program 2017b).

Planning community events, marches and advocacy trips to support the visibility of Aboriginal Women Leaders from the Town Camps:

- 2017 The Tangentyere Women’s Family Safety Group hold the largest March against Domestic and Family Violence that Central Australia has ever seen (Brennan 2017).
- 2018 Tangentyere Women’s Family Safety Group go to Canberra to ask the Federal Government to “Listen to Us, Stand with Us, Support Us” (Thorpe 2018).
- 2019 The Tangentyere Women’s Family Safety Group plans and delivers NAIDOC Week and Reclaim the Night Events for Mparntwe, Alice Springs.

## **Girls Can Boys Can Project**

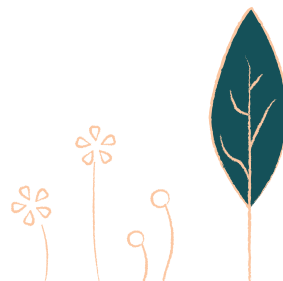
Since 2019 students have been involved in the Mums Can Dads Can and s Girls Can Boys Can Project These two programs/ campaigns aim to promote gender equality in families and young children by looking at the rigid gender stereotypes of females and males (Tangentyere Family Violence Prevention Program, 2020). These campaigns aim to shift community attitudes around gender roles through advocating that people can be free from gender stereotypes. For students, being able to be involved in the implementation stage of a campaign enabled us to appreciate how much work goes into making a successful campaign and promote a message. There were several things that need work in order to promote a successful gender equality campaign. Secure funding, long term resources, a holistic approach that involves the whole community, as well as media saturation and public engagement are all needed for a successful program that aims to prevent family violence. The TFVPP have had students involved in all stages of design, development, consultation, implementation and evaluation for these project and campaigns and have shared a mutually beneficial process of two-way learning.

## **Conclusion**

‘Two-way learning’ is embedded into TFVPP, and as such, students who undertake placements there come to have a developed understanding of ‘two-way learning’ and place



great importance on it as a principle, value, and transferrable skill that continues to benefit them once they return home. Student placements at TFVPP are directly and explicitly guided and shaped by a ‘two-way learning’ process, that sees students meaningfully gain from and contribute to the program’s work. Covid-19 has been a particularly challenging time for the program, but the program adapted and continued. Covid-19 highlights the importance of two-way learning and showed the leadership of Aboriginal communities, who lead advocacy to get border closures in place. The principles of two-way learning and self-determination have never been more important.



## CHAPTER 11

# Victorian Arabic Social Services

Evelyn Dowling and Kieran Hough



Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS) is a state-wide key service provider with specialist expertise and knowledge in working with multicultural communities, particularly Arabic Speaking Background (ASB) communities, inclusive of Assyrian and Chaldean language groups. The work undertaken by VASS is underpinned by community development principles which aim to develop the resources and status of disadvantaged members of the target communities. They do so through increased access to services, decision-making and civic participation, education and employment, and enhanced community safety programs. VASS is an inclusive organisation, open to all people regardless of background, and operates on a ‘no-wrong door policy’. VASS is a grassroots organisation, with the majority of workers identifying as being of the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as the client group. VASS provides a range of services including youth services, family services, support for gamblers and affected others, disability services, aged care services and settlement support. Pre-pandemic, VASS’s Head Office in Broadmeadows ran a drop-in centre which supported clients who presented with a vast array of different needs. VASS also participates in systemic advocacy, research, and provision of education to other service providers in relation to ASB communities.



**Image 19** *Victorian Arabic Social Services Staff* © Victorian Arabic Social Services.  
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When Covid-19 cases grew and Victoria entered into associated restrictions from early 2020, VASS’s services of course had to change. For a range of reasons, including financial constraints, limited literacy and limited digital literacy, online telehealth is not appropriate for many in VASS’s client group, so the majority of services have been delivered over the phone during lockdowns and periods of restrictions. Only essential services (such as Home Care) for urgent, high-risk clients have been seen by a select few authorised staff on site or in the clients’ homes. The majority of Social Work students on placement in these periods have unfortunately been unable to undertake direct practice with clients, even via telephone. This is because of confidentiality, language and trust concerns of some service users, as well as the unplanned nature of client interactions. Additionally, as initial support and assessment can result in acute needs and circumstances being identified that require elevated support, we require that these client engagements can be observed by qualified staff members to ensure appropriate support is always available. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to ensure this oversight for phone calls made from remote placements. However, students have been able to have a range of other learning opportunities, described below. As an ethno-specific agency with a

majority of bilingual and bicultural staff, VASS has also played (and continues to play) a role of community liaison and information provision for the Arabic speaking community in relation to Covid-19 restrictions, health measures and vaccination.

VASS is a partner agency with RMIT and has been taking 10 students a year since 2015. Generally, VASS hosts a range of students – on their first or second placements, Bachelor and Masters students. During the height of the pandemic in 2020, VASS hosted mainly Field Education 2 (second placement) students who focus on project work rather than direct practice. The project, research and policy focus fitted with the different learning experiences available when working remotely. This year (2021) VASS has returned to having a mix of students as the environment has been more flexible, we have been able to offer some onsite work but the placements have been again mostly remote.

Direct client work was, of course, difficult during the pandemic, so with our students we pivoted to focusing on project work. The students have excelled in this and have been able to undertake a range of projects that benefit their learning, but that are also very meaningful and useful to VASS as an organisation in meeting our broader aims. One student used academic literature and interviews with staff to create resources for other community organisations when working with people of ASB with disability. Another made a submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability on behalf of VASS and the Victorian ASB community. Last year, in 2020, a student wrote grant applications, some of which have been successful. Two students this year have been implementing one of the successful grants – a project that delivers sports equipment to ASB families experiencing financial hardship, so that their children can play when at home during lockdown. Two students worked collaboratively (though from separate homes) on VASS's Annual Report for 2021. While these projects developed the students' knowledge in the specific service areas, we were also able to link the projects to the AASW learning areas. In group and individual supervision, students were able to reflect on how knowledge of social work theories, personal and professional values and ethics, assessment

and intervention skills, communication skills, cultural competence and of course research skills related to and were developed throughout their projects.

Students placed with our Gambling Harm program have also completed several key pieces of research around supporting community members having input on local issues relating to gambling and pokie machines. Additionally, one student was able to use and incorporate their knowledge of computer games to develop an online training module designed to help community and youth workers respond to the issue of gambling mechanisms and loot box systems within popular computer games. This has been especially useful due to the increase in computer game use that has occurred through lock down.

It was an initial hiccup to adjust to working remotely, for staff and students, especially for those placements that began on site. But everyone soon adapted, and we were able to turn it into new learning opportunities. Use of Zoom for supervision sessions (group and individual) and meetings developed ITC and communication skills, and students reflected that working from home on projects developed their autonomy and organisation skills.

The first set of students in early 2020 began their placements on site, and then had to transition to remote placement when the lockdown measures were announced. This meant VASS was unable to plan what a remote placement would look like ahead of time. Instead, we learnt as we went, and the students demonstrated great flexibility and resilience as we did so. Some placement tasks had to be changed, for example researching a theory instead of applying it in practice. By the time the second and third cohorts of students began during 2020, fully in lockdown, VASS had more of an idea of how to create rich learning environments, including new placement tasks, the projects outlined above, as well as support and orientation. VASS already had an 'Induction Kit' for new placement students, which easily transitioned to working remotely, so orientation was not too different. We also thought of tasks and projects that necessitated communicating with a range of VASS's staff members, so that students could be linked into the organisation. As VASS has been hosting a number of students over many years, there is an openness in the staff to

supporting students' learning, which continued via different modes when working and learning from home. We created two WhatsApp groups for the students (one with supervisors and one without) to communicate more informally, and a Google Drive to share resources between the students. This was done to encourage and try to mimic the peer-support they would usually get when on-site.

Self-care is always important for students on placement, however, even more attention was paid to this when students were working remotely. This involved more checking in from supervisors as to how students were feeling and coping, both with the placement and the wider Covid-19 lockdown situation. It also included practical elements like encouraging mini-breaks and time away from the computer during the placement day. The pandemic itself, of course, often came up in supervision, with students reflecting on the impact on themselves, VASS as an organisation, and the client group.

The team at GUSS WIL have been extremely helpful and supportive throughout this time. In the early stages of the pandemic in early 2020 especially, GUSS WIL staff were readily available to discuss questions and concerns over the phone. The team has also been flexible about the kinds of placements to offer students. There has always been, and at the time of writing still is, timely communication about any changes or issues affecting student placements. The creation of the Working From Home Checklist was useful, and some students found the suggested daily schedule very helpful. Pre-existing channels of support, such as the Partnership Reference Group, were also helpful in this time, giving further opportunities for communication, as well as sharing ideas and strategies.

Social Work placements can be an intense experience at any point; undertaking one during a pandemic and associated restrictions heightened this. Nonetheless, thanks to the support and guidance of RMIT, some creative thinking, and the students' own adaptability, resilience and autonomy, students on placement at VASS have been able to undertake successful placements that helped prepare them for work in the field.



## CHAPTER 12

# Youthlaw Social Work Placements

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Ariel Couchman



Youthlaw is a not for profit state wide free community legal centre for young people under 25 years of age. Established in 2001 through a unique collaboration between North Melbourne community legal Centre and major law firm (then Blake Dawson, now Ashurst) half our funding is from state and federal governments and half through philanthropic trusts, donations & fundraising. We rely heavily on volunteers and placement students and pride ourselves on training up and mentoring university students to become lawyers and social workers of the future. Youthlaw provides legal services, advocacy, law reform and preventative education programs. Our approach is to be empowering and advocate within a human rights and social justice framework.

With a small number of lawyers (10) and social workers (2) we prioritise assisting young people with legal need that is not being met and that if not addressed could lead to big impacts such as engagement with the criminal legal system, mounting debts & fines and abusive relationships. Young people we work with include those at risk of homelessness, with mental ill health and/or disability, those who have experienced or are experiencing family violence, child protection care leavers and disadvantaged young people with few means and support.

Social work trained youth practitioners work side by side with our lawyers in our family violence program. Together they assess and respond to the young person's



legal and non-legal needs, building on an emerging body of practice and evidence that indicates that integrated legal and social work practice is a means of providing effective, holistic services for people experiencing complex and intersecting legal and social support needs. Our other services are integrated with community and youth organisations to enable clients to be assisted by a range of services.

In December 2019 at the invitation of RMIT and Rob Hulls (previously Victorian Attorney-General), Director of the Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ), Youthlaw moved into the RMIT Innovation hub. We joined two other community legal centres and CIJ to become a justice innovation centre, with a strong focus on introducing RMIT law and social work students to social justice and multi-disciplinary practice.

## **What were the placements you offered during last year and this year?**

Over the past year, we have hosted four social work placement students. They had the experience of working in a multi-disciplinary practice, lawyer & social worker both working together with clients assisted by our Family Violence program and also working more broadly with other staff at Youthlaw and with external community workers.

One student started with us just before the Covid-19 pandemic restricted face-to-face work. She worked primarily with our Family violence team comprising a lawyer and youth social work practitioner. Student tasks included supporting the family violence program staff with creating and maintaining client files data collection, updating internal databases, tasks associated with referrals to specialist services, developing research papers on integrated practice and documenting a knowledge base for students working within this program in the future.

*Placement at Youthlaw was an exhilarating experience where I gained a thorough understanding of the various roles social workers need to undertake when working collaboratively with other disciplines to address larger social issues. Placement at*



*Youthlaw was also a great way of practically applying and understanding social work values of professional integrity and respect. [Student]*

From March 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, staff, volunteers and placement students could not remain working in the office. We moved staff and students to working from home remotely. Our phone service and all our services quickly moved to remote. This presented challenges to mentoring and providing face-to-face client experiences for students to observe and participate in.

*Major challenges of this placement were remote learning and limited direct practice due to the impact of Covid-19. However, the team at Youthlaw worked closely with me ensuring that I completed my placement successfully and efficiently. [Student]*



**Image 20** Youthlaw Online Meeting © Youthlaw.

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Despite the disadvantage of limited client contact Youthlaw used the remote environment to develop other crucial skills for a competent social worker:

*I was able to develop a reflection paper that explored some of the ethical and legal conflicts that arise when social workers and lawyers work together. Exploring the conflicts unfolded the challenges in integrated practice such as legal privilege versus social worker obligations to report.*  
**[Student]**

*I gained in-depth knowledge of the family violence sector and the various support services in Victoria. This period of working remotely also enhanced my ability to utilise technology for various communication processes. I gained an increased confidence in communicating with stakeholders.* **[Student]**

We put in place structures to guide and support our staff and students to work from home during this challenging time. With generally lower client numbers due to Covid-19 there was also an upside, providing time for some staff and students to partake in the relevant professional development opportunities.

*The team at Youthlaw ensured that I was well supervised and supported. I had the opportunity to expand my knowledge by attending various online educational events and workshops. I had regular supervision sessions. These sessions gave me an open and safe space to disclose any challenges I was facing, contributing to a very productive placement.* **[Student]**

Another student commenced with us in June 2021 after having completed half of her research placement with CIJ, RMIT. This research placement focused on seeking feedback from young people and stakeholders to facilitate further improvement of our Family Violence program.

Student tasks included developing interview and survey tools for young clients who have been supported by the program and stakeholders we work with and get referrals from, and write summaries, analysis and recommendations from the results of the interviews and surveys. The student started her placement in the office when restrictions had eased. After about 6 weeks, Melbourne was in lockdown again and she completed the balance of her placement working remotely from home.

*I found it challenging to work from home while navigating lockdown restrictions and maintaining self-care. I did greatly appreciate the time that I was able to come in in person and interact with staff. This allowed me to pick up knowledge and collaborate with others in ways that was not possible while working from home. [Student]*

We supported the student in the office with the early phases of her project and in particular be there for her first couple of interviews with young people. She showed great fortitude and sensibility conducting the balance of interviews from home.

*I conducted interviews and surveys with young people who had received legal help and other support from the Youthlaw Family Violence team. I made it a priority to ensure that the questions were appropriate, sensitive and as non-intrusive as possible while still encouraging valuable feedback for the service. [Student]*

In July 2021, Semester Two, we welcomed two further students to Youthlaw. Within a week, we were in lockdown again and this has continued up to the writing of this chapter. With our previous experience and with staff now well adapted to remote work we were more prepared & less challenged than last year. RMIT was also very positive and helpful and we had the assistance of our onsite CIJ social worker who has provided induction to all students

being placed at Pelham St, and is providing on-going social work practice supervision.

The students are working with our lawyers in a number of programs including our fines service. They have had opportunity to develop practical skills, gain knowledge about the justice system and the community legal service sector and learn about collaborative and integrated practice with frontline youth services.

Their main tasks include:

- Working with our lawyers to assist young people with non-legal issues and link them with appropriate services.
- Providing reflections, information and support to lawyers about appropriate referrals and strategies to work with for a young person about the non-legal issues they are dealing with.
- Providing reflections and documenting ways to work with lawyers in this integrated approach to delivering our legal services.

As the students stated during their placement:

*I am really enjoying my placement and the many new learnings I am encountering at Youthlaw. Even though placement has been entirely remote (so far), the team have embraced me virtually sharing their knowledge and experience in a very welcoming way. I have really sunk my teeth into learning about integrated practice & the benefits and challenges in a socio-legal environment. [Student]*

*I've been very fortunate to observe the lawyers and young people [virtually] in the Friday Fine's and Pelham St Legal clinic and apply & contribute a social work lens to the issues and supports the young people may require. In addition through the family violence team I have been able to gain knowledge about the work being done across the sector in the Adolescents Using Violence in The Home (AVITH) space and attending community legal centre network meetings and professional development... [Student]*



## CHAPTER 13

# Youth Projects

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Ginetta Mammarella



### About Youth Projects

Youth Projects are an independent, registered charity which supports disadvantaged young people in North and West metropolitan Melbourne. Youth Projects provides front line support to young people and individuals experiencing disadvantage, unemployment, homelessness, alcohol, and other drug issues. We also help those looking to re-engage with learning and employment. The impact we seek enables each person to:

- Lead longer lives
- Have improved health
- Participate in meaningful employment, and have
- A greater sense of belonging, safety, and security

Comprised of a highly skilled multi-disciplinary team, we can provide a complete wrap around, judgement free service with a strong focus on respect, client-centred care, and harm prevention. Youth Projects Organisational Structure includes a Board of Directors, Chief Executive Officer, Executive Manager of Employment, Training and Social Enterprise and Executive Manager of Community Health. The Employment, Training and Social Enterprise arm of Youth Projects includes programs:

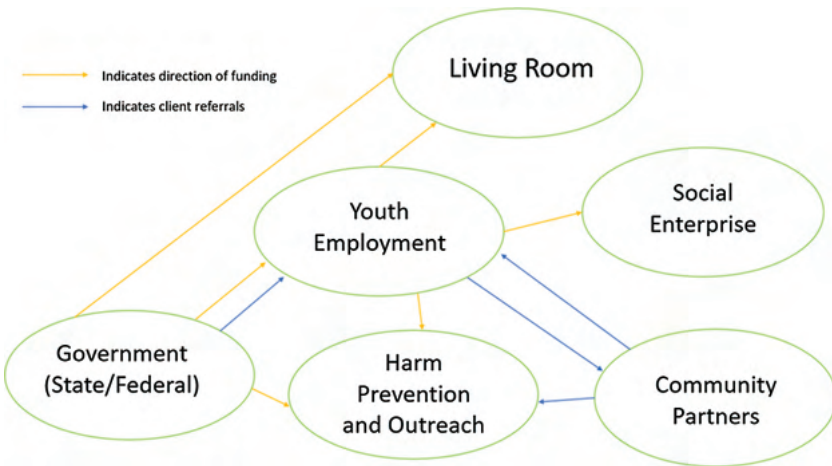
- Disability Employment Services
- Employability Skills Training
- Here 4 Hospitality
- Jobs Vic Employment Services
- Transition to Work

- Youth in Hume Outreach Program
- The Little Social Café (Hosier Lane, Alfred Health, Rosanna Metro)

Community Health features range of programs focused on Harm, Prevention and Outreach, such as:

- Needle Syringe Program
- Proactive Response Initiative
- Peer Support Programs
- Youth Northern Outreach Team
- Hotel Outreach Initiative

In addition, a range of services are provided through the Living Room program, including a Primary Health Service, Substance Misuse Team and After Hours Outreach. The relationship between each of these key focus areas, including funding and client referrals, is indicated in the Youth Projects Eco-Map (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Youth Projects Eco-Map © Youth Projects.

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Youth Projects operates through a clinical governance framework aimed at accountability for consumer care, outcomes and organisational performance. This is informed through the Risk Management Policy, Incident Management Policy, Quality Policy and Manual, Standard Operating Procedures, Improvement procedure and the Critical Incident Management Policy. While Youth Projects can

apply to access various forms of government funding a large portion of the organisation is funded through the employment and education department, which is funded by JobActive for supporting disadvantaged youth accessing employment (similar to other JobActive providers). Youth Projects works with a number of other community organisations in collaborative partnerships to achieve the best possible outcomes for young people, particularly other youth support organisations who are not Transition to Work providers for JobActive. Additionally, there are organisational relationships with Centrelink, JobActive and the Disability Employment Service funder.

## **Youth Projects approach to working with young people**

Youth Projects is designed to operate through an anti-oppressive approach. This is evident through recognition that service-users' lives have been impacted and influenced through the overarching cultural and structural influences which create barriers to their success, in addition to personal influences. Youth Projects advocates for social change that will impact the lives of disadvantaged youth, with a focus on addressing personal, cultural and structural barriers that their service-users navigate.

Youth Projects implements a trauma-informed approach to practice in working with youth that face barriers to employment and education. While the organisation extends beyond this with outreach, needle exchange programs, homelessness support, etc. a primary focus of Youth Projects is supporting access to stable employment or education. In supporting youth to access this stable education or employment there is a key focus on utilising a strengths based approach. This approach empowers young people who may be experiencing a number of barriers including poor mental health, low socio-economic positioning, substance misuse, homelessness and may have low self-esteem. A strengths-based approach reiterates observable strengths while supporting the young person to explore their strengths and how these can be applied to future endeavours.

The focus of Youth Projects in supporting young people to access stable employment, housing and positive mental health is undertaken first through person centred goal planning. This is achieved through motivational interviewing (MI) and effective communication strategies such as use of silence and active listening. MI supports service users to explore their situation and allows for workers to pick out strengths of the service user as well as ensure a person-centred approach to practice. Once a treatment/action/goal plan is developed the service users are encouraged to be the agent of change with support and working towards improved coping skills and through counselling an understanding of why maladaptive coping mechanisms were used by the service user and strategies to move beyond these are encouraged and supported. This approach to improving the lives of young people reflect solutions focused practice and a psycho-dynamic approach.

The use of systems approaches is also evident, with an emphasis on how multiple and interacting social systems either enhance or limit well-being. This approach informs practice though is used minimally in client facing services, as there seems to be a lack of use of this when engaging with service users but rather used by management to inform the scope and direction of practice. Youth Projects uses a crisis intervention problem solving approach, with structured approaches to empowering young people and supporting them to achieve the goals they developed from a person-centered approach to practice.

## **Response to Covid-19**

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, Youth Projects have continued to run programs. Essential youth outreach programs like Footies, involving foot patrol staff who walk along the streets and hand out either clean syringes, medical supplies or food to the homeless young people, have continue. In other instances, programs have moved to virtual delivery. This has presented some challenges in terms of connecting with young people. The staff have found that some young people in crisis do not want to participate in a zoom or phone calls. However, programs such as the Living Room never closed, while our social enterprise cafés continue to provide takeaway options and support



employment opportunities for young people. Youth Projects have also held large-scale online events, such as a Virtual Youth Summit in conjunction with the Hume City Council.

A key organisational challenge throughout the pandemic has been the fatigue experienced by staff, particularly coming in and out of lockdowns. The staff have attempted to create a supportive environment online by playing games together as a team, trying to keep spirits up and celebrate as much as we can. This is aimed at addressing drops in energy and morale, among staff and also students on placement. Our leadership team has played a key role in making sure that everyone is supported and is also up to date with relevant information. Despite the difficulties experienced by staff and students, key services have been delivered, and new ways of adapting to a constantly changing environment have been found.

One of the most significant learnings to take from the experiences of the past couple of years, is to always have a back up plan. Nothing is permanent, meaning it is essential to plan for all scenarios, plan things virtually and face to face, in case of social distancing restrictions being implemented. This requires good organisation, and being able to respond quickly to new circumstances as they arise.

## **Youth Projects Placement Model**

Youth Projects aim to provide student placements which support student learning and growth. Students are treated like staff members. Placement students are included in the work undertaken, including team meetings and group celebrations. Students completing placements with Youth Projects come from a variety of universities and educational institutions, studying in areas such as community work, youth work and social work. When a student nominates to complete a placement with Youth Projects, the Program Manager completes a success profile, conducts an interview and obtains paperwork from the educational institution. Following a successful interview, the student is asked to provide a national police check and Working with Children's Check. Commencing placement students are allocated to a program and a task supervisor that has a social work background that can support the student to make connections from social work theories to their practical

work and work on the project for the duration of their student placement. The task supervisor meets the student for weekly supervision. While at Youth Projects student is given opportunities to explore and emerge themselves in other programs and experience the wrap around service Youth Projects provides. Upon commencement in the student's placement, the student enters an induction process. The induction process includes meeting with supervisor and the team, knowledge the policies and procedures and knowledge of the Covid-19 safe plan.

## **RMIT student comments on placement experience**

This student completed a placement with Youth Projects between February and June, 2021:

*My time at Youth Projects has been valuable. While I did feel frustration with what I perceived to be a lack of client contact whilst on placement due to the lockdown, I can see now that the experiences I did have, and the subsequent discussion of these experiences with my Field Educator who helped me learn from them, taught me so much about what sort of a social worker I want to be. As a former teacher, being placed on the Community Traineeships Pilot Program (CTPP) where most of my client contact was during class was at first frustrating, but it helped me make the distinction between teacher and social worker which was always going to be very important for me to work out. I have gained insight into Youth Projects and increased my knowledge of the programs and services they offer. In working on the CTPP I was able to increase my experience in relation to inter-agency collaboration.*

*One of the key areas of learning development has been my increase of theoretical knowledge. I feel much more confident in considering practice events through a*

*theoretical lens while considering the micro, mezzo and macro considerations. In addition, my critical reflection skills have increased greatly, while I felt I was able to reflect previously my capacity to critically reflect has significantly increased. My improved critical reflection skills have improved my ability to identify my values/social locations.*

*I've appreciated the ongoing support my Task Supervisor has given me, as well as other staff at Youth Projects who have encouraged and supported me to experience other areas of the organisation. My discussions with my Field Educator have been instrumental in helping me link theory to practice. I have likewise always had the freedom at Youth Projects to create appropriate opportunities for me to continue exploring this link. My supervision sessions with my Field Educator have also helped me gain a deep appreciation of what the client-centred approach looks like in practice, and how to tailor my communication with clients accordingly. I can see the value this approach has for clients, as well as in my work as a social worker, and I'm looking forward to developing these skills more.*

## **Conclusion**

The pandemic has provided opportunities to continue to provide placements to students. During 2020-2021 student placements have continued both as a mix of onsite and virtually, due to the Melbourne lockdowns. When on site, students are provided with their own workstation and equipment such as a work phone. While on site the student is required to check in as per Covid-19 safe rules and always wear a mask except for eating and drinking. All students are included in team meetings and internal celebrations. The students are provided with any equipment that will add to their ergonomic workstation at home. Students are provided with weekly supervision and regular check in meetings while working during lockdown.



## CHAPTER 14

# Workforce Innovation and Development Institute

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Dr Jessica Lee-Ack



### **About the Workforce Innovation and Development Institute**

The social service sector is Australia's largest and fastest growing industry and provides vital services to support the health, safety and wellbeing of our communities. This sector is also undergoing significant change with the introduction of new funding and service models like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and significant reforms arising from a series of Royal Commissions into areas such as family violence, aged care and disability. As noted by Royal Commissioners, peak bodies and people who access social services, a high quality, well trained and valued social service workforce is arguably the most important factor contributing to positive outcomes for service users.

It was the recognition of the critical role of the social service workforce that led to the formation of the Institute in 2016. Established as a partnership between RMIT University and the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the Institute drives innovation in education,

training and applied research to enable the growth and transformation of the social service sector. Formerly known as the Future Social Service Institute (FSSI) the Institute was initially supported by funding from ‘Keeping Our Sector Strong: Victoria’s Workforce Plan for the NDIS’ (Department of Health and Human Services 2021). Over the past five years the Institute has worked closely with partners from across the sector to develop a portfolio of projects that support our vision for ‘*a strong community, supported by a diverse, high quality, responsive and innovative social service sector*’. Workforce Innovation and Development Institute (WIDI) creates impact in the following domains:

Education	Economic Participation	Leadership	Service System
We work to improve curriculum, both accredited and unaccredited, to drive engagement, work readiness and capability.	We co-design and scale up new pathways to support industry to meet current and future sector challenges in their delivery of social services. Our completion rates double industry averages.	We create innovative training solutions and enhance leadership capability, equipping workers to drive transformational improvement across social service delivery sectors.	We build the evidence base on workforce needs and solutions and support job creation, and develop sustainable, long-term pipelines of workers across the social service sector.



Photo by Jacob Lund Photography from Noun Project

**Image 22** The Noun Project open photo: <https://thenounproject.com/photo/creative-businesspeople-working-together-as-a-team-5XQoV4/> Creative Businesspeople Working Together As A Team by Jacob Lund Photography from NounProject.com

WIDI's work spans design and delivery of new education pathways, leadership development, evaluation and applied research. WIDI works in partnership with the sector and Government to identify key workforce challenges and develop, test and refine innovative responses to these challenges.

## WIDI Placements Model

WIDI began hosting social work placement students in September 2020 with WIDI providing task supervision and RMIT's School of Global, Urban and Social Studies providing Field Work Supervision. In contrast to many agencies, WIDI was well positioned to host students during the Covid-19 pandemic when placements transitioned from on-site to remote arrangements. At this time, the entire WIDI team had been working remotely for six months and had instituted a range of measures to support team functioning and wellbeing. These measures included a daily virtual Community Meeting based on the Sanctuary Model of trauma informed care, consolidation of Project Teams focusing on delivering specific workstreams and adaptation of project plans in line with public health measures, virtual one-on-one catch ups to stay connected and the introduction of a weekly social activity, a quiz held on Thursday afternoons. As part of RMIT, the Institute was also able to access to a range of services offered to support staff wellbeing during the pandemic.

WIDI developed a model to support student placements, which includes the following components:

- **Student Learning Groups** – students are typically set up as pairs or groups of three working on a specific project so that they can work together and support each other throughout the placement;
- **“Team within a Team”** – students form a "Team within the Team" and self-organise to engage with and support each other throughout the placement;
- **Project Teams** – each group of students forms a Project Team with their Task Supervisor and other relevant members of the WIDI Team and Project Teams meet regularly to plan and implement the project;
- **Induction Program** – in the first week students meet with their Task Supervisor and other members of the WIDI

Team who provide an overview of the Institute’s work, explain the team routines/ways of working and discuss any queries that the students may have;

- **Community Meeting** – students take part in WIDI’s “Community Meeting” every morning – the Community Meeting is based on trauma informed practice, the brief meeting (generally 10 – 15 minutes) begins with an Acknowledgement of Country (rotated among the Team) and includes three questions:
  - 1) how are you feeling today?
  - 2) what is your goal for the day?
  - 3) an ice-breaker question posed by the person who gave the Acknowledgement of Country.
- **Development Opportunities** – Task Supervisors and other WIDI Team members share details of relevant events and training opportunities that may be of interest and students choose which opportunities to engage in based on their interests and learning goals;
- **Buddies** – each student is assigned a “WIDI Buddy”, a member of the WIDI Team who can provide advice and support throughout the placement;
- **Coffee Roulette** – students are encouraged to connect with each member of the team over the course of their placement;
- **WIDI Quiz** – students take part in WIDI’s online quiz which is held on Thursday afternoons;
- **Email and System Access** – students are set up as non-salaried staff members access to relevant software and systems and an email address with WIDI email signature; and
- **Website Profiles** – students are invited to submit a biography and photo to be featured on the WIDI website.

Prior to the commencement of the first group of students in September 2020, WIDI undertook the following activities:

- Documenting the student placement model and briefing the WIDI Team on the model;
- Placing students into pairs or groups of three and assigning them to specific projects based on areas of interest;
- Matching students to Buddies from the WIDI Team;





**Image 23** The Noun Project open photo: <https://thenounproject.com/photo/young-woman-entrepreneur-taking-notes-during-discussion-with-colleagues-in-office-0v8Dd4/> Young Woman Entrepreneur Taking Notes During Discussion With Colleagues In Office by Jacob Lund Photography from NounProject.com

- Requesting non-salaried staff email and system access for students;
- Creating a dedicated Microsoft Team Site to share key documents;
- Scheduling induction meetings including “Welcome Meeting” on day 1 and initial Project Team meeting;
- Developing a “Meeting schedule and FAQs” document including:
  - An overview of the WIDI placements model;
  - Meeting schedule;
  - A Coffee Roulette schedule;
  - Frequently Asked Questions;
  - Activities and Upcoming Events page; and
  - WIDI Contacts;
- Emailing placement students with information about their placement and links to key documents.

## Placement Student Projects – Semester 2 2020

In Semester 2 2020, WIDI hosted eight placement students, four groups of two students. These were remote placements due to public health measures in place in Victoria between September and November 2020. Three of the groups undertook literature reviews on specific topics (disability workforce, peer workforce and integrated practice) and three of the groups also contributed to WIDI evaluation projects.

Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project 1: Literature review on disability workforce</li> <li>• Project 2: Evaluation of Family Violence Leadership Intensive Program</li> </ul>
Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project 1: Literature review on the peer workforce</li> <li>• Project 2: Evaluation of Family Violence Leadership Intensive Program</li> </ul>
Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project 1: Literature review on integrated practice</li> </ul>
Group 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project 1: Evaluation of Council to Homeless Person's internship program</li> </ul>

Placement students undertook a range of activities including:

- Sourcing and analysing academic and grey literature;
- Designing and implementing data collection methodologies;
- Data collection including designing and undertaking interviews;
- Analysis and synthesis of data; and
- Preparing and presenting reports.

The literature reviews undertaken by placement students in Semester 2 2020 helped to inform WIDI's thinking about key workforce issues and challenges such as:

- Defining the workforce including the disability workforce and the peer workforce;
- Identifying the inherent requirements for disability support work;
- The role of the peer workforce and the benefits and challenges of peer work; and
- Types of integrated practice models.

The evaluation activities undertaken by placement students contributed to WIDI’s understanding of:

- The impact of the 2020 Leadership Intensive Program – a non-accredited program for leaders in the family violence sector funded by Family Safety Victoria; and
- The outcomes of the Council to Homeless Person’s internship program.

## Placement Student Projects – Semester 1 2021

In Semester 1 2021, WIDI hosted four placement students. These began as remote placements in February however students were able to come on-site on several occasions between March and May 2021 when public health measures were eased and RMIT campuses opened to a broader range of students and staff. Three of the students worked on a project exploring retention and career progression of leaders in the family violence sector and the fourth student undertook a literature review on workforce data for the social service sector.

Group 1	• Project 1: Research project on retention and career progression among past participants of WIDI’s Leadership Intensive Program (Leadership Journeys Project)
Group 2	• Project 1: Literature review on social service workforce data

Placement students undertook a range of activities including:

- Developing project plans;
- Designing research methodology;
- Developing an ethics proposal;
- Designing data collection tools and approaches (surveys and interviews);
- Consulting with external stakeholders on key aspects of the research design;
- Collecting, analysing and synthesising data; and
- Preparing reports.

The Family Violence Leadership Journeys Project designed and implemented by placement students in

Semester 1 2021 has deepened WIDI's understanding of the factors contributing to retention and career progression among leaders in the family violence sector.

The literature review – which was part of a project sponsored by the Council to Homeless Persons – examined existing workforce data sets from across the social service sector identifying intersections and gaps in the data.

## **RMIT Support**

As noted above, under the WIDI Placements Model WIDI provides task supervision and Field Work Supervision is provided by RMIT's School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS). Prior to the first cohort of placement students, WIDI's Director and Deputy Director met with leaders from the GUSS Social Work Professional Practice Unit in July 2020 to discuss potential placements to ensure that the WIDI projects would align with the program requirements.

The GUSS Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Team supported WIDI to connect with students who had been matched to WIDI and their Field Education Supervisor, complete paperwork associated with placement and access information and resources where needed. As part of RMIT, WIDI has a good understanding of RMIT systems and processes and was able to navigate these with minimal assistance to support students on placement.



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ISBN: 978-1-922016-78-2





The background is a solid teal color. It features several small, stylized orange floral icons scattered across the top and middle sections. At the bottom, there are larger, stylized orange line-art illustrations of plants, including tall stalks with circular heads and various leaf shapes. The text is centered in the upper half of the page.

*“This collection makes an important contribution to recording and reporting the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the delivery of fieldwork education in social work. The methodology for the book reflects the commitment to co-production, in itself providing an exemplar model for robust University / Community partnership. Collectively the chapters offer strong reflections on the impacts, adjustments and restructuring that became necessary as a result of the pandemic and accordingly make a significant contribution to knowledge building within the discipline. This text provides an account that transcends its specific locational response, offering broader key messages to stakeholders in social work and allied professions both nationally and internationally.”*

**—Charlotte Williams OBE, Honorary Professor,**  
School of History, Philosophy and Social Sciences,  
Bangor University, Gwynedd, March 2022