QUT School of Public Health and Social Work


Background

Work Integrated learning (WIL) is a mandated and critical element of the education of social work and human service students. The time commitment for field education placements is substantial (university requirements are for this to continue for periods up to 16 weeks and up to 1000 hours throughout a degree) and can result in reduced capacity for paid employment and thus income for up to a semester in duration.

Many students are already experiencing financial stress associated with reduced government assistance and the costs of attaining a higher education qualification. Universities are increasingly concerned about and aware of the financial challenges faced by students associated with long field education placements.

Purpose of the research

The project seeks to assess the financial impact of field education placements on students and consider ways in which this impact may be lessened. Through an online survey, face to face interviews and focus groups, we will develop a greater level of awareness and understanding of the financial impact of field education placements from the perspective of social work and human service students. Interviews will also be undertaken with key informants representing Field Education Units, Social Work Schools, Counselling and Welfare Services.

This project would provide a strategic contribution to the particular issues associated with WIL. With increasing attention on the pedagogic benefits associated with WIL, this project would provide an important parallel understanding of the unintended economic consequences for students, thus balancing our understanding of students as whole people.

This study seeks to test the hypotheses that WIL requirements may increase the lived experience of financial stress and poverty and that the opportunity cost to students of doing work placements is likely to be increasing. The capacity to move forward with WIL as an integral part of the curriculum design requires a thorough understanding of this issue.

Time frame

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<th>Time Frame</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sep 2013 - Feb 2014</td>
<td>Literature Review &amp; Survey Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb - May 2014</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>June - August 2014</td>
<td>Data analysis and documentation</td>
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<td>September 2014</td>
<td>Report finalisation &amp; presentation at ACEN conference</td>
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Research Team and Reference Group

The QUT Research Team includes:

- Greg Marston
- Mark Brough
- Phil Crane
- Fotina Hardy/Anna Spencer
- Eleesa Johnstone

Methodology

The research team has received approval from a range of universities to be involved with the research. These include QUT, Griffith, ACU, Sunshine Coast University, Central Queensland University and James Cook University.

Online Survey

The research team received feedback from 245 students from the six universities. This has allowed the identification of themes emerging from factors such as placement impacts on student’s employment obligations, financial situation, culture, age, gender, nationality etc.

Interviews and Focus groups

24 Interviews and two focus groups have been undertaken with students and staff in teaching, support and field education roles.

Preliminary Findings

About four in five students reported that the field placement:

- seriously forced them to spend less time in paid employment
- impacted negatively in their financial situation,
- and caused them stress.

About two thirds of respondents had to increase their expenses due to additional travel, clothing and other field placement-related needs. One in five students was seriously forced to change their course progression because of the field placement. Overall, two thirds of participants felt both tired and anxious trying to balance paid work and placement, and two in five reported having to compromise their learning experience whilst on placement due to having to work for a wage.

In order to manage these demands, students reported that (83%) accessed support from family and friends, 61 (29%) accessed support from the university, and 37 (18%) accessed formal support off campus such as counselling or charity assistance.

These findings have been further teased out from interviews and focus groups with students and academic staff. The research team is in the process of further analysing and documenting these findings.
Ethics Approval

The research was granted Ethics Approval in December 2013 by the Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC) and confirmed as meeting the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

- Ethics Category: Human - Low Risk
- Approval Number: 1300000697
- Approved Until: 4/12/2014 (subject to receipt of satisfactory progress reports)

QUT Contact for further information
Research Associate: Eleesa Johnstone eleesa.johnstone@qut.edu.au Ph 07 3138 4504