

# Responding to COVID-19 in social work field education in Australia, New Zealand and the United States

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## Abstract

This descriptive article reports immediate responses to COVID-19 by social work field education faculty in four universities in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Moving swiftly to online innovations, tele-supervision, teaching remote practice methods, and establishing alternative placements allowed students to meet required competencies while supporting students during the immediate crisis. Collaboration between field education faculty teams, professional bodies and agencies and clear communication with students and supervisors enabled all stakeholders to be open to flexible placement options. To conclude, COVID-19 brought opportunities to reflect on responses and explore new possibilities for field education in a post-COVID-19 world.

## Keywords

Australia, COVID-19, field education, innovation, New Zealand, United States

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## Background

Field placement, a compulsory component of social work education, integrates theoretical classroom learning with professional practice, socializes students into the profession through experience and supervision, and further develops professional identities and practice frameworks (Cleak and Zuchowski, 2019; Jackson, 2017; Shlomo et al., 2012). Social work field education, like the profession itself, is shaped by context, responsive to the needs of students within limitations consequential to external political and economic environments which now includes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris, 2014; Rogowski, 2015; Walter-McCabe, 2020).

Managing the impact of disasters on field placements is not new (Alston et al., 2019). For example, sensitivity to trauma experienced by students, disruptions to programmes and personal consequences in the wake of bushfires, hurricanes, floods and earthquakes have required flexibility and responsiveness from faculty and supervisors in the field (Briggs and Roark, 2013). Previous disaster plans, however, are limited in pandemic conditions due to COVID-19's global reach and lack of a finite end. The global crisis necessitated new, rapid responses. Although vulnerable clients, social workers, students and educators have been affected without discrimination, existing health and wealth inequalities were exacerbated for older people and those with health vulnerabilities, Indigenous Peoples, People of Colour and those living in poverty (Fortuna et al., 2020; Pérez, 2020).

Each country took different approaches to mitigate or suppress COVID-19 in early 2020. Many countries locked down or sheltered-in-place for at least 4 weeks, moving in and out of lockdown at various timelines depending on the spread of the disease and the approach taken to pandemic management (Spektor, 2020). Full lockdown required people to stay home except for essential outings and services, and to maintain physical distance (Ferguson et al., 2020). In the United States and Australia, state governments took matters into their own hands after federal governments failed to provide clear direction. New Zealand (NZ) had a more cohesive and proactive national approach. The United States fared the worst in the early stages of COVID-19, heavily affected by infection and death (Johns Hopkins University, 2021).

University closures affected 87 percent of students globally (De Oliveira Araújo et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020). A survey of 235 field directors in the United States found 59.6 percent of universities had moved to online teaching (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020a). These conditions posed specific threats to field education in two main ways – how to provide quality placements and the potential educational, financial and emotional consequences for students (Fronck and Briggs, 2020).

In terms of quality placements, field education was already under pressure due to growing student numbers and increased competition for placements (Cleak and Zuchowski, 2019; Regehr, 2013; Ross et al., 2019). At the same time, social services in many countries including Australia, NZ, and the United States experienced systematic funding cuts which meant client load duress changed expectations of agency supervisors who have less time for the educational experience (Ayala et al., 2018). A greater emphasis is often placed on being workers rather than students, a situation commonly encountered (Williamson, 2020). As such, placing students in field environments that offer positive learning experiences has become more challenging, a situation worsened by lockdowns and agency closures (Hay, 2018).

While universities moved rapidly to online teaching during lockdowns, managing field placements in contexts where services *and* education were reliant on remote delivery triggered concerns about quality, how students could attain required competencies and prepare for a profession based primarily on in-person interactions and, in some countries, a dominant focus on micro practice (Apgar and Parada, 2018; Knowles, 2007). Conversely, students can learn new skills remotely

using digital technologies (Kourgiantakis and Lee, 2020; Perron et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2018). Although tele-social work is practised, few placement opportunities are traditionally offered in this space (Bryant et al., 2015). COVID-19 renewed debates about what constitutes traditional and non-traditional placements and how students learn (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Scholar et al., 2012).

In pre-COVID conditions, students experienced multiple challenges, including financial burdens due to lengthy, unpaid placements and overall debt (Gair and Baglow, 2018). Students were often time-poor, working and supporting families, and many experienced health or other crises while on placement (Gair and Baglow, 2018; Johnstone et al., 2016). Field education faculty managed placement breakdowns or deferred placements as a matter of course (Dove and Skinner, 2010; Parker, 2008). The profession and faculty approached placement issues and student burden with flexibility and innovation providing novel methods of supervision, better preparing students and agency supervisors for placement and establishing new placement opportunities such as social work health clinics (Briggs and Fronek, 2020; Cleak and Zuchowski, 2019). During lockdowns, job losses and housing insecurity further stressed financial hardship and personal crises.

Few studies have been conducted on the impact of previous pandemics on students, particularly students on placement. Studies on students during severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (2002–2004) and H1N1 (2009–2010) found student anxiety depended on a range of factors including the relevant disciplines and expected interactions with clients, perceptions of risk, previous epidemic experience and to what extent the country was affected (Van et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2007). COVID-19 was predicted to compound student stress affecting mental health, distress and coping as a consequence of lockdowns, loss of employment and educational disruptions. A UK survey found sleep, concentration, decision-making and emotional state were most affected in young people (Pierce et al., 2020).

Around the world, social workers and social work educators responded to the emergency flexibly, ethically and sensitively to the field education context (Amadasun, 2020; Banks et al., 2020; Briggs et al., in press; Buchanan and Bailey-Belafonte, 2021; Fronek et al., 2021; Fronek and Rotabi, in press). This article is a descriptive report which presents rapid responses to COVID-19 disruptions by social work field education faculty at four universities – Griffith University, Australia; the University of Canterbury and Massey University, NZ; and California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB), United States, during the first 6 months of 2020. Australia and NZ have similar systems with two pathways to social work qualifications – the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and the Master of Applied Social Work (MASW) in NZ, and the BSW and Master of Social Work qualifying (MSW) in Australia. Students eligible for entry into qualifying master programmes have completed a related 3-year undergraduate degree such as psychology. In the United States, BSW students typically take their social work courses in the last 2 years of their undergraduate programme. Graduates may then be eligible for Advanced Standing to complete an MSW in 1 year. Students whose undergraduate degree is in another discipline complete the MSW in 2–3 years.

Descriptive themes outline faculty responses at the four universities and the psychosocial and educational consequences for students. Reflection on responses in field education raises new possibilities for field education in a post-COVID-19 world.

## Method

Sources of data were email communications between faculty, professional organizations and students, student course feedback and notes taken during the first 6 months of the pandemic at each university. Data were retrospectively analysed and themes developed by identifying key issues using line-by-line coding and grouping-related issues together as descriptive themes. These were

discussed and reflected on by the authors to ensure accuracy and identify commonalities. Table 1 describes each setting, social work programmes and modes of delivery offered, the number of students on placement, types of placements and students served by these universities.

In the midst of the crisis, no formal evaluations were completed as priorities were focused on minimizing disruption and meeting immediate student need. Consultation with the University Ethics Committee determined that ethics approval was not required.

## Findings

The descriptive themes identified during analysis are *COVID-19 disruptions, student safety, student anxiety and well-being* and *meeting placement requirements and standards*.

### *Student safety*

*COVID-19 disruptions.* The first confirmed COVID-19 cases in 2020 were on 25 January (Australia), 26 January (California) and 28 February (NZ). On 19 March, California introduced shelter-in-place orders, the first US state to do so. On 25 March, NZ locked down before recording any COVID-19 deaths, and Australia at the end of March. Students at CSUMB were halfway through the completion of their Spring semester. In NZ and Australia, students were in their first few weeks of placement. Some agencies closed immediately, some continued to provide services, others reduced services and some amped up due to increased demand, for example, agencies providing emergency relief. All services faced unique challenges, for example, the barriers posed to service delivery in family violence and child protection services. These conditions disrupted capacities to provide safe, quality learning experiences in the context of heightened client vulnerabilities and diminished services, challenges experienced by students and supervisors worldwide (Campbell, 2020; Tedam, 2020).

At each site, the health and physical safety of students were prioritized. Students were contacted and interviewed about unfolding events, hygiene and physical distancing measures. Agencies were contacted to ensure adequate health and safety procedures were in place and understood by students and agencies, and to confirm health and liability insurance arrangements. Field education teams at Griffith and the two NZ universities developed and implemented new risk and health and safety procedures which included individual student planning forms and health and safety checklists. CSUMB required all students to shelter-in-place for their safety, effectively ending in-person field practice.

### *Student anxiety and well-being*

During intensive student contact with field education faculty at the four universities, students indicated that they were experiencing anxiety around their health, the health of family and the future of their placements and academic progression. Anxiety was particularly high for those students expecting to graduate after completing placement or had family overseas. In NZ, delays pushed some placements into the next semester incurring additional costs to students and compounding anxiety around timely graduation. Griffith University, on a trimester system, meant there was little time between trimesters to establish new plans which heightened anxiety. Experiences for students in California, the worst affected region, were mixed. Across universities, anxieties relating to academic progression eased as information about individual pathways to placement completion became clear.

**Table 1.** The setting – four universities in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

University	Social work programmes	Students enrolled	Placement type	Student type
Griffith University, Australia	Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 4 years</li> <li>- On campus and distance</li> <li>- Master of Social Work, qualifying (MSW)</li> <li>- 2 years</li> <li>- On campus and by distance</li> </ul>	1063	Unpaid except for a small number of work-based placements (students are already employed by the agency). Diverse range of government, non-government and community agencies, some research placements and an on-campus student-led clinic (Briggs and Fronek, 2020).	Domestic – First Australian, first generation at university, culturally and linguistically diverse. International – including articulated programmes.
Massey University, New Zealand	BSW <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 4 years</li> <li>- On campus and online</li> <li>- Master of Applied Social Work (MASW) 2 years</li> <li>- On campus and online</li> </ul>	520	Unpaid except for a small number of work-based placements. Diverse range of government, non-government and community agencies, some research placements.	The University serves Māori, Pasifika, non-Māori non-Pasifika and international students.
University of Canterbury, New Zealand	BSW <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 4 years</li> <li>- On campus and online</li> <li>- MASW</li> <li>- 2 years</li> <li>- On campus and online</li> </ul>	226	Unpaid except for a small number of work-based placements where the student is already employed by the agency. Diverse range of government, non-government and community agencies, some research placements.	The University serves Māori, Pasifika, non-Māori, non-Pasifika and international students.
California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB), United States	MSW <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2–3 years</li> <li>- On campus (founded to address the critical shortage of social workers in the Spanish-speaking communities of Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz)</li> </ul>	150	Unpaid placements in diverse range of government, non-government and community agencies, some macro practice placements. A small number of placement sites offer a small stipend. A small number of work-based placements.	Hispanic serving institution of 21 in the California State University system. Over 60% students identify as first-generation, Latinx.

Many students across sites worked to support themselves and dependent families. Students reported the stress of homeschooling while completing remote placements. Industries that traditionally employed students such as hospitality were the first affected in lockdown conditions, making daily living difficult for many. In Australia, international students were particularly affected due to exclusion from government benefits available to domestic students. Some experienced homelessness, and at one point, six students were living in one room with no food (Fronek et al.,

2021). The School and University responded to these needs with practical support (financial, food, accommodation) and the development of resource guides to connect students to University and community resources including mental health support. International students experienced public racism, a phenomenon that has escalated globally (Coates, 2020). Students from Wuhan were especially affected with feelings of responsibility and shame, financial issues and concern for their families at home.

COVID-19 accelerated financial disadvantage affecting Internet and computer access, and some students used to on-campus studies lacked technological skills (Pentaris et al., 2021). Although campuses were closed, special arrangements were made for Griffith students to borrow laptops or use computer laboratories if needed while physically distancing. This was not the case for NZ students as access was closed to students and staff during lockdown. At Massey and Canterbury, local students with no access to the Internet or computers were provided with computers, a solution not possible for students who lived far from campus. This support was important as Pasifika and Māori populations are among the most 'digitally excluded groups' in NZ (Digital Inclusion Research Group, 2017). University student support services remained in operation remotely, and some additional funding supports were available for students experiencing financial hardship.

CSUMB used Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES), a US federal grant created to assist students experiencing COVID-related financial hardship. Funding sources assisted students with cash awards, housing, Internet hotspots, laptops and other essentials to support their continued education. The final theme addresses how field education faculty responded to disrupted placements.

### *Meeting placement requirements and standards*

The sudden and dramatic impact of pandemic mitigation measures required immediate action to remedy disrupted placements where possible, ensure students were able to meet learning outcomes and progress through their programme. Field education faculty, field supervisors and students benefitted from the support and flexibility offered by their universities and the respective professional bodies that enabled flexible adaptations to placement requirements. Fundamentally, challenges for social work field education were due to lack of pandemic preparedness, standard pre-pandemic practices and expectations for student-client, traditional, in-person practice. Table 2 provides a snapshot of national accrediting bodies, pre-COVID-19 accreditation requirements for field education and modifications made for lockdown conditions.

Except for essential services, many placement agencies in Australia such as aged care facilities closed prior to national lockdown. Others sent non-essential staff and students off-site retaining only minimal staff and students while adhering strictly to physical distancing measures. There was a 2-week window to address placement closures before Griffith University closed on 30 March 2020. Two domestic students were on international placements in Cambodia and Sierra Leone. Arrangements were made for their return before international flights ceased. The student in Cambodia was able to continue project work for the agency from Australia. The student in Sierra Leone (his country of origin) was undecided, left his decision too late and was unable to return. Most of the international students from Wuhan were able to re-enter Australia before international borders closed, except for two students who went into lockdown with the rest of Wuhan city. Close contact was maintained with all students overseas and all placement options explored.

Collaborative planning and intensive work conducted over the 2 weeks at Griffith University enabled adaptations approved by the AASW. An online course, the *COVID-19 Alternative Placement Course*, was developed. Field education faculty taught the course, conducted field



**Table 2.** Pre- and post-COVID-19 field education requirements in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

	Accrediting body	Pre-COVID-19 field placement requirements	COVID-19 adaptations to placement requirements
Australia	Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)	2 × 500 hour placements over 2 academic years (years 3 and 4 in BSW; years 1 and 2 in MSW). One placement must be direct client work. Social work placement supervision and liaison visits in-person except for rural and remote supervision.	Reduced placement hours for students affected by COVID-19 allowed (assessed by universities). Approval of new placement options including the online course provided learning outcomes are met and tele-social work (working from home or office) approved as direct client work placements. Liaison visits and supervision via technology.
New Zealand	Social Workers' Registration Board (CSWE)	2 × placements of at least 50 days (totalling 120 days). In-person client contact required. One work-based placement possible under certain conditions.	2 placements totalling 120 days allowed in a single agency but in 2 different fields of practice with different supervisors. Tele-social work of no more than 60 days in one placement allowed provided learning outcomes can be met. Two work-based placements possible in 2 different fields with different supervisors.
United States	Commission on Accreditation (COA), an internal body of the CSWE	Minimum of 400 hours in baccalaureate programmes and 900 hours in master programmes. In-person student-client contact required. In-person placements Work supervisor and social work supervisor must be different in work-based placements	Minimum hours required were decreased from 400 to 340 and from 900 to 765 hours (CSUMB only offers an MSW). Tele-social work allowed. Virtual placements allowed. Supervisors can be the same person in work-based placements.

BSW: Bachelor of Social Work; MSW: Master of Social Work; CSUMB: California State University Monterey Bay; CSWE: Council on Social Work Education.

liaison visits and provided remote supervision (1.5 hours per week). Course content was delivered through multiple modes with an emphasis on simulated learning. Field education faculty had to rapidly adapt and provide extraordinary levels of support. Four placement options were developed and named Fully Integrated Placements, Partially Integrated Placements, Mixed New Placements and new Research and Project Placements.

Fully Integrated Placements were those where students remained in their placement agency, either maintaining services or working remotely with clients from the agency or from home. In Partially Integrated Placements, students worked remotely with agencies for 2 days a week and undertook specific projects directly related to the work of the agency for 2 days. On the fifth day, students were required to study a co-requisite theory course which moved exclusively online along with all other course work. Mixed New Placements were developed for students who could not continue on placement. These students were enrolled in the new alternative course for 2 days a

week and worked on a placement-related project set by the field education co-ordinator for 2 days. Research and Project Placements which pre-existed COVID-19 allowed students to work 4 days on a research project, not directly related to a specific placement agency. In alternative placements, students were required to meet the five AASW standards and demonstrate competence through activities such as simulated learning exercises and reflective practice, methods of skill development previously found to be effective (Kourgiantakis and Lee, 2020; Phillips et al., 2018).

Collaborative decisions about best placement options with assurances of student safety and quality experience were made between the agencies, students and field education faculty according to students' individual learning needs and circumstances. Only eight students chose to defer their placements for reasons such as caring for children unable to attend school. Of the 110 students enrolled in the alternative course, 80 students were able to return to their placements once agencies developed COVID-safe operational processes and re-opened. Although the AASW introduced reduced placement hours, Griffith had quickly established placement options before lockdown to fulfil the required 500 hours and took the initial position of no reduction in placement hours to ensure the future-proofing of student qualifications.

In NZ, the 18 tertiary providers of social work field education including Māori universities (Wānanga) and one private institution acted quickly in line with government directives. Some institutions required students to immediately withdraw from placements. Others adopted more flexible approaches allowing social work schools to determine whether students could continue on placement. At Massey University and the University of Canterbury, decision-making on practicum delivery was at the faculty level. The National Field Education Network mobilized and sent a written request to the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) for a range of flexible measures, such as allowing suspended placement hours to be carried forward into a new placement. The regulatory entity enabled considerable flexibility moving forward.

Most social service agencies in NZ continued to operate during lockdown using digital forms of communication. Where agencies were open to reshaped placements and continued student engagement, distance learning and meaningful social work-related activities were quickly developed to address shortfalls in individual learning plans. Learning objectives and specified hours of engagement were included to meet the required core competencies set down by the SWRB. Some students continued in placement full-time, while others reduced to part-time hours depending upon the availability of meaningful client work, project or research learning opportunities. Social work supervision was provided using digital communication technologies. While some field educators were already experienced in providing tele-supervision, others were new to this form of delivery (Inman et al., 2019). Policies were developed to incorporate these changes.

Stakeholder communication had a fourfold purpose – to convey clear information to students and field educators about university responses as alert levels changed; to seek student, field educator and agency feedback about the sustainability of placements during each alert level; to monitor student well-being and provide timely information about available support services; and finally to clarify expectations and information on assessment requirements.

Oranga Tamariki (the Ministry for Children), the largest employer of registered social workers in NZ, is the statutory organization for child and adolescent care and protection (SWRB, 2019). All student placements in Oranga Tamariki were ceased, and students were not reinstated until several weeks after lockdown eased. With the exception of students on work-based placements, most placements in the NZ health sector, the second largest employer of social workers, were ceased (SWRB, 2019). The resumption of placements was inconsistent across District Health Boards with students able to return on different dates. Variability between services was indicative of service-specific, autonomous decision-making and the level of engagement services had with student learning imperatives and local tertiary education providers.



At Massey, six students were on placement including one in a workplace-based placement in an essential service. This student continued in the agency and provided in-person client contact. One student on placement in Cambodia returned to NZ where her placement continued remotely. The remaining students worked from home in parallel with their placement colleagues. At Canterbury, 17 students remained on placement working remotely, and a further 19 suspended placement until lockdown conditions were eased.

In the United States, the CSWE granted permission for placement hours to be reduced to the minimum for those universities requiring additional hours. On 15 March, minimum hours required for universities were reduced from 400 to 340 (Baccalaureate) and 900 to 765 (Master) for those students due to complete by 31 December 2020 (CSWE, 2020b). This date was extended to 31 May 2021, allowing students to transition from in-person contact to include remote activities and training (CSWE and Commission on Accreditation statement update, 2020). The CSWE subsequently left decisions about whether students met the required standards to universities and counted field activities and field seminars towards the accrual of hours for the first time.

While universities moved classes online, social work programmes throughout the country were still considering whether to entirely remove students from in-person client contact. Some programmes contemplated allowing students, based on their own assessment of personal risk, to make the decision in consultation with placement agencies. One survey found 9.8 percent of universities allowed students to make modifications to their placements ranging from no change to cancellation (CSWE, 2020a).

CSUMB field education faculty immediately began working with placement agencies to develop learning and assessments that enabled students to demonstrate mastery in social work competencies. On 9 March, the County Health Department advised that all non-essential services would close, affecting the largest homeless encampment in Monterey County. In the weeks that followed, agency staff in the California Central Valley dwindled to a few essential staff, internships moved online and all in-person placements were suspended. Students in employee-based placements were required to work by their employers, overriding other recommendations. Field educators developed tasks that connected students' field learning in the online environment to CSWE core competencies, encouraged reflective and critical thinking on their circumstances and learnings about being on placement during a global pandemic. Where there was limited capacity for supervision in agencies, additional supervision was provided within the programme and where agencies closed, alternative assessments consistent with CSWE's Education Policy and Accreditation Standards were developed.

## Discussion

This article described the rapid responses of social work field education faculty in four universities during the first 6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not intended to present best practices which are likely to be highly contextual and should be understood within unique national and local contexts. Rather, this article presents opportunities to describe and reflect on how social work faculty sought to meet the needs of students on placement highlighting the flexibility and responsiveness of the profession in the midst of a global health emergency.

While there is no doubt that students bore the ill effects of lockdowns, the rapid response at these universities alleviated distress related to their placements and academic progression. How field educators were able to respond to placement disruptions was constrained and supported by a number of factors. Constraints included external conditions outside the control of social work schools, that is, pandemic containment strategies, welfare policies, decisions by placement agencies and existing placement requirements. Agencies and professional bodies were helpful in

recognizing and valuing the position of students and professional bodies in allowing flexibility for innovative responses and modifying placement requirements.

Individual placements were carefully assessed by field education faculty to ensure quality learning was possible. It was important that students considered their learning experience to be of value, no matter how different from their original expectations. An increased number of project or research-based placements and placements that were conducted from students' homes or agencies using digital technologies, referred to as non-traditional placements, were implemented (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Scholar et al., 2012). These offered opportunities for students and accrediting bodies to recognize that competencies and professional learning can be achieved without having in-person client contact in every placement or necessarily having a social worker close by on a daily basis and that skills in interpersonal work could be advanced through technologies along with tele-social work skills.

Perhaps social work terminology in field education has not kept up with the profession's progressive use of technology in delivering services. Interviewing over Skype, Zoom or similar technologies is different, yet essentially offers synchronous, in-person, direct contact between the client and social worker (or student) (Perron et al., 2010). These are issues for consideration and reflection on how we navigate associated complexities as we move into a post-COVID-19 world as many of these practices may remain. The advent of COVID-19 provided field education with challenges and opportunities to explore the different ways social work knowledge is acquired and how knowledge informs the practice of social work and the skills required. Opportunities unfolded for a wider range of placement options in competitive environments that included simulated learning (Hay, 2018; Phillips et al., 2018). This health emergency has made clear that flexibility and alternative approaches to field education can be achieved without compromising learning, ethics, practice principles and the values that underpin field education (Cartney, 2000; Conner et al., 2018; Ioakimidis and Sookraj, 2021). Opportunities lay in innovative approaches and also in addressing barriers at all levels of practice.

Students often enter social work programmes with the notion of learning how to practise on a micro-level. For example, social work educators in the United States are often met with resistance from students when teaching macro social work (Apgar and Parada, 2018). At CSUMB, for example, the haste in which programmes were designed around virtual learning required the task to shift from a heavily weighted micro focus to a greater focus on integrating macro practice to ensure learning agreements could be fulfilled. This shift was reinforced by student reflections on COVID-19 and its impact. The direct link between micro and macro and how inequalities were being acted out on the world stage spotlighted the direct connection between political leaders, politics and the well-being of individuals and families, especially evident in Black Lives Matter protests as well as efforts to save lives during the pandemic.

Early informal feedback from students suggested they coped better once early challenges with technology were overcome and clear plans for placement completion were in place. Some students who shared homes with either families or other adults reported difficulties finding private and confidential spaces to engage in placement. Other difficulties involving homeschooling and financial distress were issues for many students. However, using problem-solving skills necessary for social work practice, most students adjusted to adverse circumstances, and reported positive learning experiences despite disrupted placements.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated practices that were being adopted pre-pandemic, including online teaching, tele-supervision, tele-health and remote client work, albeit applied less often to field education. Given the financial fallout on universities, it is possible that many of these practices may remain (Marshman and Larkins, 2020). The world and the nature of work have changed. At the time of writing this article, vaccinations were being rolled out at different rates around the world and it was envisaged that the global populations would have to learn how to live

with SARS-CoV-2 and its variants. In this context, field education coordinators and field supervisors must continue to share pandemic experiences, critically review what worked well and what did not, evaluate contextualized best practices and ensure that pandemic preparedness is on the international social work agenda as part of the suite of disaster responses in preparation for the next health emergency.

All universities were under extreme duress in developing rapid responses to student needs, fulfilling responsibilities within a context of financial crises inflicted on universities, agencies and students. However, it is practice-based professions such as social work where rapid, innovative and flexible responses were required to address the challenges COVID-19 brought. Considerable time and commitment were needed from field education faculty to establish workable solutions while ensuring educational standards and safety. Field education can often be undervalued and under-resourced in social work schools, and their significant contributions in managing students' personal and educational needs during the COVID-19 emergency should be recognized (Preston et al., 2014).

Disruptions are predicted to continue to affect placements beyond 2021, and the modifications that have been put in place will continue to be utilized and adjusted as necessary. Competition for placement opportunities is not a new phenomenon in field education (Hay, 2018). However, it is anticipated that this competition will continue due to the bottleneck created where placements were shortened or delayed. Although student expectations have changed where placement hours have been reduced, producing competent and skilful practitioners should always remain the priority.

## Conclusion

Schools of Social Work and those professional bodies that set standards and accredit programmes must be prepared for the next health emergency which scientists say is inevitable. A global pandemic has been predicted for many years, yet the world and health systems were unprepared (Doherty, 2013). Social workers and students are on the front line of practice and members of the profession have fallen ill and some died. Local, national and international collaborative preparedness planning must be implemented to future proof the well-being of students and practitioners. Fractured approaches seen in governments must not be repeated in the social work profession. As such, international collaboration is needed on these issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new social work research agendas concerning how to effectively promote learning in online field placements, the evaluation of alternative field placements and their impact on student efficacy and competence and future viability.

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