

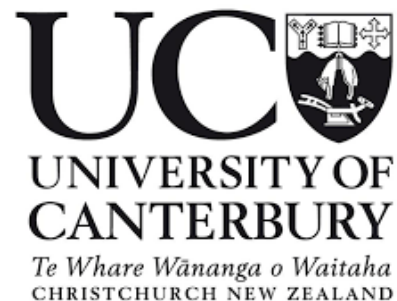
Experiences of distress during social work placements: New graduate perspectives

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STUDENT DISTRESS IN PLACEMENTS - THE CONTEXT

- Increased focus in tertiary education on student wellbeing needs and support structures (Konstantinou et al., 2023)
- The Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021 and implications for field education
- Students increasingly voicing concerns about the stress and financial burden of placements (Hodge et al, 2021; Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2023)
- Incidence of abuse/discrimination/harassment may be low but is associated with high levels of distress (Davis et al, 2020; Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2023)

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

- Pressure of having to keep up with academic work and assessments during field education (Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al, 2022)
- Students neglected, exploited, ignored, given unreasonable expectations, or feedback being unconstructive or abusive (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2023)
- Difficulties managing placement hours with other commitments including paid work (Grant-Smith, & de Zwaan, 2023; Ramgoolam-Atchiamith et al, 2022; Hodge et al, 2021)
- Students can be reticent in seeking help due to concerns of stigma and negative career consequences (Beddoe et al, 2023)

RESEARCH DESIGN

- Mixed methods approach – Phase 1 national survey, Phase 2 individual in-depth interviews – Presentation reporting early analysis of interviews.
- Mixed methods allows for triangulation of findings and in-depth understanding of the responses to the quantitative survey.
- Survey analysis informed development of the interview questions.
- Interviews included 17 starter questions lasting up to one hour.
- Questions focused on; understanding the nature of the distress; the support they received (particularly family/friends); impacts of supervision; views of students; potential changes for academic institutions, host agencies, and students; and the positive and negative impacts of the experiences.

RECRUITMENT

- Recruitment involved advertising through two professional associations, the registration board, and academic institutions
- Two rounds of advertising were undertaken at 3-month intervals
- Online survey was available through a QR code or weblink
- The survey was open from July to December 2023
- Participants self-identified and were also invited to provide their email for individual interview follow up
- 98 social workers completed the survey
- 17 out of 27 Participants who expressed an interest were interviewed

PARTICIPANTS

- Gender: 86% Female, 12% Male, 1% Other [Interviews 94% women]
- Ethnicity: 68% Pākehā, 18% Māori, 2% Pacifika
- Age: 52% 25-40, 31% 41-55
- 66% graduated after 2021 and 28% between 2016 and 2020
- 81% Bachelors degree, 16% Masters degree
- 40% participants completed their placement in Canterbury, 11% Auckland, 11% Otago [59% of interview participants completed placement in Canterbury]
- 86% of participants were employed in a role related to social work

TYPES OF DISTRESS – SURVEY RESULTS

- Workplace distress

Distress	%
Difficult workplace interactions	48.0
Unsupported, out of my depth, or unfair expectations of me	39.8

- Personal/interpersonal distress

Distress	%
Financial hardship	41.8
Mental health distress	31.6
Verbally threatened, harassed, intimidated, condescended or abused	25.5

STRATEGIES – SURVEY RESULTS

- Support strategies

Strategies	%
Talking to friends or family	52 (most useful – 25.8%)
Peer supervision	29.6
Supervision	27.6 (second most useful – 13.5%)
Seeking support from field education staff at tertiary institution	21.4

- Personal wellbeing strategies

Strategies	%
Journaling or critical reflection	27.6
Mindfulness or meditation	19.4

PRACTICAL SUPPORT – FAMILY

- Participants talked about the practical support they received from family that enabled them to navigate the distress on placement:

“And for people coming straight out of high school, stay at home if you can because so many times I'd come home just like, eat dinner and go to bed.” (P4)

“Mum . . . was really good and just being like ‘you're studying, you don't need to, you can stay here for as long as you need, you don't have to pay rent while you're studying’, which was brilliant, because I couldn't imagine having to pay rent and do all my bills and all of that while not earning any money.” (P8)

“My family and my village, they looked after my children, financially helped me out for four years. When I needed bits and pieces. So that kind of support was phenomenal.” (P18)

MORAL SUPPORT – FAMILY

- Participants identified the importance of family support from family when navigating distress on placement:

“I think those people [family/friends] typically see you as a more complete person and so more holistically, like had concept of you, so therefore, when they see you, like faults and all, they're not necessarily, seeing you as a standalone: I am a student social worker..” (P5)

“The benefits would be that they actually know the person they know, the stresses, they know how they stress what they look like when they're stressed, they know the triggers, they know how they can support.” (P17)

“My mom is just like my counsellor, and I definitely talk to her every day. So, she definitely heard a debrief every day.” (P15)

MORAL SUPPORT - PEERS

- Participants talked about the support they received from their student peers:

“My class . . . were in the same position, they understood. They were all to be fair, most of them are really good friends of mine, anyway, so we just leaned on each other.” (P8)

“I reached out to people in my class. And some of us had kind of similar experiences. So, we were able to share that but then there was also other students that I met on the placements, especially the first placement.” (P15)

“No one could change anything but just knowing that you weren't the only person going through those pressures was actually quite good.” (P7)

FAMILY SUPPORT - LIMITATIONS

- Participants also identified limitations with family support because of their lack of understanding.

“[Husband] also doesn't understand the complexities of social work . . . he was like oh, you shouldn't have been put in that situation.” (P20)

“The limitations is that if you've got no one that understands the degree or understands the kind of like problem you're facing, especially because my parents aren't in social work roles, or anything, that can be where it's quite hard”. (P4)

“If I do start talking about it, they're like, nah, it's too heavy, let's not talk about that, and then I'm still distressed and like ‘I don't know what to do with this now’.” (P3)

ADDITIONAL LIMITATIONS

- Participants identified concerns about confidentiality that made it difficult to seek family support.

“The limitations is I can't talk about work with confidentiality. I can't. So therefore, that's a limitation for me as I can't share the work-based burdens within my private life because of what - because of the nature of social work.” (P17)

- Participants also talked about the lack of alternative perspectives from family

“They're going to be your champion no matter what you do like they're going to be like, fuck her, you know, do this or whereas having that professional support you've got it through a different lens.” (P18)

“But then the limitation is that they support you too, 'cause, they sometimes are so much in your corner that they can't maybe give you some perspective”. (P4)

LIMITATIONS - DIFFERENCES

- These limitations may be different when support is provided by student peers
 - *Peers understand the context, confidentiality, and need for critical thinking*
- Some family members also have relevant experience that means support is more helpful

“Just talking to my wife and that sort of thing. I mean, she works, she’s had bully managers at the DHB where she works. So, she's kinda talking the same language to a large degree.” (P11)

REASONS FOR NOT SEEKING SUPPORT

- Early analysis indicates some reasons why students may not seek support from family, peers, and others.

“I wouldn't talk about it much, because it's a shame like, no way. I don't want my parents to know what's happened, before I was so happy there. It's not going to make sense to them at all ... So I would be really ashamed to say what happened.” (P2)

- Participants also talked about not wanting to let their family down, peers having it tougher than them, toughing it out, or not wanting to fail.
- This is an area of the data that we will analyse further.

CONCLUSIONS

- Our findings highlight the importance of family and peers in providing moral and practical support for students during placement
- Analysis of the interviews also indicates that family may not understand the unique challenges of placement or critique the student's perspective
- Field education coordinators could engage family to help them understand the challenges of placement and other supports that are available
- This is consistent with a model developed by Hay and Mafile'o (2022) for supporting Pacific students on placement
- More opportunities could be developed for peer interaction to share experiences, but the practicalities need careful consideration

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