Changing demographics: Supervising international social work students on placement in Australia

Dr Bella Ross & Dr Averil Grieve

Presented at: Changing Places: Health, social work and community placements, Monash University, Prato Centre
15 September 2017
Changing student demographics

• Students from overseas currently account for around a quarter of all Australian university enrolments (Australian Government, 2015; Harrison & Ip, 2013)

• In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of international students in Australia studying professional degrees such as social work (Harrison & Felton, 2013)

• Social work is classified by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection as a skilled occupation with a high-demand field of employment (Australian Government, 2017)
International student experiences

• Overall, most international students are satisfied with their living and studying experiences in Australia (Lawson, 2012) and report good levels of physical and mental health (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2008)

• International students face a range of challenges adapting to their new living and study environments

• International students are often dissatisfied with their field placement experiences and opportunities in Australia (Blackmore et al., 2014; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012)
Language, communication and cultural challenges

• Challenges include language, communication and cultural difficulties, such as:
  
  ▪ understanding local colloquialisms, accents, idioms, abbreviations and discipline-specific language (Deegan & Simki, 2010; Goldingay, 2012; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Marginson, 2012; Nash, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009; Taylor, Craft, Murray, & Rowley, 2000)

  ▪ cultural adjustment and barriers (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Taylor et al., 2000)

  ▪ understanding social conventions (e.g. how to address supervisors, conduct small talk, and choose appropriate topics of conversation) (Harrison & Ip, 2013)
Other challenges

- Other challenges include:
  - loneliness and isolation *(Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Marginson, 2012)*
  - difficulties engaging with local students *(Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Marginson, 2012)*
  - discrimination, racism and prejudice *(Harrison & Felton, 2013; Marginson, 2012; Taylor et al., 2000)*
  - being perceived as outsiders *(Leask & Carroll, 2011)*
  - learning about the educational and social work practices of the host country *(Harrison & Ip, 2013; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Taylor et al., 2000)*
  - adapting to new teaching methods *(Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010)*
Student supervision requirements

• All students must successfully complete two 500-hour (14-week) full-time placements in a social work field of practice

• At least one of the two placements must include direct practice with clients

• Students must have supervision (min. 3 hours/fortnight) by a qualified social worker educator who:
  ▪ has a minimum of two years’ post-qualifying practice experience
  ▪ is eligible for Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) membership
Placements for international students

• A shortage of quality and appropriate field placements for international students in Australia (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008; Wheelahan et al., 2012)

• Many international students feel that they do not have as equal access to placements as domestic students, causing frustration and dissatisfaction with their educational experience (Patrick et al., 2008)

• Students are expected to adapt to the workplace, implying a principle of assimilation rather than inclusion (Harrison & Ip, 2013; Orrell, 2011)

• Support for international students in social science placements is generally provided as issues arise, rather than being preparatory (Felton & Harrison, 2017; Taylor et al., 2000; Zunz & Oil, 2009)
International students’ supervision needs

- Quality of the supervisory relationship impacts heavily on the success of the placement (Newton, Pront & Giles 2016)

- Students of an Asian background view supervisors as unquestionable sources of knowledge and power rather than a mentor (Newton, Pront & Giles 2016; McCluskey 2012)

- International students face overt and covert racism on placement (Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell 2009)

- International students often positioned ‘without rights’ (Wall, Tran & Soejatminah 2016)

- Students internalise and self-legitimitise their positioning as time-consuming, resource poor and problematic learners (Wall, Tran & Soejatminah 2016)
Skills of social work supervisors

- Minimum qualification and experience criteria ≠ adequate supervision (Gursansky & Le Sueur 2012)

- A good social worker ≠ adequate interaction and teaching of students (Spencer & McDonald 1998)

- No guidelines on ways to develop skills for supervising international students (Felton & Harrison 2017; Tran 2012)

- Social work supervisors may have little or no training in:
  - transcultural pedagogies (Ryan 2011)
  - assessing English language abilities (San Miguel & Rogan 2012)
  - supporting communication skills development (Attrill, Lincoln & McAllister 2016)
  - differentiating between cultural and linguistic behaviour, especially for students with an Asian background (Chur-Hansen & Vernon-Roberts 1998)
Attitudes of social work supervisors

• ‘Deficit-saturated’ and ‘culturalist’ perceptions (Felton & Harrison 2017; Ryan 2005):
  • Time-consuming and challenging (Attrill, Lincoln & McAllister 2016)
  • Lacking cultural knowledge and intellectual/critical thinking abilities (Robson & Turner 2007)
  • Void of additional personal resources (e.g. language) or agency (Wall, Tran & Soejatminah 2016)

• Assimilationist attitudes: expect student to comply with agencies’ norms and practices (Harrison & Ip 2013)

• Assess students according to their image of an ‘ideal student’ which is influenced by their own personal/cultural backgrounds and workplace culture (San Miguel & Rogan 2012)
Inclusive and transcultural teaching practices

“Universities need to take a new stance, one that moves beyond interactions between cultures with one culture positioned as more powerful and dominant, to a new stance which arises from mutual dialogue and respect.”
(Ryan 2011, p. 635)

Construction of international students as global mobile citizens contributing to the learning process
(Tran 2010)

Developing a specialised community of practice for international supervision
(Felton & Harrison 2017; Zunz & Oll 2009)

Avoidance of assumptions about ‘normal’ or requisite English
(Harrison & Ip 2013; Piller 2016)

Professional development for supervisors to ensure culturally inclusive practice
(Robson & Turner 2007)

Mutual learning not one-way knowledge transmission
(Abukari 2014; Felton & Harrison 2017; Ryan 2011)

Shared onus of responsibility on student, institution, agency and supervisor
(Harrison & Ip 2013)
The pilot study

Online anonymous survey

Supervisors of Monash University Master of Social Work (Qualifying) (MSW(Q)) international students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisors of Monash University MSW(Q) International Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n-size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as mother-tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monolingual Anglo-Australian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most common backgrounds of international students supervised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MSW(Q) supervisor experiences

- The majority had only ever supervised one (40%) to two (14%) international students.
- 60.5% felt they supervised international students differently to domestic students, especially in terms of language and cultural support.
- Differences in supervision of domestic vs. international were framed negatively.
- 25% (18/73) had completed specialised training in supervising international students.
- Previous training typically a once-off seminar or workshop.
- Full day workshops rated the most beneficial.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Benefits perceived by supervisors</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exposure to new approaches and different perspectives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- It has been interesting finding out about services/intervention practices in Italy compared to Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Some bring additional life experience and cultural sensitivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General cultural learning opportunities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Brings a different perspective to the team and cultural experiences which can enhance the understanding of the wider team and organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Get to learn a great deal about people's countries of origin - political system, culture and values and I usually attempt to learn some words in their language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General linguistic and cultural benefits</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sometimes they speak languages of some of our clients and can also assist us to better understand cultural values and issues for our clients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Our workplace has a high percentage of Chinese students so having International Students who speak Mandarin is an advantage and great support for our workplace.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Challenges perceived by supervisors

| Language and communication issues | - Difficulties in engaging in exploratory conversation, essays can be a little hard to understand due to poor sentence structure.  
- At times it is the forms of communication and the directness and lack of descriptiveness.  
- Their writing and verbal skills often need extra work and some of them expect this from placement, though it is not the duty of placement organisations to provide this. |
| Cultural barriers or a lack of understanding of cultural norms | - Cultural responses to teachers, i.e. unwilling sometimes to challenge and debate.  
- Not being able to connect with clients because of cultural differences. |
| Lack of local knowledge or knowledge of local systems | - Not understanding the Australian health care system. Not working in the industry whilst studying hence no exposure to Australian community.  
- Limited understanding of key education, health, housing and social service systems in Australia. |
General findings

• Generally, respondents felt confident supervising international students

• Those not from CALD backgrounds were less certain of their levels of confidence and understanding of the impacts of language or culture in their supervision of international students

• Greater attention should be paid to improving supervisors’ awareness of and competence in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students
MSW(Q) Supervisor professional development training preferences

- **92%** (67/73) believe specified training should be provided for supervising international students

- Preference is for small face-to-face ‘in-house’ sessions
Self-identified professional development training needs

- Customs, values and beliefs in other cultures
- Your own cultures influence on your thoughts/behaviours
- Cross-cultural communication skills
- Cultural differences in approaches to learning
- Your organisation’s policies relating to cultural diversity
- Cultural differences in the role of social work
- Other (please specify)
Transitions in social work supervision

This pilot study reveals that provision of training for social work supervisors of international students would contribute to transitioning from:

- Deficit model of international student supervision
- Mutual benefit model of international student supervision
- Ad hoc international student supervision specialisation
- Guided international student supervision specialisation
- Placement as localised form of recruitment
- Placement as a globally-oriented training opportunity
Any questions?

Monash University
Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences
Student Academic Support Unit

Dr Bella Ross
Bella.ross@monash.edu

Dr Averil Grieve
Averil.grieve@monash.edu
References


References continued


Thank you