



**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

*Building bridges between school and field: the  
Western region student unit*

This is the Published version of the following publication

Egan, Ronnie and Hoatson, Lesley (1996) Building bridges between school and field: the Western region student unit. *Women in Welfare Education* (2). pp. 67-74. ISSN 1320-3584

The publisher's official version can be found at

Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/16022/>

## **Women in Welfare Education**

## **Building bridges between school and field: the western region student unit.**

**Ronnie Egan and Lesley Hoatson \***

### *Abstract*

*This paper provides a history of the Western Region Student Unit which operated for more than a decade, from 1982 to 1993 in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. Its significance lies in the way it opened up a broad range of field education options, provided a vehicle for different social work schools to work collaboratively and built a strong relationship between schools and the field. In this period of limited resources, and for some schools, increased difficulty in finding field placements, it offers insight into how to increase field education opportunities by using a community development and trading approach in the search for placements.*

---

### **Introduction**

In the current Victorian climate of scarce field education opportunities, it is timely to reflect on the experience of the Western Region Student Unit which operated for more than a decade, from 1982 to 1993 in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. This paper provides an historical overview of the Unit, drawing on the experiences of the writers who were previous Unit Co-ordinators, and on feedback from field educators who taught students through the Unit. Its significance lies in the way it opened up a broad range of field education options, provided a vehicle for different social work schools to work collaboratively and built a strong relationship between schools and the field. Its approach may offer direction in how to increase field education opportunities in times of resource stringency, and to release university based social work staff to focus on other academic responsibilities such as research. Field education is an integral part of social work training, allowing students the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge they have learnt in the classroom as well as have new insights. Students complete two or three field placements (a total of 980 hours) across their course. Placements supervised by a qualified social worker often have a different focus: case work, group work, community development, research or policy. Each school is responsible for annually searching for placements and negotiating with interested agencies. One strategy used by some Australian and international social work schools to strengthen their fieldwork program has been the development of student units (Volard and Weeks 1991:134-5).

### **Student units**

In a student unit, an experienced field teacher is employed within an agency or broader context, such as a region, to find placements and support supervisors and students in field learning. In the past ten years the value of student units in social work field education has been recognised (Ainsworth and

---

\* Ronnie Egan and Lesley Hoatson are part-time lecturers at the Victoria University of Technology.

Fulcher 1984; Bleby 1981; Creed and Flynn 1981; Dalton 1981; Volard and Weeks 1991). Volard and Weeks (1991: 135-136) argue that student units are established for one of three reasons. These are:

- educational rationales, where the school is attempting to both increase the profile of field education within social work learning and ensure high quality student learning experiences,
- pragmatic reasons, where units are established largely to increase fieldwork options in a time of scarce resources, and
- commitment to developing community services in areas where the human service infrastructure is undeveloped.

Volard and Weeks (1991) identify five different models for student units. One of them is a field based/placement development co-ordination and field teaching model, of which the Western Region Student Unit, is an example. The student unit is located within a field agency, but the roles of the student supervisor extend beyond direct field teaching. She/he assumes responsibility for placement finding, co-supervision, and liaison visiting. The supervisor also organises student orientations, provide educational seminars for those students on placement, develops a collection of resource materials, and offers support and educational seminars for local field teachers and practitioners. Volard and Weeks (1991, 140) comment that this model bears the marks of community development. Its advantages are that it provides opportunities for a broad range of placements, it can be used as a resource by more than one school, and it builds strong relationships between the school and field, an investment which has long term placement implications.

### **History of the western region unit**

The Western Region Student Unit was formed in the early nineteen eighties in response to pressure from the human service agencies in the West of Melbourne wanting to find ways of recruiting skilled workers. It was hard to attract staff to the region and often those who were employed reflected a middle class social work profile. They brought with them life experiences and analytical frameworks which were often inappropriate to a region that was being called the 'Deprived West' (Submission for accreditation of the Bachelor of Social Work, at Victoria University of Technology, November, 1990)

Staffed by a .6 time worker, the Unit was based at the Western Region Council for Social Development (WRCSD). It was funded by the Phillip Institute of Technology Social Work School (now Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, RMIT) which was known for its structural/feminist approach to teaching social work. The WRCSD had in the early 70's been the key regional planning and initiating body for the Whitlam Federal Labor Government's Australian Assistance Plan, and

continued to take a major planning and initiating role well into the 80's. Although past its heyday, it still held enormous power within the region so that the Student Unit's siting was quite strategic. The first Student Unit Co-ordinator, Sharon Moore remembers that the Council's philosophy had a strong anti-professional bias and that they were more interested in her media and community education skills and resources than her ability to train social work and welfare studies students.

Despite this, the Unit quickly developed a role of providing innovative placements to students, in particular those who lived in the West or were from non English speaking backgrounds. It also saw itself as a resource base from which community groups could explore and pilot new ideas and as an educational resource to the field.

The Unit took a strong structural/feminist perspective, recognising the importance of promoting social justice and progressive social change at personal, group, community and societal levels. It worked alongside regional workers and groups to create placements which were at the cutting edge of human service development. Early projects included setting up a workers' co-operative, establishing peace groups, exploring environmental issues such as chemical spills, looking at issues around women's work, and resourcing the newly established Women Workers of the West and an Environmental Action Group. Students were based in politicians' offices, as well as at the dock yards. As the Unit developed, many of the community services established in the eighties in the Western Region relied on students from the Unit doing the initial needs study, consultation, committee training or organising. A number of community legal services, community health services, district health councils, the Women's Health Service of the West, Western Region Centre Against Sexual Assault, and The University of the Third Age used Student Unit resourcing. As well the Unit provided ongoing resources and leadership to the Western Region Council for Social Development.

As the region's community service infrastructure became established, the work of the Unit moved more to resourcing those agencies, and away from initiating new services. Between 1988 to the Unit's closure in 1993, placements focused on projects which identified roles for existing services in newly established areas, developed new and supported existing self help groups, reviewed the impact in the West of government policies, developed training packages for workers, and researched needs assessment profiles for new client groups.

Community development, policy and research placements were relatively easy to come by. There were usually greater numbers on offer than could be used. More difficult to find were direct service placements, focusing on casework and counselling. The struggle to find these placements reflected the fact that direct service had developed as a smaller part of the service sector, and that competent direct service workers were still hard to recruit in the western suburbs. In fact government frustration in attracting skilled direct service staff led in the early 1990's to Community Services of

Victoria (a state government department) being a major advocate for the establishment of a social work course in the West of Melbourne.

In 1988 the Western Regional Council for Social Development closed and the Unit moved to Footscray Council and later the Western Region Commission. In this period the Unit broadened to place students from three schools of social work at Phillip Institute, Melbourne University, and students from the western region's new school of Social Work at Victoria University of Technology. This increased the number of social work students doing field placements in the region and the possibility of them later getting work in the West. The Unit co-ordinator was accountable to the three participating schools via a steering committee comprising of representatives from the schools as well as organisations in the Western Region.

As well as extending the Unit to cover three schools, from the late eighties the Unit made a major decision to change the way it related to other courses also looking for field placements. Instead of competing it developed a strategy of working alongside welfare studies and community development courses that had been established in the region. Together a field education planning group was formed. Principles that underpinned its work were :

- co-operation between schools and agencies produced better outcomes than competition in field education.
- the field's contribution to the development of courses was critical, and
- that a regional focus in the West increased a sense of ownership and accountability between the schools and the field.

The group jointly advertised for placements, trained supervisors, and organised community service seminars for the field as the schools' contribution to field staff development. (Hoatson, Leser, Egan, Ferguson and Moorhead, 1994). Such work anticipated the latter co-operative field education relationship that was to develop between social work schools in the mid nineties. This field education group has continued as The Western Region Field Education Interest Group providing placement information and regular seminars for the field, students and the schools in the west

In 1993 a decision was made to cease the operation of the Unit. This occurred because major funding cuts to RMIT meant it was unable to continue funding at its former level. Despite a commitment to the continuation of the Unit by all contributing schools, it was impractical to maintain it in its current form.

### **Practice implications off the western region unit**

The Western Region Student Unit (WRSU) provides an example of a student unit which was able to open up a broad range of field education options, it enabled a number of schools to work collaboratively on field education and built strong relationships between schools and field. Central to this work was the use by Unit Co-ordinators of community development strategies to build and strengthen networks, establish a climate of trust between participants and create co-operative ways of working. It is useful to reflect in more detail on how the WRSU went about these tasks.

#### *Opening up field education options*

Successive co-ordinators called on their community development backgrounds to develop networks which spanned the vast majority of agencies in the West as well as organisations that would not be normally considered for field placements. Each were visited and relationships built with workers and administrators.

These contacts meant the Unit had an overview of field education opportunities in the region not only for social work but also welfare and community development courses. Such an in depth knowledge of the field enabled the Co-ordinator to produce a broad range of placements with generally high quality supervision. Working within a co-operative framework it did mean however that the coordinator had to be sensitive to other course's needs as well as their own.

Informal field feedback indicated that dealing with only the Unit Co-ordinator (who might be representing a number of schools), encouraged workers to take on field placements. Negotiating with the Unit alleviated much of the persistent, competitive, multiple contact with field education school coordinators and released them from being expected to understand educational programs from the different schools of social work.

The Unit's knowledge and commitment to building a pool of skilled supervisors meant that students with special needs around learning, disability, access or language, were often able to be placed in appropriate supportive learning environments.

#### *Co-ordination across schools*

In its later years, the WRSU in spanning three schools acted as a gatekeeper in terms of information flow between the field and the schools. The Co-ordinator, in regular contact with participating schools, was in a position to match placements on offer with the school, time of year, and nature of placement task that was most appropriate. If an agency was offering a placement that was not picked up by one school, with the agency's permission, the placement could be offered to another. This gate keeping

aspect of the role could be stressful if schools were competing for particular placements that were in short supply (for example in feminist agencies). Maintaining trust and goodwill with all parties demanded considerable skill.

Working across schools also had the potential for conflicting agendas, different understandings of accountability, different priorities and the need to span quite different practice philosophies. The skills of the Co-ordinators and social work schools had to be sophisticated to maintain a successfully collaborative relationship.

Co-ordinators being closely linked with the Region were more likely to be aware of potential supervisors who had weak teaching skills or agencies in the midst of major internal conflict. Such information short circuited possible disasters for the schools. The Co-ordinator needed to be familiar with the different teaching approaches and material of the three social work schools who were part of the Unit. In integrative seminars where students from three schools were taught together, an environment was created where students were exposed to a range of curricula and different understandings of practice. The Co-ordinator, being familiar with all three programs, facilitated a critique of different perspectives. Student feedback was positive in relation to these integration seminars, particularly the sharing of different theoretical perspectives.

The steering committee provided the Unit with an independent auspice and so was not aligned with any one school. Knowledge stemming from active engagement with the field was fed back to the schools through field education advisory committees and influencing curriculum development and content. Field practitioners were also encouraged to teach in courses because the Co-ordinator was able to identify people with relevant expertise, and teaching skills.

The Co-ordinators also played key roles in both the development, implementation and ongoing maintenance of social and community service courses in the western suburbs. They sat on accreditation boards, and chaired or were members of various course advisory committees.

### **Building strong relationships between the schools and field**

The philosophy built by the Unit over the decade was based around reciprocity and trading. Educational opportunities were not taken for granted. Relying on workers' altruism or commitment to a profession was not enough to ensure a pool of placements. Agencies and supervisors needed to gain extensively from the experience to make it worth their while, and to be motivated to offer placements over a number of years.

Emphasis was placed on offering individual assistance to develop placements, quality training to prepare the supervisor, close liaison contact, and the possibility of intensive work with students and supervisors if there was conflict or learning difficulties. It was recognised that in a number of



community development settings, skilful practitioners were not able to take social work students because they did not have the required training. Rather than lose learning opportunities, these agencies often became important sources of teaching when the Unit negotiated an agreement where they were able to offer co-supervision.

The Unit also recognised that every human service organisation was a potential source of placements and consequently saw the value of resourcing the broader field. To enhance the quality of practice in the region there was a need to offer new approaches and theories for discussion, create debate around current policy and focus on skill development. The Field Work Planning Group established monthly community service seminars which were open to anyone in the region to attend. These seminars regularly brought workers together from a wide range of settings, providing topical staff development opportunities, whilst keeping placement opportunities high on the agenda.

Occasionally the Unit was approached to provide agency staff development as well as individual supervision for people working in the field, in non placement time.

### **Learning from the western region unit**

The Unit provides an example of a model which is applicable not just to the West of Melbourne, but across broad field education settings. It has the advantage of giving the auspicing school a high public field education profile. It also allows for the releasing of academic staff from some of the intense field education load allowing them to focus on other roles such as class room teaching or research. It could be argued that while student units are a useful strategy where there is already a well established, well functioning field education program, they would be most effective when a school has failed to maintain strong links with its field, or where issues beyond the school's control have led to a drying up of placements.

There is debate within the field however as to whether student units can be afforded in periods of economic stringency when field education resources are being cut to the bone. Units have got the potential to take up much of the field preparatory work that a university based co-ordinator handles, and being directly in the field, should be more efficient in searching out and preparing placements. This is particularly the case where the unit is working across schools and the salary is shared. However where there are costs around establishing an independent base, and administrative or technological support, these add to the expense of running a unit. Until more work is done to cost student units and compare this with the resources needed to run equivalent field based programs this debate will not be clearly resolved.

## **Conclusion**

This article provides a history of the WRSU and how it went about building a consistent identity around field education in the west of Melbourne. It identifies some of the key aspects in its work of opening up field education options, and encouraging collaborative work across schools and the field. In this period of limited resources, and for some schools, increased difficulty in finding field placements, it offers insight into the importance of using a community development and trading focus in the search for placements.

## **References**

- Ainsworth, F and Fulcher, L (1984) 'Student units for practice teaching in group care', *Social Work Education*, 3, pp.30-34.
- Bleby, P. (1981) 'Faculty-supervised fieldwork units: a successful exploration', *Contemporary Social Work Education*, 4, pp.82-91.
- Creed, H and Flynn, S (1981) 'The Sussex Street centre: an innovation in field teaching' *Contemporary Social Work Education*, 4, pp.161-166.
- Dalton, D (1981). 'The student unit fieldwork in fieldwork education', *Contemporary Social Work Education*, 4, pp. 167-175.
- Hoatson, L., Leser, M., Egan, R, Ferguson, R., and Moorhead, S. (1994) 'Co-operative field education planning for social and community services', *Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education. Newsletter*, September, 1994.
- Victoria University of Technology, 1990, 'Submission for accreditation of the Bachelor of Social Work course', November.
- Volard, J. and Weeks, W. (1991) 'Linking community, industry and tertiary education community-based student units in social work education', *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol 10, No 2, pp. 134-5.

## *Acknowledgments*

*A number of people read an earlier draft of this paper, and we would particularly like to thank: Lis Starbuck, John Ernst, and Sharon Moore for their help.*