ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Animal-assisted social work at Flash Farm

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Flash Farm (FF) is a purpose-built therapeutic farm where people come to undertake animal-assisted social work (SW) including animal assisted educational activities to improve social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing. For La Trobe University's Bachelor of Social Work students, field education includes approximately 14 weeks of supervised placement. For the past 6 years, FF has provided field education placements to SW and welfare students, where students attend the farm each day and engage in a range of activities including individual animal-assisted therapy (A-AT) sessions and group sessions that include life and social skills and psycho-educational workshops.

APPROACH: In this autoethnographic article, we consider the different perspectives that need to align for a successful student placement. We will discuss the perspectives of the university field education team who are looking at which student might be a suitable match for this placement, and the FF team who are looking for a student who will fit in with the farm operations. In addition, we discuss the perspective of the university field education liaison officer (FELO) who provides oversight and troubleshooting, and the student who wants to learn about social work practice and to integrate the theories that they have learned at university.

IMPLICATIONS: This auto-ethnography has been prepared to shine a light on the opportunities and complexities of A-AT and SW field education. Although outside the scope of this article, the experience of the clients and the animals needs to be considered in determining what constitutes successful social work placements.

Keywords: Animal-assisted social work, field education, social work

Flash Farm (FF) is a small farm located in a rural community near Bendigo in Victoria, Australia. Kristy Kemp (KK) is an experienced social worker who runs a unique animal-assisted social work (A-ASW) programme where clients engage in therapeutic activities while interacting with various farm animals such as horses, cows, sheep, alpacas, goats, donkeys and dogs. FF practitioners integrate evidence-based therapeutic techniques with the enriching elements of animals. At the core of FF ‹s philosophy is the commitment to person-centred care, where practitioners recognise and value the individual's lived experience and distinctive personality, fostering an environment where therapy is tailored to the unique needs of each person.

Therapeutic sessions at FF are hands-on and experiential, featuring goal-oriented, planned, and structured therapeutic interventions that are directed or delivered by a trained professional within the scope of their practice. A-ASW focuses on improving the physical, cognitive, behavioural, and socio-emotional wellbeing of the human recipient. The practitioner delivering A-ASW (or the person handling the animal) must have knowledge about the behaviour, needs,

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *37(1)*, 56–69.

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health, and indicators of stress of the animals involved.

In this article, we explore the experiences of the placement team including KK who is a social worker (SW) at FF and is the placement field educator (FE), Hayley Sherry (HS) a SW student who completed her first SW placement at FF, Dr Natasha Long (NL) the university field education coordinator and Dr Helen Hickson (HH) a university field education liaison officer (FELO) with experience in supporting SW field education at the farm. KK, HH and NL have been working together for several years providing and supporting students undertaking field education placements. We recognised that FF was a unique placement experience, and we were keen to contribute to the conversation about successful social work placements that include animal-assisted SW and the alignment that is needed in social work education.

In Australia, SW students enrolled in accredited courses are required to undertake 1,000 hours of placement (AASW, 2020). The placement experience is part of a structured field education programme that includes opportunities to integrate theory and practice (Egan et al., 2018). Placement, clinical placement, field education are all terms used to explain this learning experience (Gardner et al., 2019) and are used interchangeably through this article.

Literature review

There is emerging interest in SW practice in animal therapy programmes with a notable increase in research and publications in recent years, see for example Gant and Meadows (2023), and Duvnjak and Dent (2023). This represents the broader recognition of the benefits of animal therapies to address social and emotional challenges and presents opportunities for SW field education in these practice contexts.

There is limited literature that aligns directly with the unique FF experience. The SW practice context of FF is a person-centred therapy programme that is conducted in the space of animals. The animals are in their home environment on the farm and visitors such as SW students and clients visit to engage with the animals. The animals become accustomed to regular visitors and to meeting different people. There is no formal training or standard for animal-assisted therapy. The animals at FF such as the horses and dogs have undertaken training and all the animals that are included in A-ASW at FF are assessed for temperament, safety, and soundness. There is a lengthy process before an animal is added to the animal therapy team. This is different from much of the research and commentary in the literature about A-ASW, where the animals, usually dogs, are trained as therapy animals and are taken to a SW setting where clients engage with the animals (Taylor et al., 2020; Winkle et al., 2020).

In the literature, there are different terms used to describe the animals and the roles that they perform such as *therapy dog*, *guide dog* or *emotional support animal* (Howell et al., 2022). Nomenclature is important and there are various terms used to describe the professional roles where animals provide support to people, such as animal-assisted therapy (A-AT), animal-assisted interventions (A-AI), and animal-assisted activities (Winkle et al., 2020). In this paper we use the term *animal-assisted social work* (A-ASW) to describe the activities at FF.

Social work practice with animal-assisted therapies

We were able to locate a small body of literature about SW with A-ASW published over the past 10 years, with articles published in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom. We identified three scoping reviews that explored animal-assisted interventions in universities (Cooke et al., 2023), nature-based interventions for vulnerable youth (Overbey et al., 2023) and nature-based interventions

in institutional and organisational settings (Moeller et al., 2018).

In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, there is growing emphasis on the inclusion of animals in SW practice, including A-ASW, A-AT, animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted education (Taylor et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2015; Walker & Tumilty, 2019); Fraser et al., 2021; Yeung et al., 2020). These papers describe SW interventions in a range of practice settings such as working with children (Taylor et al., 2016), youth mental health (Meadows et al., 2020), with refugee communities (Fraser, 2017), in universities (Cooke et al., 2023), and in the domestic and family violence context (Taylor et al., 2020).

In the international literature, there were studies about human–animal relationships and ways that SW integrated therapy animals in the practice context. In the US, Arkow (2020) identified the ways in which SW who were working in child protection and child safety, integrated pet support and practice dogs to support vulnerable populations.

Winkle et al. (2020) explored A-AT inclusion of dogs in formal intervention settings and identified the need for good dog welfare to keep animals and humans safe, and the importance of a good match between the dog, the client and the task. Hoy-Gerlach et al.'s (2019) writing about SW field education was introduced in a human society and described student learning opportunities, while Overby et al.'s (2023) scoping review outlined the potential for nature-based interventions in their scoping review. Compitus (2021) described the process of integrating A-AT into SW practice and argued that A-AT was considered an effective treatment for a variety of populations and conditions such as psychotherapy and cognitive based therapy, but there is limited research about how to integrate A-AT into clinical SW practice and how to measure impact and effectiveness of A-AT as a treatment model. Silberberg's (2023) article set out the challenges for SWs to think about their relationship with animals and to look beyond an anthropocentric perspective of practice to consider what self-determination and exploitation is from the animal's perspective. There is a body of literature by writers such as Kirby (2016) and Hallberg (2017) about equine-assisted therapies such as horses in health, mental health and social therapies.

In their scoping review, Moeller et al. (2018) investigated nature-based therapies, such as horticulture or gardening activities or A-AT in settings where individuals reside full time for care or rehabilitation purposes such as inpatient hospital wards, prisons and women's shelters.

Social work education and animal assisted therapies

Research is emerging about SW education and the ways in which human–animal relationships and animal therapy were identified. Arkow (2020) argued that SW education should include explicit focus on the value of human–animal relationships and include animals in family genograms, curricula and professional development activities. Similarly, Fraser et al. (2021) identified that animals including companion animals, farm animals and wildlife are relevant to green and disaster SW education and need to be explicitly included in the curriculum particularly in teaching assessment of person-centred practice. Duvnjak and Dent's (2023) survey of SW education programmes in Australia argued that content about SW practice with animals related mostly to the discussion of ethical issues and was generally incorporated in theory such as green SW, highlighting that there needs to be more explicit content about A-AT and this is a challenge in a crowded SW curriculum.

Social work field education and working with animals

We located three articles that explicitly described A-AT in SW field education. A

paper by Hoy-Gerlach et al. (2019) described the successful SW student placements at the Humane Society in the United States. One of the key features of this paper was the connection between animal welfare and human welfare. The authors discuss the opportunities, for learning and skill development as part of SW placements, to identify and respond to client strengths and concerns that ultimately support the well-being of both humans and animals.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Meadows et al. (2020) and Gant and Meadows (2023) described the integration of animal-related content into the SW courses at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) and developed a partnership with The Nelson Ark, with a focus on integrating animals into their work with young people. This partnership included teaching into the Bachelor of Social Work programme and support of SW student field education.We were not able to identify any research or literature about SW student placements in an A-AT farm context. Whilst we understand that the focus on human–animal relationships in SW research and practice is developing, we consider there needs to be stronger focus on these relationships in the conventional SW curriculum and student learning experience.

Ethical issues

In the literature, ethical issues are raised about the inclusion of animals in SW settings. In their work, Taylor et al. (2016) argued that recognising animals as sentient beings with needs of their own leads to benefits for both humans and animals by challenging attitudes and behaviours. Walker and Tumilty (2019) argued that there needs to be an ethical code of conduct for practitioners to keep animals safe. Similarly, Silberberg's (2023) paper considered SW values and considers how SW can reconcile animal ethics and animal welfare principles with the animal's right of self-determination.

Gaps in the research

There is limited research in Australia about a regulatory framework of the integration of animals in SW practice including the need for animal welfare standards and professional liability considerations. In addition, there is a need for guidelines and standards to keep humans and animals safe.

There are gaps in the research about the benefits of animals in SW practice. There is a need for further research to evaluate the effectiveness of animal assisted interventions, identify best practice and the ways to measure success, and address the ethical and cultural aspects that are specific to the Australian context.

There are limitations in the literature about the importance of including A-AT in SW education, and this is a notable gap in curriculum and research literature. This results in a disconnect between the integration of learning about animals in SW university education and their experiences in fieldwork. There is a need for specialised training programmes and professional development opportunities to support SW to develop the knowledge and skills to implement animal-assisted interventions safely and effectively. Similarly, there is a gap in the literature about student experiences and needs in relation to field placement involving A-ASW.

There is growing recognition of the benefits of animals in SW practice in Australia; however, there remain challenges and opportunities for further education, research and interdisciplinary collaboration in order to maximise the effectiveness of therapies for clients and safe interventions for animals. In addition, collaborative interdisciplinary partnerships need to be developed between SW animal welfare organisations, veterinarians and other professionals involved in animal-assisted interventions. Through this article we hope to contribute to the ongoing discussions about A-ASW by providing a nuanced perspective about A-ASW and social work field education.

SW student placement at FF

The following section starts with a case study that highlights a typical placement experience at FF. The overview of the placement structure and process is presented as a case study and each of the authors shares their reflections about the placement experience and potential at FF from their specific perspectives.

Case study of animal assisted SW at FF

Introduction

FF is an innovative facility that integrates animal-assisted therapy with SW interventions, offering a unique environment where individuals can engage in therapeutic activities while interacting with various animals such as dogs, horses, cows, sheep, alpacas, goats, and more. Under the guidance of SW, students are introduced to SW theories in practice, in conjunction with animal-assisted therapy interventions.

Initial shadowing experience

During the initial phase of the placement, students shadow the SW to gain insights into the implementation of SW principles within the context of animal-assisted therapy. The SW creates a safe learning environment for the student to observe and understand how the human-animal bond can be used to effectively address clients' needs and goals.

Animal education

Safety of the animals is of critical importance to FF. The SW provides comprehensive animal education, including an introduction to each animal and discussion about their personality and likes and dislikes, as well as behaviour, nutrition, and health needs. This supports students to develop the knowledge and skills to interact confidently with different species, understand their individual personality and behaviours and the potential therapeutic benefits they offer.

Integration of social work and animal-assisted therapy

Students participate in one-to-one therapy sessions and group programmes facilitated at FF. Students are expected to apply their knowledge of SW theories and their readings from research about animal therapy to contribute to the development of client sessions tailored to individual needs. By harnessing the power of the human–animal bond, students work collaboratively with clients to identify and work towards their goals.

Client-centred approach

At FF, students prioritise a client-centred approach, recognising the importance of empowering individuals to articulate and achieve their aspirations. Through meaningful interactions with animals and guided therapeutic interventions, students facilitate a process where clients can explore their emotions, develop coping mechanisms, and enhance their overall wellbeing.

Research and learning

Throughout the placement, students engage in continuous research to deepen their understanding of animal-assisted therapy and its applications in SW practice. Students use their findings to inform practice interventions and enhance the effectiveness of client sessions, ensuring they are evidence-based and tailored to meet specific needs.

Conclusion

Placements at FF provide a rich learning experience where students can witness firsthand the transformative potential of integrating SW principles with animal-assisted therapy interventions. Students who engage in deep learning and prioritise the holistic wellbeing of individuals seeking support at FF, leave with a lasting impact on both clients and the broader community, and a SW placement experience that they will never forget.

When considering placement as a holistic learning experience, it is helpful to think about the life cycle of a placement, that is pre-placement planning, during placement and ending/post placement (Gardner et al., 2019; Cleak & Wilson, 2022). In this next section, we explore the various perspectives of the placement team in relation to each of the phases of the life cycle.

Pre-placement planning

The planning phase commences well before the start of the placement. During this phase, university staff will be sourcing placement offers, confirming student numbers, preparing students for placement (credentialing, field education curriculum delivery, etc.), and matching students to placement. Agency staff will be considering their capacity to offer a student placement, making arrangements with staff to supervise students, and preparing to interview potential students. Students will be thinking about how to juggle hours at placement and their other commitments such as work, childcare, and other caring responsibilities. During this stage, the student will be matched to an agency and the agency will arrange to interview the student (*note not all universities have pre-placement interviews). This interview is important for agency staff to consider the match of the student to the agency, how they align with the team, and the agency and if the agency has capacity to support the student's learning.

University perspectives about pre-placement matching (NL)

Field education is the distinctive pedagogy of SW education and a significant undertaking by students, agencies, and the university in terms of time and resources (Egan et al., 2018). Underpinning field education and the placement experience is the learning opportunities and supervisory support for students. The reciprocal benefits for agencies and agency staff who invest their time and resources to support the student on placement is also considered. These might include development of agency staff's supervisory skills and knowledge, reduced workload towards the end of the placement, or completion of a project that may not otherwise have been achieved. In addition, having the capacity to adequately support the placement student and agency staff via the FELO is also important. When thinking about matching a student to a placement at FF, these considerations are front of mind. As such, after confirming that a placement will be offered at FF, I email the student cohort (both first- and second-placement students) seeking their interest. In the email, I provide

the link to the FF website and ask students to let me know if they would be interested in a placement, noting that they will need to be comfortable working with both animals and people. I make a decision based on the strength of their email, their interests, and any follow-up conversations I have with the students. I am looking for students who have some experience with animals (can be animals as pets), are interested in thinking differently about *where* SW is delivered (in relation to spaces), who are self-motivated, and open to doing things differently. Once matched the student is then interviewed by KK at FF. The strength of the matching process is enhanced by the relationship KK and I have developed over the past 6 years.

As part of the pre-planning process, I also consider the match of the liaison person. Similarly to the student, the FELO needs to be able to think about placement differently and see the possibilities of placement learning opportunities outside of the walls of a traditional agency placement. The FELO is pivotal to supporting the students' learning in a non-traditional placement setting. Ideally, it would be helpful for the FELO to be involved in placement discussions with the student and agency as soon as placement starts, or perhaps even prior to placement starting, to help the student commence placement with an understanding of what to expect on placement.

Student perspectives of pre-placement planning (HS)

The first SW placement can be both anxiety-inducing and exciting—as this was my first placement with no prior experience in the industry, I was both, in buckets.

When I first found out about the opportunity of placement at FF, there were many thoughts, such as: I like SW, I like animals, I like to do things a bit differently, and I don't find myself particularly drawn to a desk-heavy role or clinical environments. I researched FF by looking at the website, social media, and asking around and it appeared to fit with my values and my learning style. However, I did not know much about what A-AT *actually was* and how SW was done at FF.

Before the placement started, students were encouraged to do their own research into their area of SW practice and the placement organisation before commencing—which I did. However, I found myself under pressure to do this as I was still completing a final assessment for another subject. I found many articles on canine- and equine-assisted therapy; however, I found a lack of resources on other animal species within a therapeutic environment. I had little knowledge from my previous studies as there is no prescribed reading in this area of SW. I had little previous A-AT knowledge, therefore I could not be sure what was relevant and what was not. I found more resources about *why* A-AT can be beneficial, but it was difficult to find resources on *how* it should be done. I was interested in finding out more about the ethical considerations for the animals.

For future students who are considering this area of placement and have limited knowledge about A-AT, it may be helpful to have a list of suggested readings about A-AT and SW. I suggest students interested in doing a placement approach with:

- A genuine openness to the experience.
- Willingness to be vulnerable and acknowledge their expectations are often formed from assumptions. Try to go with the flow.
- Patience to support service users in their own time (just be with them, be present, connect with them where they are at).
- Willingness to get hands dirty and be physical—it's a working farm.
- Genuine care and compassion for all included in the therapeutic relationship (service users, animals, practitioners, and the environment).
- Creativity—in all its variations. Essentially a willingness to think outside

of the box, while also incorporating SW theories.

Field educator (KK) perspectives of pre-placement planning

FF has capacity for one or two students at a time and needs to consider the mix of TAFE or university students. In the pre-placement planning phase, we need to think about the seasonal influences on the farm and the activities that a student could undertake or a particular aspect of the farm that needs attention such as supporting groups, research, or searching for funding opportunities.

Over the years, we have developed a strong relationship with the university and discussed placements that have gone well and placements that did not go so well to understand what works in the farm environment. We interview all prospective students, and we are looking for a student who will be open to doing things differently. We ask students to come to the farm for the interview and tell them about the farm and the model of practice and ask about their learning goals and aims for the placement. We include the animals and go into the paddock and observe the interaction between students and animals, watching the reaction from the animals to see if this relationship is going to work.

During placement

Placement ideally begins with an orientation to the organisation, where the student becomes familiar with the people and animals, and processes of the organisation. This is also a time when the supervisory relationship between the student and supervisor is being developed and it is important to approach this aspect of the placement intentionally and by beginning with a discussion about understandings of supervision, expectations, and learning styles. It is also important the students make contact early in the placement with the liaison person to set up the liaison meetings. It is understood that the beginning of placement can be stressful and overwhelming for students (Gardner et al., 2019) and establishing good processes early in placement can mitigate this for students. After orientation, during the middle (perhaps the *doing* phase) of placements, students are exposed to a range of learning opportunities that aim to increase their SW knowledge and skills and their professional identity. As stated in the distinctive pedagogy statement (Egan et al., 2018, p. 41):

> SW education prepares students for entering professional practice through acquiring core knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across various practice settings and using a range of modalities … Students make sense of what it means to be a SW by developing their professional identity, integrity and practice framework.

Field educator (KK) perspective—during placement at FF

Placement starts with orientation to the farm and meeting the animals and understanding the daily routine at the farm. Students will shadow staff, meet clients, and observe therapeutic activities with permission from the clients. As students become more confident, they begin to work more independently and there is the aim that students will work independently and as part of the team, with clients and small groups, under supervision as required. Students will also work independently with the animals undertaking activities such as feeding, cleaning, and moving animals around the farm. Student activities include:

- Conducting assessments of the client's needs and goals, considering the potential benefits of A-AT.
- Developing and implementing A-AT plans tailored to each client's needs, incorporating interactions with animals into therapeutic interventions.

- Facilitating individual and group therapy sessions that integrate interactions with animals as a therapeutic modality.
- Collaborating with staff to ensure the wellbeing and safety of clients and animals during therapy sessions.
- Utilising the unique environment of the farm to create therapeutic activities and exercises that promote relaxation, emotional regulation, and social interaction.
- Engaging clients in animal care activities, such as grooming, feeding, and walking, to foster a sense of responsibility, empathy, and connection.
- Utilising observations of client–animal interactions to assess clients' emotional states, attachment patterns, and relational dynamics.
- Educating clients about the therapeutic benefits of A-AT and how to incorporate these experiences into their daily lives.
- Collaborating with other professionals, such as veterinarians or animal behaviour specialists, to address any animal-related concerns or challenges that arise during therapy sessions.
- Documenting client progress, session outcomes, and observations related to A-AT therapy interventions in client records.
- Participating in ongoing training and supervision related to A-AT techniques, ethics, and best practices in SW.

During placement, the field educator (KK) is looking for support from the placement team, including a liaison person who understands the practice context and is open to thinking outside the box.

FELO (HH) perspective—during placement at FF

As FELO, I am interested in the structure of placement and both implicit and explicit connections to SW theory and practice. I like to talk with the student early in the placement to understand their learning goals and what they hope to get out of the placement experience. It is important to build this connection with the student so that if there are problems they can be quickly identified and discussed. SW students at FF are likely to be solo students on placement and this can lead to some students feeling concerned about missing out on other learning opportunities that they hear about from their peers or feeling isolated. It is important to address these concerns and discuss opportunities for students to connect with other students on placement, either formally or informally.

SW practice at FF is different to the practice examples that are used in teaching and some students find a gap between their assumptions and expectations about field education and the reality of placement. This gap seems to happen for students at FF, perhaps because the practice context seems to be very different to the case study and role play activities that students experience throughout their university education. Once students begin to explore what they know about social theories and practices, the connections with the placement activities become clearer.

I have supported a couple of students on placement in this organisation and visited the farm to meet with students. I know what it looks like, and I understand the practice environment and the types of activities that students will be involved with. I have found that sometimes students are not able to easily identify SW practice in the placement context, and it can take a bit of work to see SW theories and practices that are used in the FF context. Over the years, I have met KK a few times and had lots of conversations about SW theories and practice and I understand her practice approach, so there is a beginning relationship in place, we are able to quickly catch up and do not need to cover old ground.

It is important that the FELO has visited the farm, met the SW and understood the practice context, and what happens at the farm. The FELO needs to understand

the day-to-day farm operations and the context and philosophical underpinning of the practice model. In addition, the FELO needs to understand the activities that are expected of the student, which might include farm-related activities and SW activities. This is important because the FELO can help students to think about SW-related learning activities that connect between placement activities (such as feeding animals) and the university's placement learning activities (research theories about A-AT). We know that when students develop a learning plan with integrated learning activities it is more engaging, and leads to meaningful learning, and less work (Hickson et al., 2015).

Student (HS) perspective—during placement at FF

Placement started with observing, getting to know the clients and animals and shadowing the team. When preparing for placement, I did not know much about A-AT and although I read widely, I was not sure what was relevant to the farm practice. I found resources about the benefits of A-AT but still was not sure about how to do A-AT. I found that all the "how" knowledge came while I was on placement. I had many relevant reading materials and an experienced field educator. I was able to shadow and see the doing and then able to connect theory to practice. I was still learning the "how" all the way through placement, right up until the end; each day brought different experiences and opportunities to do A-ASW.

Students need to consider that while this is a SW placement, it is SW *on a farm*. There may be assumptions about what SW is in this setting. For example, does helping a farrier perform hoof trims seem like SW? To some people, it probably does not, but in this placement context, animals are included in the therapeutic process. Building relationships, connection and importantly, trust, with service users cannot happen if there is no trust between the practitioner and the animal. It is similar to building relationships with people, where trust does not often happen overnight. A-ASW requires knowledge about animal behaviour and wellbeing but also respect for the animal and mutual trust—this keeps everyone safe and is an essential component for facilitation of A-ASW. In a sense, you are a SW for the animals, as well as the service users.

It is important to consider the context of the placement. At FF, individual therapeutic sessions and group programmes are offered, and this may be different to other placement contexts. This requires some adaptability in building one-to-one relationships with service users and facilitating group sessions. In addition, the placement context is SW in private practice. Some days there will not be direct work with a client, perhaps due to a cancellation or where a client does not consent to a student in their therapeutic session. This time needs to be productive, and students will need to be organised and self-directed. Activities could include working on the placement learning plan, supervision, researching A-ASW, or building relationships with the animals.

During placement, I sometimes felt isolated from my cohort. I often perceived some mutual inability to relate with my peers as their experience in larger organisations was quite different from my own. I found placement assessment record (PAR) tasks difficult to discuss with peers as they were often able to tick off things quite easily, whilst mine required extra creative thought. It was helpful to discuss PAR activities with my field educator as they were able to guide me in the right direction.

Placement can be uncertain and stressful and one of my main concerns during placement was completing PAR tasks and perhaps this was related to my personality and neurodivergence. I was fortunate to have access to a desk in a private office and the time to complete tasks was generous, which was incredibly helpful. At FF, students were expected to self-direct their learning and

ensure appropriate balancing of time, and I understand from my peers that this was common to all placements.

It was helpful to work with an experienced field educator, who made time for debriefing which was essential to my learning. Much of my learning and consolidation of theory and practice came from the informal chats we had while on a break, between clients, and even while out repairing fences and feeding the animals.

Ending phase/post-placement

Like the beginning of placement, the ending phase of placement can evoke a range of emotions (Gardner et al., 2019) for students, supervisors, and liaison staff. It is helpful to have a plan about the ending of placement early in the placement (Cleak & Wilson, 2022) so that this part of the placement is a considered experience rather than a rush to the end. This is a time for students to finish working with clients or complete the project (if a project-based placement), to say farewell to staff, and to reflect on their learning and next steps. Similarly, this is a time for supervisors and agencies to prepare clients and staff for the ending of the student placement and to review with the student and others the experience of the placement to inform future student placements in the agency. It is helpful for the FELO to seek reflections from the student and supervisor about the placement experience, and to consider any improvements in placement planning and student preparedness in the future. It is important to note that, whilst conversations about the student experience are important, a power imbalance exists between student and the supervisor, agency, and university and hence the student may not feel able to provide honest feedback (Cleak & Wilson, 2022; Gardner et al., 2019)

Student (HS) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

There were mixed emotions at the end of placement at FF. The placement experience opened a new SW practice pathway that I did not know was available and it reinforced my passion to advocate for animals in SW including ethical rights of animals and our responsibility to care for animals, nature, others, and self. I reflected on social norms: hierarchy humans over animals and the natural environment; the taken-for-granted assumptions that clinical room-based therapy is the gold standard. I was able to incorporate my SW education about Indigenous knowledge, green SW, anti-oppressive practice and a feminist perspective. I reflected on what seemed to be a lack of knowledge about animals in SW and what could be done to raise awareness both in the curriculum and in practice. I note that the AASW *Code of Ethics* contains only one sentence on responsibilities to animals and I would like to see this expanded. It would be useful to have a debriefing and reflection activity with other students after placement has ended, along with support to work out how to apply learning from placement to other areas of SW.

FELO (HH) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

Towards the end of the placement, the FELO role becomes very task-focussed, ensuring that all milestones have been met, placement reports are in order, and placement hours have been correctly recorded. I like to talk with students about highlights from their placement learning and what they will take with them to their next placement or practice. I am aware of the power imbalance where some students might not feel comfortable to talk freely about their placement experience while there are still assessment structures in place.

In a best practice context, it is useful to review the placement, and identify what happened, what we learned to support students, the agency, the university and what we need to remember for placements in the future, both for this student and in this placement context. We need to think about how we gather this information from students and neutralise the institutional

power that is inherent in the relationship between the student and university.

Field educator (KK) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

The closing phase of a student placement at FF is a time to ensure that the student has met their objectives, completed their tasks and had time for goodbyes with both clients, animals, and staff. One of the central tasks is ensuring that the student has satisfactorily completed their PAR tasks. These tasks are not merely checkboxes to tick off but represent a culmination of their learning and application of SW principles in a real-world setting. It is essential to guide them through this process, ensuring they have grasped the significance of their work and how it contributes to the broader goals of our organisation.

As client sessions conclude, I take the opportunity to offer feedback to the student. This is not just about highlighting areas for improvement but also recognising their strengths and the progress they have made throughout their placement. Constructive feedback is crucial for growth, along with acknowledgment of their achievements and skills developed. It is not uncommon for students to develop deep connections with the animals on the farm. These animals often serve as sources of comfort, companionship, and even therapeutic support. Therefore, it is important to create time for the student to farewell these creatures who have become an integral part of their placement experience. These goodbyes are poignant reminders of the human–animal bond.

Beyond the formalities of task completion and feedback, I believe in providing space for reflection. After the formal feedback session, I offer the student an opportunity to reflect on their overall placement experience. This reflection is not just about looking back but also about looking forward, identifying areas where we, as an organisation, can improve in our delivery of student placements and how we can enhance the learning experience for future students.

Through these reflective conversations, we gain valuable insight into what worked well during the placement and what aspects could be refined or expanded upon. It is a collaborative process aimed at continuous improvement, both for the students, FF and the university.

University (NL) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

As placements draw to an end, I encourage students to think about *finishing placement well*. I remember reading the chapter "Finishing Well" in Cleak and Wilson's book *Making the Most of Placement Field Placement* many years ago in one of the earlier editions of the book (see most recent edition, Cleak & Wilson, 2022). The importance of developing this ability to finish well really resonated with me, in relation to the messages about finishing placement well with colleagues, with clients and for A-ASW, animals. Towards the end of placement, students come together at university, and we talk about this idea, and they brainstorm what this means for them.

Currently students are invited to provide me with informal feedback about their experiences; however, a best practice approach would include more formal ways for students to provide an evaluation of their placement experience.

Conclusion

SW field education is expanding into new and interesting domains. For successful SW placements, it is important for the placement team to be engaged and understand the expectations of the student and the organisation. The FELO needs to understand the SW practice context and day-to-day activities that are expected of the student, which might include farm-related activities and SW activities. Students

might need support to engage with other students during placement and to translate learning from this placement to other fields of practice. There are opportunities for SW educators to better integrate animals in SW theory and practice and for researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of animal-assisted interventions and explore the multi-disciplinary context of working with animals.

Limitations

In this paper we focussed on the elements of a successful student placement, and it is important to recognise that not all placements in this practice context will go well. This may be for a range of reasons including the student not feeling confident or comfortable in the animal environment or a mismatch in personalities. We emphasise the importance of pre-placement interviews on site to explore first impressions, expectations, and assumptions about the placement.

Recommendations for SW placement team

Successful animal-assisted SW placements require engagement of the placement team, including the student, FELO, university staff and the field educator.

Our recommendations for successful animal-assisted SW placements:

- Evaluation of the quality and suitability of the placement and clarification about what the student will actually do on a day-to-day basis.
- Engagement of the placement team and commitment to supporting placement context.
- Animal-assisted SW is embedded into the curriculum, e.g., include animals in case studies, role plays, genograms, suggested readings, animal ethics, guest speakers.
- External peer supervision or support for students in solo practice placements.

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Received: 2 April 2024

Accepted: 17 January 2025

Published: 7 March 2025

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