

Fieldwork placement reflection from a regional Pacific university during Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected many people around the globe, creating havoc and stress unlike anything ever seen before. For social work educators engaging Pacific-based audiences, the pandemic brought many challenges—the restrictions imposed in Fiji meant that social work teaching and fieldwork placement coordination was conducted virtually, until the situation improved. The Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a re-think of the status quo regarding fieldwork coordination and unveiled new considerations for the role. Experiences from fieldwork education provided a unique chance to reflect, highlight the lessons learned during a global pandemic, and consider opportunities for the future.

This reflection is written from my own experience as a relatively newly appointed academic with a regional university in the Pacific¹, providing tertiary education to 12 nations in Oceania. Field education has been a part of the social work curriculum at this regional university for over seven years now. Students are required to complete two fieldwork placements during their three-year study towards a Bachelor of Arts (Social Work) Degree. Fieldwork placement provides an opportunity for students to have a practical, hands-on experience within an organisational setting.

This paper will, firstly, discuss challenges and lessons learned in a changing employment context amid a global pandemic. Secondly, the paper highlights the challenges encountered while coordinating fieldwork placement for Pacific Island based students across Oceania. Finally, recommendations will be provided about ways to strengthen the co-ordination of fieldwork placements.

Locating ourselves

I am an i-Taukei² who has lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for over 40 years, and I have worked with children, youth, families, and in community development for over 20 years. I am an academic and practitioner with experience specifically focusing on bi-culturalism³. This stems from years of experience working with Māori⁴, Fijian⁵, and Pasifika⁶ populations and in multi-cultural settings. I previously worked as a lecturer and fieldwork placement coordinator in Aotearoa New Zealand. In April 2020, I took up a new position with a regional university in the Pacific when Covid-19 was beginning its global spread. At the time of my appointment, international travel bans were imposed, and so I worked remotely from Aotearoa New Zealand in the first four months of my new employment. I had to quickly adjust to conducting staff meetings, student supervision, and course-related work from a distance via online platforms. Working from a distance, in isolation, and trying to navigate new systems and processes became my new norm. As

AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL
WORK 35(2), 47–52.

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someone who had lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for many years, I was unknown to the network of Pacific students and stakeholders in the Pacific. It has been said that success comes when a person is already known by its population (Kanuha, 2000) and has a shared identity, language, and experience with participants (Assesslin, 2003). It was, therefore, important for me to establish trust and credibility quickly with the field education stakeholders, a challenging task given the newness of the role, and the fact that Pacific field education in the Pacific covers a large and diverse geographical area.

Challenges faced in a changing employment context amid a global pandemic

Changing employment and opting for an international posting amidst a global pandemic created uncertainty for me. This action may seem absurd to some, especially during a time of uncertainty and significant challenges. Many people during the pandemic were worried about their future (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020), with the rise in unemployment, and the disappearance of some job sectors (Hite & McDonald, 2020). As employers faced significant challenges (Akkermans et al., 2020) I questioned whether it had been risky to accept a new employment opportunity during a global pandemic.

According to Hite and McDonald (2020), because of the global pandemic, some sectors are expected to experience growth and there was the possibility that new industries would emerge. I believed that social work was going to be a growth sector and that social workers would be in high demand due to an increase in social problems as a direct result of the pandemic. Buoyed by this possibility, I was more determined more than ever to return home to Fiji and give back to the students, stakeholders and the Pacific region by sharing my knowledge and experience in a field that I was passionate about.

Next, I explore the challenges of coordinating placements during a global pandemic.

Fieldwork placement challenges

This section will discuss challenges encountered from fieldwork placement coordination across Oceania and the lessons I learned from being engaged in this process.

1. A complex undertaking

Coordinating fieldwork placements in Oceania is an enormous undertaking. There is a large geographical area to cover, and 12 Pacific countries to engage with. Additionally, for most students engaged in the programme, English is a second language. The students enrolled came with challenging experiences and on occasion, from difficult circumstances, that could act as barriers to succeeding in social work study.

Securing placements was initially slow and demanding and there was little success due to the reality that I was unknown to the network. I found myself in a less than ideal situation of not having enough placements for the numbers of students I had to place. Quintanilla (2020) has reported that, since the pandemic began, internship opportunities for university students in the USA have decreased by 75%. Time was not a luxury I had, as students needed placements confirmed so they could commence. I, therefore, needed to find alternative ways to gain access to the networks so that I could secure placements. One of the challenges I encountered was not having an updated agency directory, including details about the agency contact person and the agency's core field of practice. Additionally, some organisations were not willing, or able, to take students for placement due to Covid-19.

Another challenge I experienced was related to working with different time zones across the Pacific. On one occasion I had scheduled a Zoom meeting with a student and on the day and time of the meeting, I logged

in and waited for the student for about 30 minutes and when the student failed to turn up, I logged off, thinking that the student must have forgotten about the meeting. The student emailed me an hour later to advise that they logged on, but no one was present. In this instance, the student was not the problem, I had not factored in the time difference for both countries.

2. *New initiatives*

While working with a large geographical area like Oceania, I engaged with a diverse group of people. While it helped to be a Pacific person, as Pacific people share some common values and beliefs, what was critically important was understanding the geographical area that was covered, being aware of basic greetings, common phrases, and cultural protocols. These are essential competencies to have when working with Pacific students and placement networks—having Pacific cultural knowledge helped to open doors and not be met with skepticism.

The pandemic impacted field placement work in that different methods of engagement with industry stakeholders were employed; the face-to-face meeting was replaced by virtual and other meeting modes, such as emails, phone calls and Zoom meetings. I had to adjust quickly to this alternative mode of operation which might seem to be impersonal compared with face-to-face meetings, but which became part of a new way of conducting the work. To support this new way of working with stakeholders, a list of social work qualified social workers who would become field educators was created to capture an accurate record of those that could support students.

I developed an organisational database created from previous data and from staff knowledge. The database enabled me to network and familiarise myself with the stakeholder landscape. Organisations in Oceania were still willing to take students on placement, and with limited time available to

secure placements, the database helped me to be more strategic and purposeful in targeting agencies to achieve a higher rate of return in securing placements. I came to appreciate the use of networks in the diaspora and to acknowledge that, although I was not known to the networks, I was connected by the ocean to the wider Oceanic peoples (Hau'ofa, 1994). Utilising an intermediary from within the Pacific diaspora helped me to establish connections; the intermediary's introduction opened doors that, in the end, secured placements. To develop further connections I included previous contacts, conducted an internet search and used a snowball method to gain contacts. Having face-to-face talanoa⁷ with people within organisations in order to get clarity on who they were and what they did was very helpful. Being provided with the opportunity to share Pacific values of respect, humility and reciprocity in our interactions was greatly appreciated. The agency database is now a sustainable placement database that can be utilised for future social work practice placements. The process of engaging fieldwork stakeholders was a valuable experience in expanding my knowledge of the networks and establishing new relationships.

Because of the limited number of organisation-based placements (OBP) available, I developed other placement types, the Research-Based Placement (RBP) and the Virtual Based Placement (VBP). These new placement types required high levels of collaboration between the university, placement organisations and communities. For the RBP option, students undertook 12-week online work focused on research projects about their experiences of fieldwork placement during the Covid-19 pandemic. The VBP was 12 weeks of online-based learning which provided students with weekly learning packages that included simulated case management scenarios. The online learning arrangements followed on from an online 'preparing for placement' workshop I had organised to support student understanding of placement expectations.

To be successful, online placement learning modes needed to be easy for students to navigate and to understand. For the VBP, I needed to develop a partnership with the technical experts to create online forms and simulated learning for students to complete and save on the system; the aim was to ensure that there was no double-handling, valuable information was not lost, and to make certain that the process was less time-consuming. Offline support and guidance to students in a timely manner was critical to their learning progression.

3. *Diverse learning needs*

A challenge that I experienced was in managing the diverse learning needs of students, for example, students with visual impairments, and students for whom English was a second language. At times, students needed extra support to clarify placement options and assessments as they struggled to understand course instructions, which led to delays in meeting placement deadlines. For example, some students struggled with how to submit an assignment or how to upload a large file, and some did not understand the assessment requirements. Corresponding individually with students was time-consuming.

Additionally, many students were juggling family, cultural and religious obligations on top of their academic requirements, were managing cross-discipline demands, and were living in remote locations and working in isolation. While it was expected that students engage in distance learning, some did not have personal devices to complete academic work and some students also had poor (to no) internet connection. During the Covid-19 pandemic, distance learning has increased around the world (Lassoued et al., 2020); students' learning needs must be understood, and technical issues overcome, for students to meet the workload required of fieldwork placement and to succeed. To support students in their learning endeavours I

developed a 'Frequently Asked Questions' resource along with audio and video instructions that provided clear information about assessments. I also included aspects of Pacific languages throughout the lessons to support student engagement with content. Students who have limited internet access or faced financial constraints, should have access to course material offline. To assist students with these issues, our programme partnered with the various regional campuses to make this support available and accessible to students who required it. This was a small, but effective, way students could be supported to succeed and it was also an approach that promoted educational equity (Lim et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2018).

Being well-prepared and ready to successfully engage in learning utilising an online platform requires attention and focus. Along with the challenges noted earlier, being novices in the world of online learning also makes the learning journey extra challenging for most students. As progress is made internationally on information communication and technology within higher education (Reddy et al., 2016), there is a great need to increase Pacific students' digital literacy (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018). There is clear evidence that vulnerabilities are increasing and inequalities are deepening, and it remains for many a distant dream to be able to access and use technology (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2020). There is a big push in the Pacific region for 'prosperity' and the promotion of productive lives for all Pacific people (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018). Pacific students face a mammoth task in achieving their aspirations. Coleman (2020) stressed the importance of creating and designing ways where students can support each other—or be better supported by tutors—while doing distance learning. One way of supporting students, which was part of my pastoral support strategy, was to allow handwritten assignments to be submitted, especially for those who did not

have access to a computer or a device to type their assignments.

To be culturally appropriate, one aspect that could be explored is for assessment instructions and written assignments and/or presentations to be in the first language of the students. Additionally, assessments could be in the form of dance, song, cultural frameworks, and poems. Thaman (1990) stated that the language of instruction is closely linked to the students' ability to learn and conceptualise. I offered two students the opportunity to present their assessments in their first language; the students did exceptionally well, proving that this approach can work in a predominantly western-dominated academic environment. The approach encourages confidence in the students because they are comfortable with the familiarity of their own language. As an academic, I aim to continue to build an inclusive and constructive teaching style, one that promotes culturally sensitive practice that is meaningful to the context of Pacific students and works side-by-side with the learner (Yang et al., 2016).

I aimed to be constructive and transformative in my teaching approach. To this end, I responded to students in a positive, encouraging and supportive manner. I was very aware that, for many students, succeeding in education could be the difference between remaining in, or breaking, a life of poverty. A transformative approach is therefore required, one that contributes to making a difference in students' lives. Adopting a flexible and accommodating approach, exercising patience and leniency, and promoting a culture that supported students to thrive and succeed were principles that guided my work.

Conclusion

Placement co-ordination in Oceania is a unique task that covers a large geographical area, with students who have diverse learning

needs; the work requires a value-based approach that is culturally sensitive, and which provides proactive functional support. Reflecting on the challenges and lessons learned from coordinating fieldwork placements in Oceania during a pandemic has been a valuable experience. It has been a worthwhile opportunity to take stock of how fieldwork education is delivered and highlight the learning that will hopefully benefit future academics, students and social workers who will engage with Pacific social work education in Oceania.

Notes

¹ Relating to the island groups within the Pacific Ocean.

² Indigenous Fijian from the island of Fiji.

³ Consists of both the indigenous people (Māori) and Pākehā (European or white person) of New Zealand.

⁴ Indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

⁵ Citizens or residents of the country of Fiji.

⁶ People from the various island nations in the Pacific Region.

⁷ To tell a story, have a conversation, chat, sharing of ideas.

Submitted: 9 February 2021

Accepted: 22 September 2022

Published: 19 June 2023

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