
2020

Counselling Placements Caught up in the Mismatch of Standards And Realities: Lessons From COVID-19

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Recommended Citation

Pelden, S., & Banham, V. (2020). Counselling Placements Caught up in the Mismatch of Standards And Realities: Lessons From COVID-19. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(4).
<https://doi.org/10.53761/1.17.4.12>

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Abstract

As the fear of mortality struck humanity, a new age dawned in the relational styles, processes, and interactions amongst people. COVID-19 has caused a major shift in the educational landscape. While most teaching and learning activities moved online, field placement units which are fully invested in industry engagement, and once highly sought, came to a dramatic pause. For students, this produced uncertainty around completion of their degrees and for institutions who became entangled in the changing requirements of accrediting bodies as they grappled with the changing landscape. Our final year counselling and psychotherapy students on placement were instructed to retreat from their placements while some 'lucky few' joined the drifting warriors working from the safety of their homes with their assigned agencies. Crisis and contemporary times call for openness and innovation grounded in practical wisdom. But the tyranny of COVID-19 times highlighted a growing gap between professional standards and community realities. This paper alludes to the struggles of counselling postgraduate University students on placement who are caught up in the mismatch between professional standards of accreditation bodies and the emerging community expectations and practices. It draws on literature to highlight the impact of historic controversial discourses involving online counselling and face-to-face counselling on current practices. This paper aims to reflect on lessons dispensed by COVID-19 to the professional bodies and universities in order to work together in creating innovative, non-placement work-integrated learning (WIL) practices that reflect the realities within the current landscape.

Keywords

Non-placement work-integrated learning, counselling, COVID-19, online-counselling, professional standards



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Introduction

In the face of historic restrictions to combat COVID-19 spread, Universities and educational institutes around the globe transitioned to online classes or came to a pause. In Australia, most university classes moved to virtual platforms adhering to social distancing restrictions (Johnston 2020). However, practicums and placement units (classes) suffered the brunt of these restrictions. Most counselling and social science placements were put on hold while nursing students in parts of Australia were enlisted as frontline workers (Lievre 2020).

Amidst growing uncertainties, final year postgraduate counselling students on placement were instructed to retreat without a clear picture of what the future of their course completion might look like. Potentially, an added crisis for the anxious students as they stood penniless after they lost their income (Grant-Smith et al. 2017). Equally lost, universities directed students to camp safe while grappling with creative ways to support their students. Within this process of innovation and thinking outside of the box, universities needed to navigate the seemingly stringent professional standards governed by accreditation bodies.

This paper alludes to the struggles of students on placement during the COVID-19 restrictions with an intent to highlight the mismatch between field/community realities and counselling professional standards. The concern is of missed opportunities and speaks to the professional standards that must make room for creativity as they guide the central processes between universities, communities, and students.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) placements for counselling

WIL has gained strength and popularity across disciplines and educational institutes as the recognition for students to be 'work ready' upon graduation grows momentum. Indeed, Banham (2019/2020) has suggested academic courses need to re-examine how and what they teach to ensure the students are work-ready. Additionally, Chick et al (2012) noted that professions change and morph over time as the field changes and practitioners within the profession amend and reflect on their values and community realities. While universities have adopted varied WIL strategies in line with current thinking, direct engagement with the industries has shown benefits to all stakeholders (Orrell 2018). For postgraduate counselling courses in Australia, clinical practicums or field placements have traditionally remained as a mandatory WIL practice.

Field placements are popular for various reasons: it is the most realistic approach in translating theory to practice as they directly engage with a workplace team, clients and practices of the assigned agency/industry partner; students on placement bring new knowledge and resources to the industry; placement directly links students to potential employers and improves students employability. This, in turn, helps the recruitment process for agencies in various disciplines (Orrell 2018; Zegwaard & Rowe 2019). Consequently, field placements are increasingly competitive across students and universities. Students are expected to be equipped with skills, knowledge, and experiences relevant to industries or agencies that offer placements or else they are not selected at the placement interviews. This requires students to be prepared beyond their university subjects and to progress through a series of screening processes to be deemed ready for placement (Cook 2015; Smith et al. 2010). To secure a placement is a milestone for a student, the victory of which momentarily renders invisible the looming field practicalities they must traverse hereon.

Students had secured and commenced placements at their designated agencies when the COVID-19 restrictions were announced in Western Australia. They were at the zenith of an exciting journey before they were catapulted back into the unknown gulf.

The frenzy caused by COVID-19

A new educational and economic landscape emerged where all face-to-face or in-person activities were to cease and where applicable virtual platforms in every possible manner were encouraged. COVID-19 not only tested our strength, ingenuity, and spontaneity, it reformulated the communication and relational processes ever known to humankind. In a state of frenzy, everyone was retreating to home from work. Most agency supervisors were treading carefully to break the news of needing to reschedule or cancel counselling placements to their students/supervisees as they were not authorised to work remotely. This was rendered with care and sensitivity by the agency supervisors knowing this would be one of the difficult conversations between a supervisor and a supervisee. A handful of students were retained by their agencies with arrangements including supervision to work remotely. Both groups, those who were asked to pause/reschedule and those working remotely with the agencies have distinct challenges now. The paragraph below will address the struggles of those who had to reschedule and withdraw, and the concerns faced by the other cohort will be discussed thenceforth.

Students looked to their universities for some consolation and alternate plans. They wanted assurance that they would graduate on time or as planned before the onset of the COVID-19 drama. Universities, while doing their best to morally support their students, could only offer loose responses in terms of alternate plans for counselling placements. Universities, whilst on one hand were supporting their students developing innovative strategies for placement opportunities were, on the other hand needing to carefully navigate the requirements of their accreditation bodies (PAFCA, 2020b). For both students and universities navigating these waters, the endless wait and uncertainty began!

Some students had lost paid employment and along with an inability to access a placement presented a sense of 'worthlessness' especially when they realised that they were not in the frontline with their peers, nor asked by the Government to enlist like the nursing students. Some students decided to withdraw from the course to save money while some demonstrated patience to wait until the second semester or re-enrol in 2021. We advised our students to withstand the test of time, to remain adaptable and open to uncertainties and changes. But the question of how we model and uphold these teachings as the keepers and developers of standards remains. It seems that although the government had recognised mental health professionals as essential workers (AHPRA 2020; PACFA 2020a) the flexible accreditation arrangements announced for the counselling students was limited. The pandemic gave rise to a new world and online communication became the new normal. However, the age-old controversy over the use of online counselling, particularly telephone counselling, was raised by some critics who rank face-to-face counselling as the superior practice (Oldenburg 1991).

A mismatch between professional standards and field reality

Communication technology has provided a range of possibilities for practitioners, clients and educational providers since the 1940s (Rogers 1942). Online counselling has been increasing and accepted widely elsewhere and in Australia (Dowling & Rickwood 2013; Gedge 2002; Glasheen

& Campbell 2009; Glasheen et al. 2013; Nagarajan & Yuvaraj 2019; Rickwood et al. 2016). Mallen et.al (2005) predict further growth in online counselling in varied forms.

It was natural for most services including counselling to move online with flexible arrangements (ACWA 2020; Liu et al. 2020; PACFA 2020a; Wang et al. 2020). However, such a transition widened the waging ‘flame wars’ (Dery et al. 1994), triggering a ripple of concerns amongst the traditionalists who have held reservations for the online counselling modalities (APsaA 2020; Oldenburg 1991; Reynolds & Morris 2002). Perhaps PACFA’s (Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia) instructions echoed similar sentiments of fear in lowering professional standards to replace face-to-face (in person) counselling requirements. PACFA’s instructions which were provided in March and later revised in April held stringent requirements around ‘face-to-face client hours’ (PACFA 2020b) and did not honor telephone counselling hours at par with the face-to-face (in-person and video conferencing) practice hours. This direction left universities and counselling students currently on placement at a deficit to their counterpart.

Students on placements were working remotely under the guidance of agencies and were involved in providing telephone counselling/tele-counselling. Telephone counselling organically replaced face-to-face meetings, as it was the fastest and the most accessible communication platform. This practice unfolded before PACFA announced their flexible arrangements. Students also reported their clients’ preference for telephone counselling to video conferencing because of the flexibility and accessibility of the platform. Some clients did not have other virtual platforms set up nor opted for video conferencing sessions. This is likely, as the telephone is one of the oldest forms of distance-communication technology and its preference over other distance-communication technology is validated by several studies (Mallen et al. 2005; Reese et al. 2006). The aforementioned research validated that the factors involved in the preference for telephone counselling were its accessibility, control of time and pace and client’s ability to maintain visual confidentiality to a degree (Higgins 2016; Lester 1974; Reese et al. 2006). Telephone/mobile phone access also bridges the digital divide among service seekers/clients, and they are not disfranchised by the lack of resources required for video conferencing. To add to the value of telephone counselling, research has evidenced the effectiveness of telephone counselling in varied settings (Bakshi & Goss 2019; Dowling & Rickwood 2013; Drda-Kühn et al. 2019; Higgins 2016; Reese et al. 2002). Telephone and mobile counselling are generally found to appeal to clients from younger demographics, with multicultural backgrounds and those under poor social-economic conditions (Drda-Kühn et al. 2019; Lester 2002; Mallen et al. 2005).

Despite the proven value of telephone counselling, it seems the professional standards in Australia are grappling to credit this practice. Understandably, professional bodies uphold duties to protect the field and its service seekers from quasi practices, and to responsibly reflect, question, learn, debate and facilitate a process of change and to evolve (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan 2015). Such practices must occur to keep pace with the changing times and community needs. In the current case of students’ placements in the face of COVID-19 pandemic, the professional guides have slowed down creating a mismatch between the emerging field and community practices and professional standards. Equally, universities whilst navigating alternatives, were stranded, seeing the futility of attempting anything outside of the unbending professional standards. Such a mismatch presents dilemmas for all parties and discredits the ongoing work of students who are currently on placement providing telephone counselling services.

The way forward, lessons and reflections

In an ideal world, the task of mental health professionals is to create diverse and creative service models to support and stand by communities in the face of crisis. Our postgraduate counselling students at Edith Cowan University on placement in their final year of the course, are equipped with skills and experiences and are ready to cater constructively to the wider community. They undergo rigorous pre-WIL preparation in a clinic setting on campus under professional supervision provided by their lecturers, followed by clinical group supervision provided for a year on campus. Despite their grueling preparation, during the COVID-19 emergency students were caught up in a dialogue being played out between cautious and stringent professional standards, innovation during difficult times and community realities.

As the fear of mortality struck humanity, a new age dawned demanding change and creativity to survive and for disciplines to reconstruct their professional identities. Postgraduate counselling students on placement, universities, industry and community partners, and accreditation bodies, have much to contemplate on the lessons presented by the COVID-19 phenomena. The current responses regarding counselling field placements from the accreditation bodies have impacted universities, students, industry, and communities as they struggle to navigate these turbulent waters. The question of preparedness and ingenuity for future crisis must be debated. The current pandemic and crisis has shown a glimpse of the next generation of practitioners and a suite of service models that must be considered. There presents an opportunity to consider applied practices contained within courses to be acknowledged as relevant learning opportunities in the building of a student's preparedness for practice. Such practices could include embedding in courses group supervision sessions within units; practice-led group sessions in environments that simulate the workplace under the guidance of qualified counsellor/academic; and online one-on-one and small group sessions. Students need to have access to environments to practise their skills under supervision, but such opportunities could be recognised as also occurring elsewhere when embedded in the course curriculum. As dystopian as it may appear to the hesitant campers we have arrived in the future, living as part-time dwellers or rather 'soaking' in the cyberculture. It would not be prudent to remain divided. All parties must consider their part. To begin, accreditation bodies could engage with alternative modes of service delivery that are simple and accessible, with expansive outreach to communities and not seen as a threat to face-to-face practice (Bakshi & Goss 2019; Mallen et al. 2005).

All these issues lead to another argument which is the space of creativity and ingenuity that remains underexplored in advancing non-placement WIL in counselling courses. A similar discourse of preference for traditional face-to-face counselling over online counselling features in counselling courses, where more value is placed on practices in a physical setting compared to non-placement WIL alternatives (Hay 2020). While non-placement WIL innovations have taken off in many parts of the western world and across disciplines and have shown positive outcomes (Hipolito-Delgado et al. 2011; Reyneke & Botha 2020; Zegwaard & Rowe 2019; Zeleke et al. 2018), there is a dearth of literature which shows how non-placement WIL practices have evolved in counselling programs in Australia.

As stated in the previous discussions, there is a call for the counselling field to rethink how universities prepare students to be work and world ready (Banham 2019/2020). The world of work is rapidly changing and COVID-19 has provided a test run. Universities could adopt non-placement WIL practices to offer flexible and responsive options to their students in becoming work-ready by meeting the course requirements and accreditation standards. Non-placement WIL practices while

minimising dependence of universities on its industry partners, help students learn and achieve without the imprudent conflicts and complexities experienced in placement settings (Grant-Smith et al. 2017). Furthermore, embedding non-placement WIL addresses equity issues such as the preference of domestic students over language issues and suitability criteria required by the industry partners which emerge when students are selected for placement by agencies (Jackson 2016). Research has evidenced the growing difficulties faced by international students on WIL placements (DET 2015; Forbes-Mewett 2019; Gribble 2014) and posited the benefits of non-placement WIL engagements for this group of students (Jackson 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has presented accounts of counselling WIL placements in the face of COVID-19. It has staged the struggles of students and universities caught between professional standards, realities of practice and the opportunities that have gone amiss. Counselling accreditation bodies in Australia, universities and industry partners should champion appropriate and responsive mental health service delivery models to benefit communities and care for its students. For surely as Bruner claimed, “how we educate the young is an expression of a culture’s goals in the large, its broader aspirations for the future, its sense of the limits of human possibility” (2006, p. 2). Likewise, this paper highlights the growing need to reexamine the historical treatment of WIL practices particularly in Australia (Zegwaard & Rowe 2019). Contemporary and alternate WIL practices that can achieve course outcomes and effectively contribute to student employability are possible.

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