

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

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Changing student demographics

- Students from overseas currently account for around a quarter of all Australian university enrolments (Australian Government, 2015; Harrison & Ip, 2013)
- In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of international students in Australia studying professional degrees such as social work (Harrison & Felton, 2013)
- Social work is classified by the Australian Government Department of Immigration and Border Protection as a skilled occupation with a high-demand field of employment (Australian Government, 2017)

International student experiences

- Overall, most international students are satisfied with their living and studying experiences in Australia (Lawson, 2012) and report good levels of physical and mental health (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2008)
- International students face a range of challenges adapting to their new living and study environments
- International students are often dissatisfied with their field placement experiences and opportunities in Australia (Blackmore et al., 2014; Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012)

Language, communication and cultural challenges

- Challenges include language, communication and cultural difficulties, such as:
 - understanding local colloquialisms, accents, idioms, abbreviations and discipline-specific language (Deegan & Simki, 2010; Goldingay, 2012; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Marginson, 2012; Nash, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009; Taylor, Craft, Murray, & Rowley, 2000)
 - cultural adjustment and barriers (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Taylor et al., 2000)
 - understanding social conventions (e.g. how to address supervisors, conduct small talk, and choose appropriate topics of conversation) (Harrison & Ip, 2013)

Other challenges

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

Student supervision requirements

- All students must successfully complete two 500-hour (14-week) full-time placements in a social work field of practice
- At least one of the two placements must include direct practice with clients
- Students must have supervision (min. 3 hours/fortnight) by a qualified social worker educator who:
 - has a minimum of two years' post-qualifying practice experience
 - is eligible for Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) membership

Placements for international students

- A shortage of quality and appropriate field placements for international students in Australia (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012; Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008; Wheelahan et al., 2012)
- Many international students feel that they do not have as equal access to placements as domestic students, causing frustration and dissatisfaction with their educational experience (Patrick et al., 2008)
- Students are expected to adapt to the workplace, implying a principle of assimilation rather than inclusion (Harrison & Ip, 2013; Orrell, 2011)
- Support for international students in social science placements is generally provided as issues arise, rather than being preparatory (Felton & Harrison, 2017; Taylor et al., 2000; Zunz & Oil, 2009)

International students' supervision needs

- Quality of the supervisory relationship impacts heavily on the success of the placement (Newton, Pront & Giles 2016)
- Students of an Asian background view supervisors as unquestionable sources of knowledge and power rather than a mentor (Newton, Pront & Giles 2016; McCluskey 2012)
- International students face overt and covert racism on placement (Spooner-Lane, Tangen & Campbell 2009)
- International students often positioned 'without rights' (Wall, Tran & Soejatminah 2016)
- Students internalise and self-legitimise their positioning as time-consuming, resource poor and problematic learners (Wall, Tran & Soejatminah 2016)

Skills of social work supervisors

- **Minimum qualification and experience criteria ≠ adequate supervision**
(Gursansky & Le Sueur 2012)
- **A good social worker ≠ adequate interaction and teaching of students**
(Spencer & McDonald 1998)
- **No guidelines on ways to develop skills for supervising international students** (Felton & Harrison 2017; Tran 2012)
- **Social work supervisors may have little or no training in:**
 - **transcultural pedagogies** (Ryan 2011)
 - **assessing English language abilities** (San Miguel & Rogan 2012)
 - **supporting communication skills development** (Attrill, Lincoln & McAllister 2016)
 - **differentiating between cultural and linguistic behaviour, especially for students with an Asian background** (Chur-Hansen & Vernon-Roberts 1998)

Attitudes of social work supervisors

- ‘Deficit-saturated’ and ‘culturalist’ perceptions (Felton & Harrison 2017; Ryan 2005):
 - Time-consuming and challenging (Attrill, Lincoln & McAllister 2016)
 - Lacking cultural knowledge and intellectual/critical thinking abilities (Robson & Turner 2007)
 - Void of additional personal resources (e.g. language) or agency (Wall, Tran & Soejatminah 2016)
- Assimilationist attitudes: expect student to comply with agencies’ norms and practices (Harrison & Ip 2013)
- Assess students according to their image of an ‘ideal student’ which is influenced by their own personal/cultural backgrounds and workplace culture (San Miguel & Rogan 2012)

Inclusive and transcultural teaching practices

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

(Ryan 2011, p. 635)

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pilot study

Online anonymous survey

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

Supervisors of Monash University MSW(Q) International Students	
n-size	83
Average age range	45-49 years
Gender	73% female, 26% male, 1% other
English as mother-tongue	84%
Monolingual Anglo-Australian	67%
Most common backgrounds of international students supervised	73% Chinese 26% Indian

MSW(Q) supervisor experiences

- The majority had only ever supervised one (40%) to two (14%) international students
- 60.5% felt they supervised international students differently to domestic students, especially in terms of language and cultural support
- Differences in supervision of domestic vs. international were framed negatively
- 25% (18/73) had completed specialised training in supervising international students
- Previous training typically a once-off seminar or workshop
- Full day workshops rated the most beneficial

Benefits perceived by supervisors

Exposure to new approaches and different perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- It has been interesting finding out about services/intervention practices in Italy compared to Australia.- Some bring additional life experience and cultural sensitivity.
General cultural learning opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Brings a different perspective to the team and cultural experiences which can enhance the understanding of the wider team and organization.- Get to learn a great deal about people's countries of origin - political system, culture and values and I usually attempt to learn some words in their language.
General linguistic and cultural benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Sometimes they speak languages of some of our clients and can also assist us to better understand cultural values and issues for our clients.- Our workplace has a high percentage of Chinese students so having International Students who speak Mandarin is an advantage and great support for our work place.

Challenges perceived by supervisors

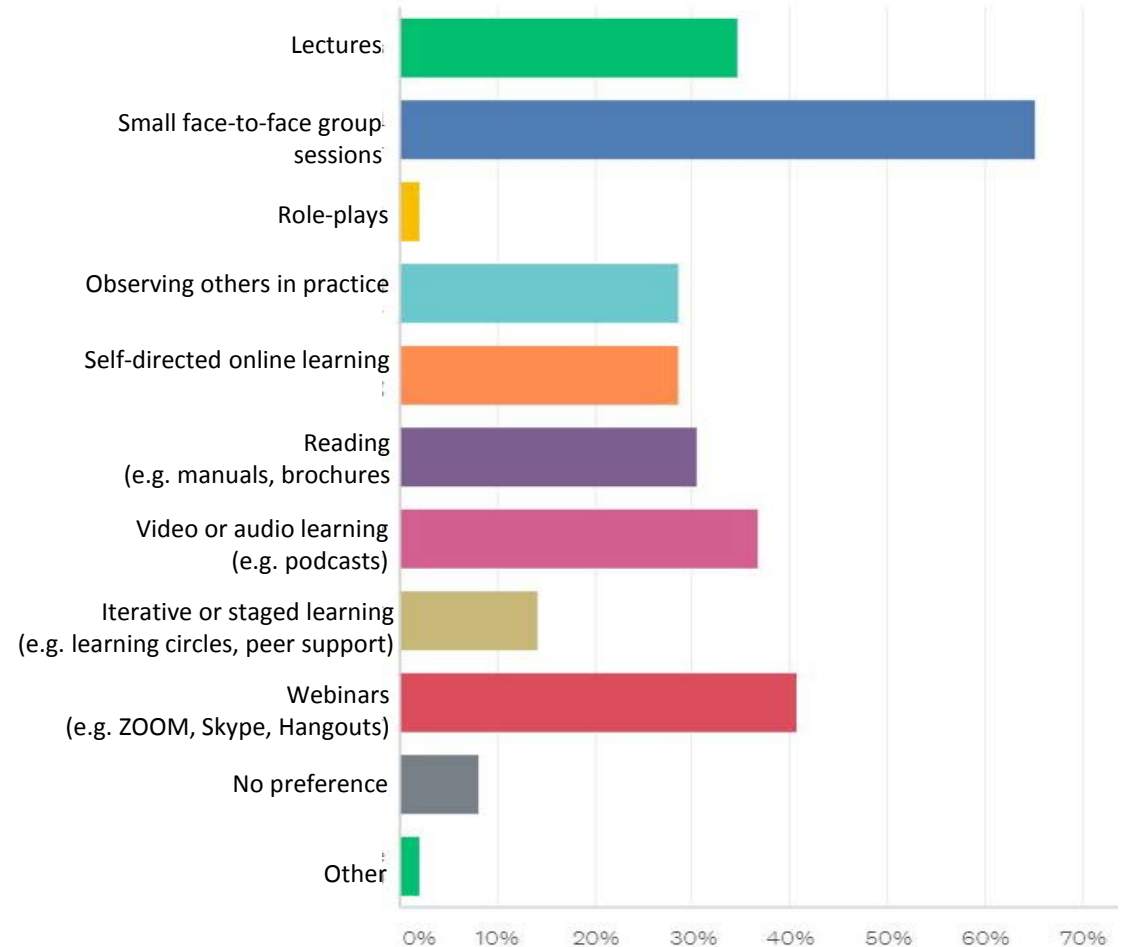
Language and communication issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Difficulties in engaging in exploratory conversation, essays can be a little hard to understand due to poor sentence structure.- At times it is the forms of communication and the directness and lack of descriptiveness.- Their writing and verbal skills often need extra work and some of them expect this from placement, though it is not the duty of placement organisations to provide this.
Cultural barriers or a lack of understanding of cultural norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Cultural responses to teachers, i.e. unwilling sometimes to challenge and debate.- Not being able to connect with clients because of cultural differences.
Lack of local knowledge or knowledge of local systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Not understanding the Australian health care system. Not working in the industry whilst studying hence no exposure to Australian community.- Limited understanding of key education, health, housing and social service systems in Australia.

General findings

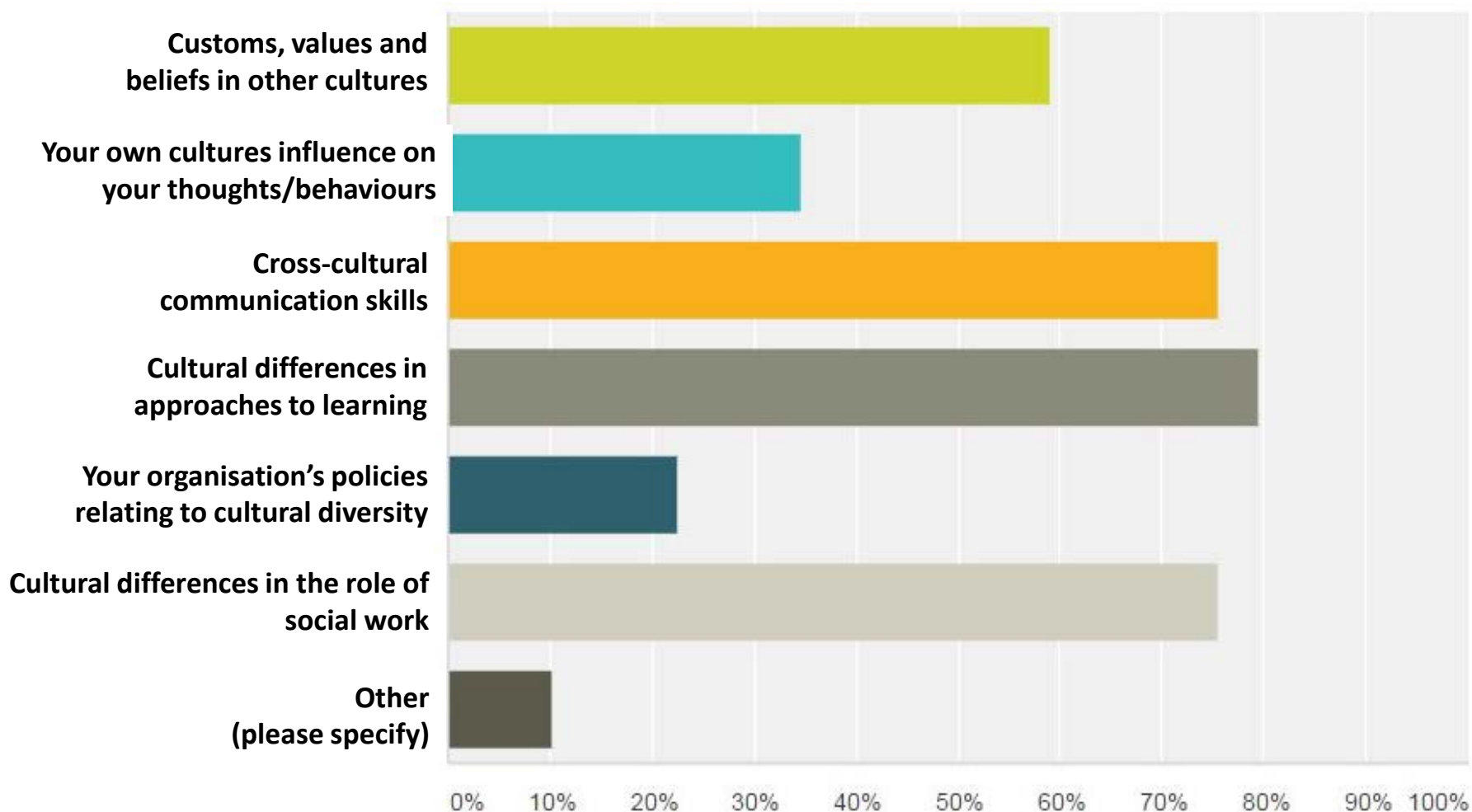
- Generally, respondents felt confident supervising international students
- Those not from CALD backgrounds were less certain of their levels of confidence and understanding of the impacts of language or culture in their supervision of international students
- Greater attention should be paid to improving supervisors' awareness of and competence in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students

MSW(Q) Supervisor professional development training preferences

- **92% (67/73)** believe specified training should be provided for supervising international students
- Preference is for small face-to-face 'in-house' sessions

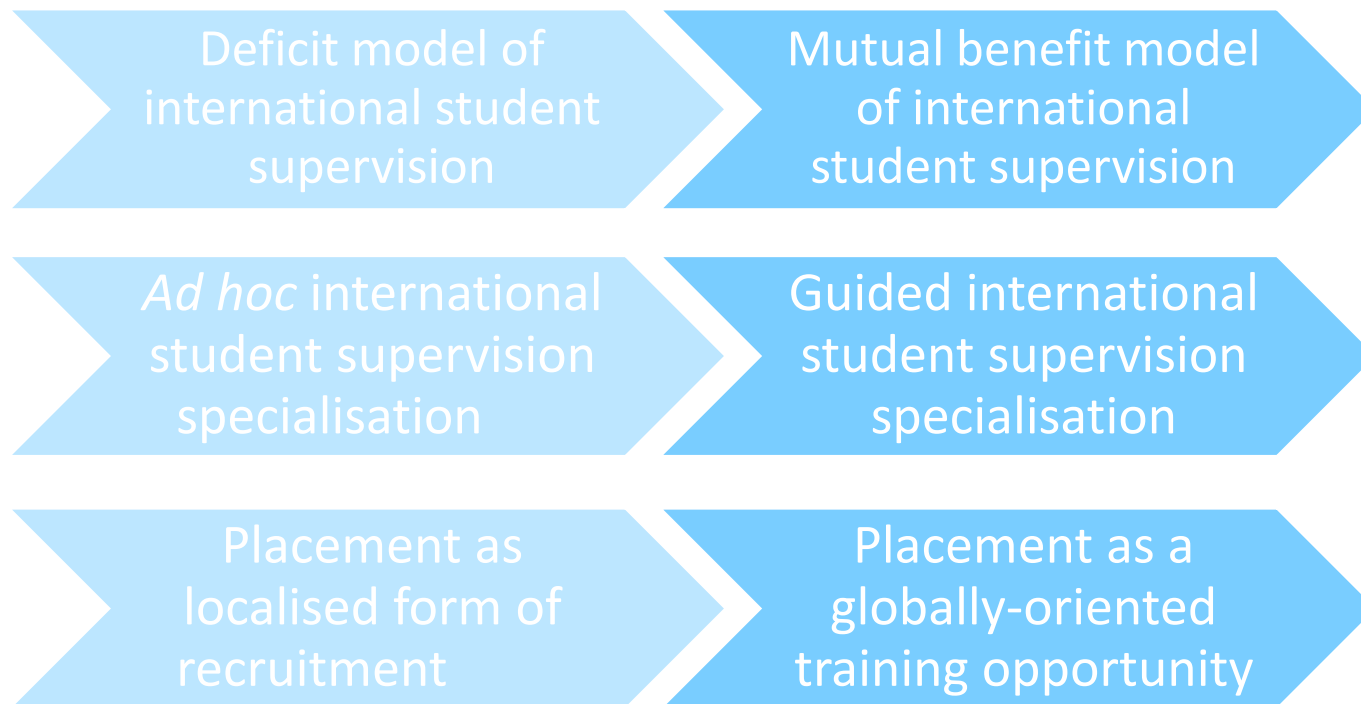


Self-identified professional development training needs



Transitions in social work supervision

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



Any questions?

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Thank you