



# Guidance: Practice Education

This document is to be read in conjunction with the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (ASWEAS 2024), it is only a guide to assist.

## Relevant Standard 4: Practice Education

***The structure, developmental cycle and range of authentic practice-based learning activities are integrated with all elements of the overall program.***

### 1. Intent of Standard 4 (Criteria 1-8)

The overall intent of this Standard is to ensure that a social work student can apply theoretical knowledge in real-world situations. Through supervised placements, students develop essential skills such as biopsychosocial assessment, report writing, case noting, and interpersonal communication skills whilst undertaking authentic practice-based learning experience in working with diverse client groups. This hands-on learning helps students build confidence, understand ethical responsibilities, and navigate the complexities of social work practice.

Practice education plays an additional crucial role in shaping professional identity and readiness for employment. By engaging with experienced practitioners and multidisciplinary teams, students refine their problem-solving skills and learn to manage real-life challenges. Moreover, practice placements ensure that graduates meet accreditation requirements, such as the 1000-hour requirement, preparing them to enter the workforce as competent and ethical social workers.

### 2. AASW will seek evidence of

1. Practice education subjects/units demonstrating a developmental approach to learning that complies with the principles for social work education set out in ASWEAS 2024.
2. Practice education subjects/units taken over two years within the professional social work program of study.
3. Students' successful completion of a minimum of 1,000 hours of professional practice learning experience involving no more than three placements. These hours must be completed within the normal working hours / days of the organisation hosting the placement. No leave of any kind may be included in this requirement; that is, the full 1,000 hours must be completed.
4. Providers ensuring structured placement preparation, including: an induction into social work practice provided from commencement of course, successful completion of all prerequisites before placement, dedicated preparatory days separate from integration seminars and

placement hours, face-to-face engagement opportunities, and the use of simulation to enhance learning and provide a safe environment for practicing complex scenarios.

5. Practice- theory integration seminars may be included within the required placement hours up to a maximum of 7 hours per 250 hours of placement, with a maximum of 28 hours across all practice education placements.
6. No placement being shorter than 250 hours.
7. At least 500 hours of placement time undertaken in a direct practice role including supervised interaction with individuals, families, groups or communities.
8. No placement being an observational placement.
9. Students completing at least one placement in a professional practice setting with an onsite social work qualified placement educator.
10. Placements being structured in a way that is educationally viable (so that educational goals can be achieved). Patterns of placement days may vary from five days per week, to a minimum of two days per week. Placements that are two days per week must include at least two full-time (five-day) block periods, unless the SWAOU determines that extenuating circumstances apply.

#### Guidelines for considering extenuating circumstances

Extenuating circumstances should normally only pertain to those with a disability in which the five-day block is likely to lead to more impaired health or is simply untenable due to the nature of the disability.

The ASWEAS does not attempt to define extenuating circumstances absolutely. Any extenuating circumstances would be expected to have a substantial impact on the individual's ability to complete the tasks. This means that the circumstances must have a bigger impact than everyday things like a poor night's sleep, a minor illness (such as a cough or cold), a minor injury or if you are anxious about the placement.

The following is an example of circumstances which may be considered extenuating:

- Serious health issue, illness or disability which impacts on the student's capacity to attend placements for at least two full time (5 day) block periods. An appropriate medical certificate or other assessments may be requested by the SWAOU in considering such requests.

The following are some examples of circumstances which would **NOT** be considered extenuating:

- Other work commitments
- Family commitments
- Holiday / Moving house
- Changing jobs
- Financial cost
- Transitory health matters

The above guidelines are not absolute nor are they exhaustive. It is recommended that each SWAOU considers all extenuating circumstances requests on a case-by-case basis.

The onus is on the student to demonstrate their extenuating circumstances and to provide appropriate evidence and/or supporting documentation upon request of the SWAOU.

SWAOUs are required to report on incidents where extenuating circumstances are granted as part of their annual reporting to the AASW.

11. The Provider ensuring that chosen workplace organisations provide appropriate social work activities<sup>1</sup> and meet the educational requirements of the practice education program.
12. The participating partners are fully informed of their obligations and accountabilities
13. Each student being allocated a Placement Educator who is suitably qualified and an experienced practitioner meeting the Standards. The Placement Educator provides guidance and direct supervision of the student during their placement.
14. Clear expectations being set for learning and performance outcomes, based on the *AASW Practice Standards* (2023) and the *AASW Code of Ethics* (2020), established and discussed between the Provider, Placement Educator and the student, and documented in the student learning plan.
15. Student feedback specific to the placement experiences is systematically collected, evaluated and used for diagnostic and quality purposes.
16. In some community contexts provision of cultural support in addition to the requirements for supervision specified. Cultural support may be provided by a community member who is not a social worker.
17. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for placements is granted only for part or all of the first placement and requires at least the equivalent of three full-time years of relevant work experience, with recent practice within the last five years. All students approved for RPL undertake the final placement with direct supervision by a qualified social worker.

### 3. Roles and responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities for the student, the workplace, the agency-based educator, the Provider Placement Coordinator, Provider Social Work Practice Liaison staff and, where required, the external Placement Educator must be clearly outlined in the Provider Placement Education policies, guidelines, manuals or documentation of the social work program.

#### 3.1 Placement Education team responsibilities and qualifications

For specific details on roles, and responsibilities for the Placement Education team, please read the criterion stated in the ASWEAS.

1. Placement Educators are social work qualified with at least two years' social work practice experience, or its part time equivalent, who align with the commitment for professional education and adhere to the ethics and professionalism expected of a social worker.
2. In recognition of the difficulties for some regional Providers, in exceptional circumstances relating to distance, a Placement Educator with less experience may be allocated for one placement only. In this circumstance the Placement Coordinator must ensure that the Placement Educator has additional support and mentoring.
3. Placement Educators must undertake induction and training for the Placement Educator role prior to or during their first experience in the role.
4. Social work Placement Educators will provide a minimum of 1.5 hours formal, structured supervision of students during every 35 hours of placement, at least half of which is on a one-to-one basis.
5. The social work Placement Educator assesses the student learning, informed through ongoing and direct observation of the student's practice across the placements. Ideally the Placement Educator will also observe the student's engagement in team and interdisciplinary meetings.

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<sup>1</sup> Appropriate social work activities are tasks which enable students to develop practice and analytic skills in community work, interprofessional skills, reporting, casework, social planning, advocacy, research, social policy analysis or social policy development.

6. The social work Placement Educator will not be someone who has a current or prior close personal relationship with the student or have a role as their current supervisor.
7. The Placement Educator and Placement Liaison Officer will have an agreed communication plan for regular consultations on student progress and meet together at least twice with the student during their placement.
8. The SWAOU must offer adequate support to Placement Educators in recognition of their contribution to the social work placement education program. This support should include:
  - a. access to the higher education provider's resources such as the library
  - b. consultation with SWAOU staff as required
  - c. training and support in student supervision
  - d. other professional development activities as appropriate.
9. Where the placement agency cannot provide a **placement educator**, the Provider will appoint a suitably qualified and experienced social worker to act as **placement educator**. Working in partnership with agency staff responsible for day-to-day guidance of the student's practice, the external **placement educator** will retain overall oversight of the student's learning and professional development on placement.
10. Where the Placement Educator is not on site there must be a task supervisor/manager on site and these roles work together.

### 3.2 Social work program responsibilities

1. The program must have sufficient appropriately qualified and experienced academic support staff dedicated to the delivery of placements and the management of workplace learning.
2. The designated placement education unit should have a Placement Coordinator with social work qualifications and appropriate experience with oversight and management of the placement program, ensuring quality outcome of each placement experience and responsibility for summative assessments of student performance at the conclusion of each placement.
3. Staffing of the placement education programs should reflect the Academic Organisational Unit commitment to the centrality of placement education in the social work curriculum. For example, there may be clear connections between the academic and research interests of staff and the placement education experiences offered by the academic unit.
4. All members of staff will actively contribute to the placement education program. All academic staff will use opportunities to integrate learning from placement education into other parts of the curriculum to ensure that students are effectively prepared for social work practice.
5. The social work program will assign one or more staff in the role as Placement Liaison Officer with social work qualifications and appropriate experience for each placement.
6. The Placement Liaison Officer acts as the primary contact with the Placement Educator, providing support to students and establishes a program of meetings/visits between the parties, assessing student progress and making any necessary adjustments to assure learning outcomes are achieved.
7. The Placement Liaison Officer ensures at least two meetings/visits occur during the placement, one in the first 4-6 weeks of a 500-hour placement and at mid-term. These meeting are to clarify educational issues, monitor the progress of the placement, and mediate any difficulties. Students and placement educators should be provided with additional on-site visits from liaison staff if difficulties arise during the placement.

8. The social work academic organisational unit (SWAOU) must ensure that policies and processes are in place to meet duty of care, risk management and occupational health and safety requirements for students undertaking practice education. These include:
  - a. recommending a maximum number of hours of placement and travel to be undertaken in one day
  - b. recommending a maximum number of paid hours and placement hours to be undertaken in a week
  - c. notifying workplace organisations of occupational health and safety requirements, higher education provider insurance arrangements and the limits of that cover
  - d. ensuring that workplace organisations have alerted students to policies regarding harassment, bullying and other obligations under relevant legislation
  - e. ensuring that workplace organisations understand that their legal obligation to provide a safe workplace with respect to freedom from bullying, harassment etc. extends to students in the workplace.
9. Only one placement should have an external Placement Educator, except under exceptional circumstances.
10. Where Placement Educators undertake student supervision roles that are not included in their usual paid employment, where they are employed as external Placement Educators to the workplace organisation, it is expected that SWAOUs will negotiate payment as part of their contractual agreement with the Placement Educator.
11. SWAOUs will liaise with workplace organisations so that the student has access to appropriate learning opportunities and to an educational environment that enables a student to meet the requirements for social work education. This includes arrangements for:
  - a. adequate space and resources for the student as required, including use of desks, office space, computers, telephones, and cars. If the resources that a student requires to meet their learning needs are not available, it is expected that alternative arrangements will be negotiated
  - b. reasonable access to organisational records
  - c. accommodation of students' learning needs, including adequate time for supervision, completion of field education assessment requirements, reading and reflection
  - d. a physically and emotionally safe and secure work environment.

## **4. Location of placements**

It is an important part of the placement education program that the students have the opportunity to participate in a broad range of learning experiences in practice education to ensure that they have the ability through authentic practice-based learning to effectively demonstrate their capabilities. Students must undertake their placements in at least two distinctly different practice settings, to experience different client groups, utilising different methods of social work practice and with a different Placement Educator for each placement.

### **4.1 Placements in the student's place of employment**

1. To provide a breadth of experience and to prevent conflicts of interest between employment and education roles, practice education placements will be undertaken in a different context, organisation and field of practice to the student's current place of employment or under their current supervisor.
2. This requirement may be waived for one placement only if the SWAOU is satisfied that all other principles and policies set out in this document can be met.
3. If a placement is undertaken in a student's place of work, a written agreement signed by the workplace organisation, the SWAOU and the student will be completed. The role will be significantly differentiated from the student's substantive/current position to ensure sufficient opportunities for a breadth of learning and practice experiences, as required to meet the graduate learning outcomes.

All parties will agree to:

- a) a formal agreement that the employee is in a student role while on placement and that the student is able to meet the educational requirements, principles and policies set out in this document
  - b) allocation of learning experiences not involving the student's routine work responsibilities, including details of the differentiation between learning goals and usual employment duties
  - c) protected time while on placement that is separate from the duties carried out at work and includes time to complete reading, reflective learning and assessment activities related to the placement
  - d) specification of how the criteria outlined in this document for practice education are met
  - e) specification for how the placement will be monitored to ensure that the criteria will be met
  - f) that the supervisor is not the student's line manager or usual supervisor.
4. In exceptional circumstances, a student may be granted two placements in the student's place of employment. These exceptional circumstances could include:
    - a) Where students are living and/or working in remote areas<sup>2</sup> and there is no suitable placement within a reasonable distance (> 90 kilometres travel)
    - b) Mobility, support, access and equipment requirements of students with a disability that would exclude other placement options
    - c) Extreme financial circumstances. This would involve a significant change to a student's living circumstances if they were required to undertake an unpaid placement and documentation must be provided to substantiate these claims.
  5. If the SWAOU approves two practice placements in the student's place of employment, it must guarantee that all of the principles of this document are met. Grounds for exceptional

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<sup>2</sup> Definition of rurality/remoteness: ARIA is an unambiguously geographical approach to defining remoteness. It is derived from measures of road distance between populated localities and service centres. These road distance measures are then used to generate a remoteness score for any location in Australia. Australian Standard Geographical Classification – Remoteness Areas (ASGC-RA)

RA1 – Major Cities of Australia Scores: 0 – 0.2

RA2 – Inner Regional Australia Scores: >0.2 – 2.4

RA3 – Outer Regional Australia Scores: >2.4 – 5.92

RA4 – Remote Australia Scores: >5.92 – 10.53

RA5 – Very Remote Australia Scores: >10.53

It is recommended that the definition of remoteness includes those areas which fall into the ARIA categories RA3–5 and RA2 where the distance to the major service centre is more than 90 kilometres.

circumstances must be documented in the social work practice education handbook.

6. In cases where exceptional circumstances apply, the second placement in their place of work must be a completely different practice setting and field of practice, with a different Placement Educator from the first placement.

## 4.2 Overseas placements

1. When a student is enrolled in a higher education institution based in Australia, one placement of the practice education program may be taken overseas. It is preferable that the student undertake their first placement(s) in Australia.
2. The overseas placement must provide a student experience of equivalent quality to that of an Australian setting and meets all ASWEAS requirements.
3. Direct responsibility for the placement and onsite supervision will be assigned to a qualified social worker and the program provider must appoint a staff member to directly liaise with their international counterpart.
4. When a student is enrolled in an accredited social work program in an Australian HEP offshore campus, students can do both placements overseas providing the principles and policies of this document are met.
5. Placement Educators should have social work qualifications and must have at least two years' social work practice experience and be eligible for membership of either the AASW or the equivalent professional association within the host country.
6. Placement Coordinators must be staff members of accredited social work educational programs in the country where the placement is undertaken, or members of accredited Australian social work programs.
7. Recognition of prior learning for practice education does not invalidate the requirement for one placement in Australia.

## 5. Assessment in practice education

The *AASW Practice Standards for Social Workers (2023)* must be utilised to inform assessment of student placements as they align to the graduate attributes.

1. Social work programs should map the practice standards specified in the AASW Practice Standards across the entire curriculum and show how practice education is located within this.
2. Social work programs have a responsibility to assist organisations and Placement Educators to map the AASW Practice Standards against the experiential learning opportunities offered to students during placements and to articulate how the students' practice education experiences relate to the practice standards.
3. Performance outcomes based on the AASW Practice Standards and the AASW Code of Ethics will be used to assess students in each of their placements. It is expected that different scaffolded performance outcomes will assess novice students (first placement students) and graduating students (final placement students).
4. The assessment activities will include direct observation of the student in academic and practice education settings.
5. Assessment strategies will require the student to demonstrate performance at the same standards of academic rigour as is expected in any academic subject.

6. The assessment asks will be designed and implemented using a range of agreed assessment strategies to assess the student's level of achievement and include contributions from all parties involved in the placement and carried out in an equitable and collaborative manner.
7. The final decision about whether the student has achieved the identified learning goals and performance outcomes and has passed the practice education subject is made by the SWAOU after consideration of material submitted by all parties.
8. Practice education curricula must incorporate a development component, such as a rating\* scale, so that student progress against the practice standards and/or levels of achievement can be assessed and recorded.

\*The following example of a rating system was developed by, and is used with permission of, the Victorian Combined Schools of Social Work (CSSW).

### **Extract from the Victorian CSSW *Common Assessment Tool* (2012)**

**A rating scale** that identifies level of achievement against the core learning areas assists students and field educators to assess the level of the student's performance. This scale is designed for the purpose of indicating minimum standards expected for field education placements. It is holistic in nature, providing a broad rating against each of the core learning areas. The scale is as follows:

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Description</b>
Not capable	0	Performance not at basic level expected. Poor understanding of requirements. Practice unsafe or inappropriate. Knowledge or skills undeveloped. Little application to learning.
Some capability	1	Performance not yet capable. Some requirements understood. Further work needed to demonstrate beginning capability.
Beginning capability	2	Performance at beginning level expected. Requirements understood. Practice capable under close guidance and supervision. Limited adaptability.
Capable	3	Performance at level expected of newly qualifying practitioner. Requirements integrated into practice. Can perform independently. Demonstrates adaptability and critical appreciation of own/others' practice.
Highly capable	4	Performance beyond level expected of newly qualifying practitioner. High levels of independence. Engages strongly in critical reflexivity. Exhibits ethical fluency. Generates new understandings or practices.
Unable to be assessed	U/A	The work has either not been undertaken, or the supervisor has not had an opportunity to assess capability in this area.

To pass the first placement, students must at least reach a level of 'beginning capability' (2) for all learning outcome areas appropriate to the setting by the end of the placement.

To pass the final field education placement, students must at least reach a level of 'capable' (3) across all learning outcome areas, relevant to placement setting, by the end of the placement.



## 6. Non-Compliance Risk

If the ASWEAS is not met in relation to practice education, it may result in a conditional accreditation finding being placed on the social work program by Council. It may additionally affect the students by:

- **Skills Gap** – Students may lack essential skills in assessment, intervention, report writing, and ethical decision making.
- **Limited Authentic Application** – without adequate practice experience, students may struggle to apply theoretical knowledge in complex social work settings.
- **Reduced Confidence** – insufficient exposure to authentic practice-based learning can leave students feeling unprepared and uncertain in their professional roles.
- **Risk to the Public** – unprepared graduates may struggle to provide effective support, potentially leading to poor client outcomes.
- **Employability issues** – many employers prefer you to have practical experience, and graduates without that may face challenges securing jobs.
- **Qualification failure** – students failing to successfully complete practice education components would not meet competency program requirements, leading to an inability to complete their qualification.

## 7. References

Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (2023). *Practice Standards for Social Workers: Achieving Outcomes*. Canberra: AASW.

— (2020). *Code of Ethics*. Canberra: AASW.

Combined Schools of Social Work (Victoria) (2012). *CSSW Common Assessment Tool*.