Hosting student placements

Best practice guidelines for
Victorian community sector organisations

VCOSS
Victorian Council of Social Service

About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector and the state's premier social advocacy body.

VCOSS exists to end poverty and disadvantage in Victoria. We do this by supporting organisations and activities, through research and advocacy, and by connecting, convening, and working with others.

VCOSS's strength comes from our members and the people at the heart of their work. Our members include frontline service organisations, peak bodies and advocacy groups, working across a wide range of areas including health and wellbeing, children and family services, family violence, early childhood, housing, food systems, economic and civic participation, justice, disability and disaster response.

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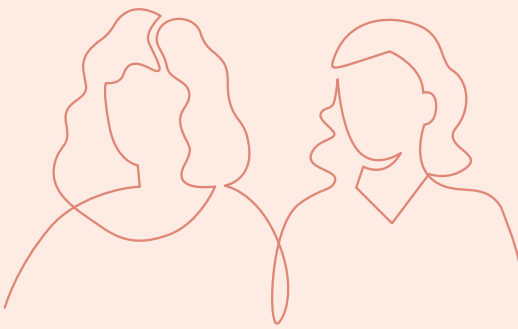
Lived experience statement

VCOSS thanks all those who shared with us their personal stories, experiences and insights in the development of this work. Every person is shaped by their history and environment. Many people have endured trauma or hardship. For some, this trauma and its effects continue today. When somebody shares their experiences and insights with VCOSS, they enrich both our understanding of the issues and our recommendations for change. Thank you for your courage and generosity.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders and ancestors. Our office is located on the sovereign, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.



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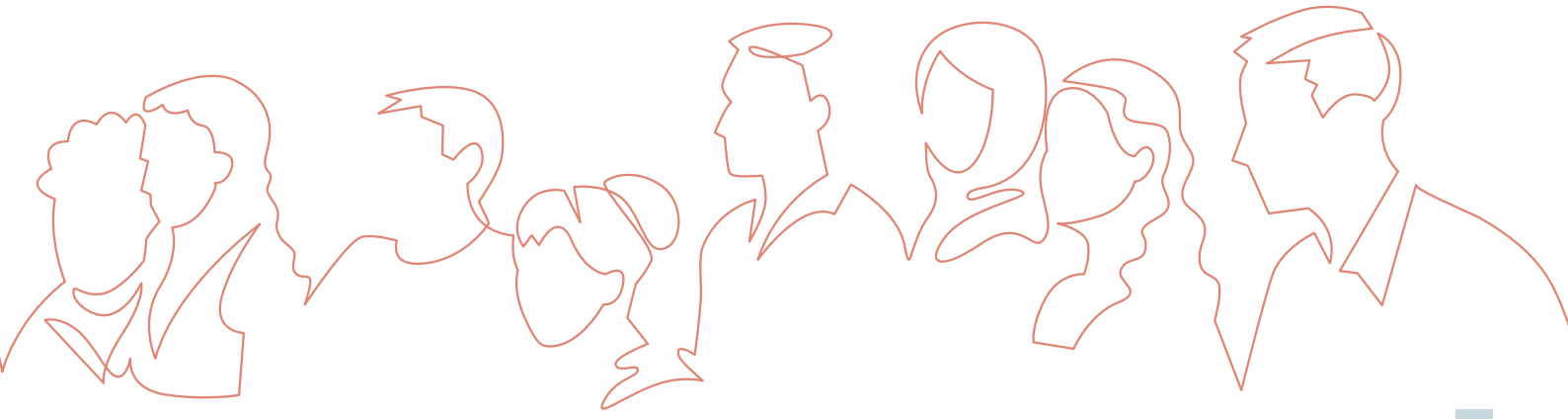


The purpose of this resource

This resource has been developed for community sector organisations in Victoria that are, or are considering, hosting student placements. It provides evidence-based guidance to help organisations host high quality placements that provide mutual benefits for the students, host organisations and education providers.

This resource focuses on placements in four key courses relevant to the community service sector:

- Master of Social Work
- Bachelor of Social Work
- Diploma of Community Services and
- Certificate III in Individual Support.

It presents best practices for hosting students in these courses. These practices may, however, apply to other courses, as the resource does not present specific requirements of individual courses, accrediting bodies or education providers.

Education providers facilitating student placements may also have tailored resources and manuals for host organisations which they are strongly encouraged to access.

This resource is intended to assist organisations of different sizes, hosting experience and levels of resourcing. The principles, tips and reflection prompts can support organisations wherever they are in their hosting journey – whether small organisations looking to host a student for the first time, or large, experienced host organisations seeking to demonstrate current best practice.

This resource is an initiative of a larger VCOSS project to support the sector in hosting quality student placements. VCOSS understands that some community sector organisations do not currently have the resources to demonstrate best practice in student placements. However, the resource should assist readers to reflect on their organisation's current processes and context and identify some opportunities to strengthen practice.

The resource was developed based on findings from VCOSS's Supporting high quality placements in the community services sector Insights Paper, a scan of current literature and policies, and consultations with community service organisations, Victorian education providers and the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

"The culture is inclusive and there is an open door policy... I am not [of the same cultural background] but I was still welcomed... My supervisor ensured that I accompanied her [to] client visits, community events [and] workshops... I helped the organisation create a project management tool to help the team monitor various projects they were working on. I never felt like a student, I felt like part of the team."
Diploma of Community Services student

CASE STUDY

A community service organisation supporting young people with disability or additional learning needs hosted Diploma of Community Services students.

Students were able to share relevant industry information with staff from their studies, such as new changes in legislation. Students also used different communication styles to successfully engage with young clients who staff members found challenging to engage. Staff subsequently mirrored the students' approach in their interactions with these clients.

As one staff member explained:

> *I'll watch them and I'll go... What can I use in my work?... Because we're always looking for a way to do a better job... [The students] have different communication techniques and I'll look at how they're communicating with my young people and see, how can I modify my behaviour?"*[1]

Hosting students: The benefits for community sector organisations

Hosting quality student placements is a meaningful way for community sector organisations to help address workforce supply challenges and build and shape the future workforce.

There are numerous, more immediate benefits for host organisations, too. Hosting student placements can assist organisations to:

1 Attract and retain your ideal workforce by:

- Building your organisation's profile and competitive advantage as a workplace with a learning culture and a commitment to supporting the future workforce.
- Offering existing staff members more and/or broader professional development opportunities, including in supervising students, mentoring, coaching and engaging in reflective practice.
- Building relationships with students who may be prospective employees and utilising the placement to confirm if they are a good fit for your organisation.
- Filling staff shortages by employing high calibre students after placement.
- Connecting staff with enthusiastic students who can provide up-to-date information about research and best practice and offer new or fresh perspectives.
- Increasing your organisation's understanding of key courses and the requisite skills and knowledge of graduates, benefitting your recruitment and onboarding processes.

2 Support organisational service delivery by:

- Undertaking or completing projects that are important, or of interest, to your organisation but would not otherwise occur due to resourcing constraints.
- Increasing diversity in the workplace, including in age, ethnicity, language, religion and lived experience. Greater diversity enables organisations to benefit from broader, richer perspectives and identify opportunities to improve service delivery, which may also benefit client experiences.

3 Deepen relationships with education providers which may enable your organisation to:

- Strengthen links to innovation research and current theory, industry insights and key employment and training trends across jurisdictions.
- Offer feedback to education providers to shape what and how they teach your future workforce.
- Gain access to education providers' facilities and initiatives (e.g. library access, research partnerships, etc).

4 As some community service organisations only host university students, there are opportunities for other organisations to gain hosting experience and reap additional benefits of hosting TAFE students including:

- Hosting students who can 'hit the ground running' because their training emphasises current workplace practice and application of advanced technical and practical skills. They may offer new approaches that staff wish to adopt.
- There may be fewer requirements placed on host organisations by TAFE providers, compared to university providers, enabling broader organisations to participate as hosts.

Best practice principles for high quality, successful placements

This section presents best practice principles for high quality placements that:

- promote student learning and
- are successful for students, host organisations and education providers.

Key considerations are also provided to assist your organisation to identify when it is ready to host students and how it can build readiness.

Further information on how to enact the principles is presented in the subsequent section *'Practical Tips for Each Stage of a Placement'*.

For placement success overall, host organisations should:

1 Understand all parties' expectations at the outset

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

Consider the following and their level of alignment:

- your organisation's purpose and motivations for hosting a student(s)
- your organisation's expectations from the placement
- the student's expectations from the placement
- a clear process for how the student can raise issues if needed
- the education provider's placement requirements
- how the education provider prepares students for placement.

2 Provide an inclusive, culturally appropriate environment for students of diverse backgrounds

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Do staff have skills in culturally appropriate supervision and/or access to resources on this?
- What additional benefits might hosting students of diverse cultural backgrounds offer your organisation, staff and/or clients?
- How will your organisation and the education provider support students with additional learning needs and students who might have lived experience in your service delivery area(s) (e.g. homelessness, family violence, disability, etc.)?
- What additional benefits might these student placements offer your organisation, staff and/or clients?

3 Confirm your organisation and the education provider has, or will have, the resources and capability to provide an appropriate placement experience

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Do you have the necessary space and equipment to host a student (desk, computer, etc)?
- Are your organisation's current staffing levels sufficient to support a student or will hosting only increase pressures on staff?
- How could supervisors be supported and prepared? Have they been provided with information on the range of supervision models that might assist them?
- What support will the education provider offer to students during the placement and how is this support reflective of their needs?

4 Invest in your relationship with the education provider

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- Is there opportunity for meaningful, two-way communication?
- Are structured processes in place to support relationship building and increase understanding of each other's priorities? If not, can you suggest them?
- Is the education provider interested in the placement's benefits to your community service organisation and local community?

For student learning, host organisations should provide:

5 A positive learning environment

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

A welcoming workplace that recognises and values student contributions. This includes:

- providing a positive induction and onboarding experience
- treating students as 'part of the team' and including them in staff meetings and events
- encouraging and valuing students' ideas and input
- ensuring staff are approachable, responsive and happy to answer students' questions.

6 Collaborative, supportive supervision relationships

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The host organisations ensures that:

- supervision is conducted in a strengths-based way that offers students both support and independence
- there is recognition that supervising students is different to supervising staff; it involves providing a learning environment where students can discuss new, untried concepts and practices and build their confidence and 'professional sense of self'[2]
- student supervisors are provided with adequate support and supervision training
- staff appointed to supervise students have the time to do so and are empathetic, flexible, knowledgeable and respectful.

7 Access to a range of learning activities

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The host organisation provides diverse activities for students, including opportunities to:

- learn from, and build relationships with, different staff
- gain exposure to different parts of the organisation
- interact with clients or client practice in an appropriate way (this could be indirect e.g. reviewing client files or listening to recordings)
- engage in reflective practice and discuss links between theory and practice.

8 Structure and processes that enable regular instruction, feedback and coaching

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Students can prepare for, and rely on, regular opportunities to:

- discuss and reflect on their experiences and learning
- review their learning goals and progress
- receive feedback
- collaboratively plan next steps
- raise questions and any concerns.

"My supervisor has made it a positive experience by always checking in and ensuring I have plenty of work to do. She has given me opportunity to work with a range of different programs within the organisation to get a varied experience. All of the workers have been incredibly welcoming and helpful."
Diploma of Community Services student

"[My placement] was well mapped out from the start. I knew what I would be doing and what I should aspire to achieve by the end of it. I feel supported with regular formal and informal supervision and was never put in a situation I did not feel comfortable to be in."
Bachelor of Social Work (Hons) student

"[High quality placements are] where we have good relationships with the [host] organisation, the placement coordinator and supervision team. This requires mutual time and resourcing for relationship development that establishes shared understanding and approaches for student learning outcomes."
Education provider

"What [the neighbourhood house] does exceptionally well is the hands-on student engagement and on-the-job learning. The manager there is always willing to support our students – whether that's with her time, knowledge or flexibility in completing hours."
Education provider

How to build genuine, mutually beneficial relationships with education providers

Student placements are most successful when host organisations and education providers build and maintain genuine, mutually beneficial relationships.

Rather than viewing placements as one-off transactions to support individual students, the education provider and host organisation should prioritise and foster longer-term, reciprocal relationships. These relationships enable host organisations to provide high quality placements and enact the best practice principles discussed above.

Below are some key, evidence-based considerations for your organisation to explore and negotiate with the education provider to foster a relationship based on reciprocity:

- Does the education provider have demonstrated interest in, or links to, the community services sector and an understanding of the context in which their students will be learning? If feasible, how might your organisation support their interest and understanding?
- Is there opportunity to discuss your organisation's priorities and/or projects of interest and how a student placement might progress these in a way that aligns with student interests and the education provider's placement requirements?
- Does the placement process enable you and the education provider to work together to identify students with a genuine interest in your organisation's sector and client group, to increase the likelihood of placement success for all involved?
- How does the education provider prepare students for placements in community sector organisations? What additional support can the education provider offer to students (including international students, students with additional learning needs and students with lived experience) to promote successful placements?
- How and with what frequency will you and the education provider communicate during placements?
- Does the education provider welcome your organisation's feedback on placements? How and when will those conversations occur? How and when will the education provider act on feedback?
- How and when will the education provider share students' feedback on their experience in your organisation? How might your organisation act on this feedback and use it for organisational learning and improvement?
- How can your organisation help to foster an ongoing relationship with the education provider?
  - Could key staff offer to visit their campus and present a guest lecture on a topic in the course?
  - Could you invite the education provider to one of your organisation's key events that may interest them?
  - Could you work together on a research project or submission?
  - Can your organisation offer to be a location for research fieldwork?

CASE STUDY

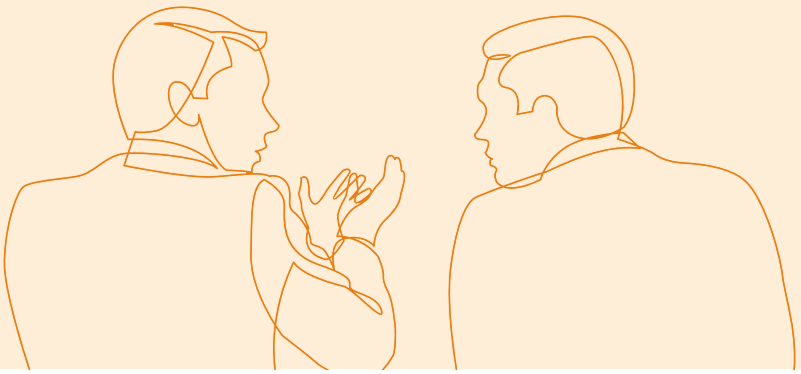
A university and Aboriginal community in Cherbourg, Queensland developed a partnership for student placements that prioritised 'reciprocity, openness and practical benefit over time'.[3] Recognising that student placements often focus on benefits to students and education providers, the parties developed a relationship that emphasised decolonisation and social justice.

Placements were planned based on the Aboriginal community's priorities, their potential to bring sustained benefit to the community and to build on previous student contributions. The community also sought to host students who were keen to learn from Aboriginal agencies and to contribute over a longer period of time, rather than those "looking for a short-term, cross-cultural experience".[4]

CASE STUDY

Some community sector organisations have developed formal agreements or Memorandums of Understanding with education providers for hosting students. These agreements can help to ensure the benefits of hosting students are realised for host organisations.

One agreement required the parties to collaborate on specific projects that would benefit the host organisation's client groups, via joint research projects, professional development opportunities and consultancies.[5] Another involved the host organisation committing to host 10 students from one institution each year and the education provider contributing some funding towards employing a Student Placement Officer within the host organisation to manage their placement program.[6]



Overview of placement requirements

This section provides high-level information about student placement requirements across courses and institutions. Prospective host organisations must confirm the specific requirements of the education provider and the course accrediting body where relevant.

- Student placements are structured experiences where students learn and work in an organisational setting and undertake activities related to their course and required learning outcomes.
- Courses that are accredited by the Australian Association for Social Workers (AASW) or Australian Community Workers' Association (ACWA) have specific requirements for student placements. These requirements include a minimum number of hours for each placement and specific supervision requirements (including the nature of sessions and the supervisor's role and years of experience). Non-accredited courses also have specific requirements, including a minimum number of placement hours.
- Placement requirements also differ across courses. Host organisations that have hosted a student undertaking one course should not assume the same requirements apply to their next student.

  For example, AASW requires host organisations to contribute to student learning assessments and to deliver 1.5 hours of formal supervision (at least half of which is one-on-one) every 35 hours of placement. ACWA requires student placements to be at least two days per week, at least one term apart, and no more than 5 per cent of the student's placement hours can be used for non-community welfare related activities. Other vocational education and training and higher education courses have different requirements.
- Parties' roles and responsibilities in a student placement will differ across work and course contexts and depend on the arrangements between the education provider and host organisation. Clarity on each party's roles and responsibilities is essential from the outset, including for the student. Host organisations should refer to the education provider's documentation and then discuss and agree on specific roles and responsibilities for each party.

Information to expect from education providers

As part of initial planning phase, host organisations should expect to receive key information from the education provider, including:

- The specific roles and responsibilities of the host organisation, the education provider and the student
- The required hours, duration and timing of the placement and key dates that may affect it (e.g. semester dates, assessment deadlines)
- Information about the course, the intended learning objectives and/or outcomes for students on placement
- The type of tasks and activities the student must or could undertake during the placement
- Specific supervision requirements
- Student assessment processes and the responsibilities of host organisations and student supervisors in student assessment
- Each party's legal and insurance requirements, noting host organisations should seek independent legal advice to confirm their obligations
- Details of key contacts at the education provider
- Proposed methods and dates for planned communication and feedback between the host organisation and education provider
- Mechanisms to raise and resolve any issues or complaints regarding student placements.

In addition, you may wish to enquire about the following:

- Information or recommended resources to confirm host organisation's legal obligations, insurance and WorkCover requirements during student placements and a copy of the education provider's standard work placement agreement with host organisations (if applicable).
- A copy of the education provider's placement information guide for students, to inform you about the student's likely initial understanding of the placement experience.
- Contact details of any other community sector organisations that have hosted students undertaking a course with the education provider who would be happy to speak with you about their experience.

Practical tips for each stage of a placement

This section presents practical suggestions and tips to assist community sector organisations to enact the principles across the placement experience.

Planning to host a student

Hosting student placements takes time and commitment but offers many benefits to community sector organisations, as identified above. The planning phase is critical to set your organisation up for success and help ensure all parties have a positive experience.

Below are some suggestions that might assist your organisation to plan a student placement.

Student selection

- Work with the education provider to identify students who have a genuine interest in working in your sector.
- Identify and remove barriers to taking on students from diverse backgrounds.
- If possible, conduct interviews and tailor your interview processes for students:
  - Enquire about the student's interests and career aspirations. Students cannot be accepted to cover a vacant staff position so you might focus on determining whether they are a good cultural fit for your organisation, rather than whether their skills match a specific position description.
  - Ask about any previous placement experience and what they enjoyed and did not enjoy. This may help you confirm if you can offer an appropriate range of learning experiences. Note that some courses may require a student's placements to differ significantly in context and role (e.g. different tasks and client groups).
- Reflect on how your organisation could support individual students. For example:
  - Could you offer any flexibility in working hours for students with caring responsibilities or those travelling for placement (including, for example, opportunities to work from home)?
  - Do you have existing processes in place that could assist students with additional learning needs?
  - Could you share information about local services, accommodation and social activities for students who live in a different geographical area and would be relocating for their placement?
  - Is any peer support available at your organisation?
  - Are there likely to be subsequent employment or volunteer opportunities at your organisation that hosted students might like to know about at the outset?
- For students who are not offered a placement at your organisation:
  - Can you request their contact details so that you can advise them of future opportunities they may wish to apply for?
  - Provide constructive feedback to students who weren't successful in securing a placement at your organisation.

Organising student supervision

- Supervising students is different to supervising staff. The host organisation and student supervisor should be proactive in ensuring student learning needs are met.
- Appoint a student supervisor who:
  - Has a genuine interest in student learning
  - Has time to perform the role, noting its differences from staff supervision
  - Is empathetic, flexible, knowledgeable and respectful.
- Some organisations find an internal Expression of Interest process helps them to identify appropriate staff and maximise the value of this professional development opportunity.
- If appropriate staff are reluctant to take on a student supervisor role:
  - Ask the education provider what training or resources they could offer.
  - Explore opportunities to recognise student supervisors' contributions within the organisation or in the broader sector. This might include profiling student supervisors in a staff newsletter, organising an annual celebration of student supervisors or creating an award for outstanding student supervision.
- Confirm the support and/or training the supervisor will receive to enable them to succeed. Consider the student's individual needs as part of this assessment. For example, can the staff member undertake training in culturally aware supervision?
- Share key resources, such as the Victorian Government's *Best Practice Supervision Guidelines: Family Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Wellbeing*.[7]
- Encourage staff to reflect on their own experiences as a student.
- Ensure the supervisor is afforded time in their working week to deliver supervision and to undertake relevant training, debriefing, mentoring, etc.
- Ensure the student supervisor understands their role and the education provider's requirements of them, including how their role links with any other supervisor.

"[Student] matching is collaborative. The education provider and host organisation discuss each CV. The host organisation interviews all students for a 'general' placement and matches [students] depending on the information provided in the interview. Orientation and induction are structured. Supervision is set and constant. Staff nominate to supervise so there is commitment."
Education provider

Preparing for the student's commencement

Once a student has been accepted, prepare for their first day:

- Advise all staff about:
  - The student, how their experience and skills will benefit the organisation and the broader organisational benefits of hosting a student.
  - The purpose of the student placement and the types of tasks and activities the student can help with.
  - The timeframe of the student placement.
- Encourage staff members to welcome the student and identify opportunities to involve the student in their work.
- Organise the student's induction to the organisation and onboarding (including their equipment, email account and computer access, access to internal training, information about workplace safety and work conditions).
- Add the student to staff meetings and event invitations.

From 1 July 2025, eligible social work students will be able to access the Commonwealth Prac Payment, a weekly payment equivalent to the single Austudy rate while undertaking mandatory course placements.[8]

The community services sector plays a critical role in promoting social and economic equity. As far as practicable, and noting education provider requirements, host organisations are encouraged to offer flexibility to students so that they can undertake placements while managing paid work commitments and any caring responsibilities.

"They had a computer set to go... online HR modules for me to complete and a busy line up of meet-and-greet meetings to say hello to staff. I was linked into the extensive calendar of meetings such as intake and invited to shadow groups and individual assessments/conversations. Gradually I had more responsibilities with as much support as I wanted... I was invited to training sessions along with other staff. My supervisor was open and very available to me if I wanted a quick chat. She was ready for our weekly supervision, always on time and we had good discussions. There was plenty of room to take initiative and to express [my] ideas on various programs."
Master of Social Work student

During the student placement

- On the student's first day, ensure their workspace and IT are organised. Nominate a staff member to greet the student and introduce them to key staff.
- When the student commences, ensure the student, their supervisor(s) and education provider are all agreed on each party's responsibilities in the placement. Agree on the student's learning plan.
- Encourage open, constructive two-way communication with the student. Encourage them to contribute their ideas and regularly check in on their experience at your organisation.
- Ensure regular, structured, formal student supervision sessions are scheduled and occur. Provide support and/or debriefing for the student supervisor as required.
- Include the student in all-staff activities/meetings and provide opportunities for the student to experience different parts of the organisation and to undertake tasks with different staff members.
- Maintain regular communication with the education provider so that any risks or arising issues can be addressed quickly and all parties are aware of any changes in expectation or in the placement environment.
- Seek the education provider's support, clarification and feedback during the placement and offer feedback in return. Remember this relationship can help build your organisation's profile and competitive advantage to attract high calibre future workers.
- Formalise regular reflections on how the placement is going, from both staff and student perspectives. Consider the best practice principles in this document. The following prompts may assist you to reflect on how the placement is going:
  - Is the student progressing in their learning, including towards meeting their learning objectives?
  - Is there evidence of positive and informal interactions between the student and staff?
  - Is the student offering ideas or making suggestions? Are staff members actively encouraging and valuing these?
  - Are the student and their supervisor meeting on a regular basis? Do they describe this relationship as collaborative and supportive?
  - Is the student supervisor receiving support and are they raising questions and concerns? Are these questions and concerns addressed quickly and effectively?
  - Has the student participated in a range of activities relevant to their learning plan and interests?
  - Is the student aware of processes to raise any concerns and issues, including different people they can speak to?
  - Are the education provider and host organisation in regular contact? Are all parties quickly informed of any changes affecting the student placement?
  - Have any issues or concerns been raised quickly and resolved respectfully and effectively?

How to manage challenges

Sometimes, an issue or concern arises during a placement. For example, organisational or staffing changes, an adverse event in the workplace, or a personal event in a student's life may affect the student placement.

Host organisations are encouraged to raise any concerns or issues with the student directly in the first instance. Host organisations should also refer students to the education provider's support services.

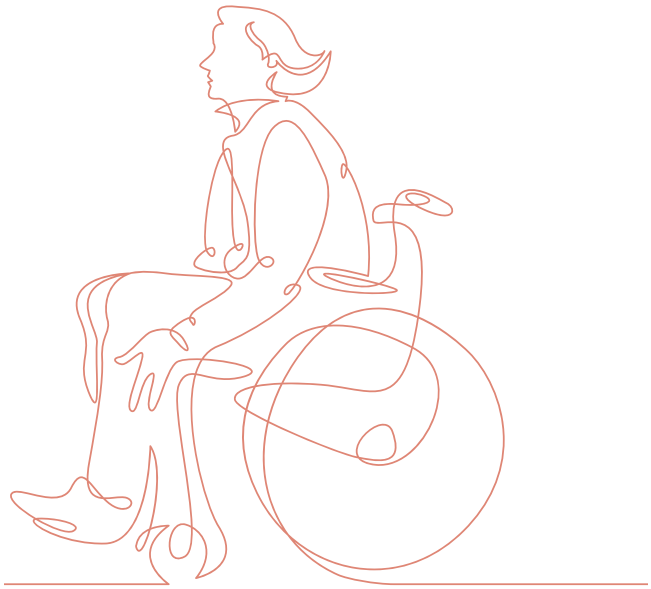
Regular supervision sessions that involve mutual reflection on the student's progress can help to ensure any concerns about the student's assessment outcomes or other challenges are raised early. This enables all parties to reflect on their agreed responsibilities and provides both the student and host organisation with an opportunity to improve.

Host organisations should also document any concerns about student performance as they occur and refer to the education provider's information about escalation processes.

It is critical that host organisations promptly advise the education provider of any arising issues or concerns about the placement that cannot be quickly and readily resolved with the student. This will allow the parties to work collaboratively to mitigate issues. Most education providers have processes to support host organisations and students. Host organisations should refer to these processes.

Placement conclusion

- Ensure staff have fulfilled their responsibilities regarding student assessment in the agreed timeframes and seek the education provider's confirmation.
- Seek feedback from the student and the education provider on the student's experience at your organisation. Share and reflect on this feedback internally as appropriate. Provide feedback and recommendations to the education provider to help improve their work on student placements in the community services sector.
- Encourage staff to reflect on what worked well and what could be improved in future student placements. Consider learnings that might benefit other aspects of your organisation's operations (e.g. staff recruitment and onboarding processes, internal communications) and learnings to further build your relationships with education providers.
- Decide how you will maintain your organisation's relationship with the education provider, so that your organisation:
  - realises the benefits of a longer-term, reciprocal relationship with the education provider, as outlined above
  - can attract high calibre students and host future placements that reflect the needs and priorities of your organisation and community.



Further reading

Key resources

Australian Association of Social Workers (2023). *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (version 2.2).

Australian Community Workers Association (2024). ACWA Course Accreditation Guidelines.

Australian Learning and Teaching Council (2021). *A guide to supervision in social work field education*. Revised edition.

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4 Harris, L., Jones, M., & Coutts, S. (2010), p.708.

5 Harris, L., Jones, M., & Coutts, S. (2010).

6 VCOSS (2025), p.19.

7 See https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines

8 See https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education/commonwealth-prac-payment

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