

# CISVic Student Placement Pilot Project

## Executive Summary



Community Information & Support Victoria | Advocacy Support Research



*“Our aim was to get her to love this work so that she would come back to the field.” Task Supervisor*

## Community Information and Support Victoria (CISVic)

CISVic was established as an association of members in 1970 to support the growing number of community advice bureaus. Since then its role has evolved to that of peak body for the community information and support sector in Victoria. CISVic provides operational support, sector development, advocacy and representation to its member agencies.

CISVic has over sixty member agencies. These community information and support centres (CISCs) are managed by autonomous, community based management committees. They operate according to the policies and standards of CISVic. CISCs provide information, referral, advocacy, emergency relief, case work, No Interest Loans, Tax Help, budgeting support, personal counseling, financial counseling, legal and settlement services.

## RMIT University

RMIT is a global university of technology and design and Australia's largest tertiary institution. The University enjoys an international reputation for excellence in practical education and outcome-oriented research.

RMIT is a leader in technology, design, global business, communication, global communities, health solutions and urban sustainable futures. We are ranked in the top 100 universities in the world for engineering and technology in the 2011 QS World University Rankings.

## Victoria University

Victoria University (VU) is one of the few Australian universities that is a multi-sector institution (higher education and TAFE). VU offers short courses, apprenticeships, certificates, diplomas, degrees and postgraduate studies. VU's flexible learning pathways means students can choose their own study journey, entering from various points and exiting once they've reached their goal.

Over 50,000 students enrolled at VU campuses, primarily located in the western region of Melbourne (Australia) and at international sites. VU's teaching, training, research, scholarship and partnerships are locally relevant and globally significant.

## Acknowledgements

CISVic acknowledges students, supervisors, educators and agency staff and managers who participated in the SPPP evaluation. CISVic also acknowledges the contributions of Reference Group members to the evaluation process, especially their enthusiasm and commitment for the process, and the project itself. We particularly acknowledge the guidance, advice and support so generously provided by Zita M Unger PhD, Evaluation Mentor.

## Reference Group members:

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## Executive Summary

The CISVic Student Placement Pilot Project (CISVic SPPP) is a partnership between Community Information and Support Victoria (CISVic), RMIT University and Victoria University. CISVic facilitated and coordinated the SPPP offering a range of support to agencies, supervisors and students throughout the placement period. With a small grant from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the SPPP commenced field placements in July 2012.

The SPPP was evaluated for effectiveness of the project, and to capture learning for future project implementation. The relative success of the pilot, recording high satisfaction ratings across key evaluation questions, and the endorsement of the CISVic student unit model reinforces that there is a role for peak bodies to play in facilitating and coordinating a student placement program. The CISVic model sets out the mechanisms that can be put in place for a successful student placement program that provides adequate levels of support for agencies and supervisors to create high quality work-based learning. Lessons from this pilot could contribute to the development of similar programs in other community sectors.

The outcomes for clients are at the forefront of this initiative. Student placements ensure that agencies can continue to provide intensive, supported services to clients who fall through service gaps. It also promotes and enhances professional practice within the sector (in a professional and volunteer capacity) meeting both workforce capability and service delivery needs. Whilst placements enhanced agencies' capacity to deliver their programs to complex needs clients, students too were afforded invaluable opportunities to practice their craft and consolidate their understanding of social work theory and practice.

## Purpose of the project

There are two broad aims to the SPPP. First, capacity building for agencies to deliver emergency relief casework services through the introduction of an internship workforce and secondly, the provision of high quality work-based learning in the community volunteering sector.

The key objectives of the project were to:

- co-ordinate placement process for students across CISVic agencies;
- support placement agencies in identifying and developing placements, facilitate agency-university engagement to ensure projects and student matching are optimized from both learning and service delivery perspective;
- create an effective support infrastructure for students on placements, supervisors and agencies;
- identify other opportunities to set up student placement across a range of agencies, with the principle aim to provide a student placement program that builds on the caseworkers model.

## Project activities and setting

The CISVic Student Unit Model (CISVic SUM) was adapted from an existing RMIT University student unit model of multi-site student placements. An off-site supervisor (Field Educator) was engaged by CISVic to provide group and individual social work supervision, whilst an on-site task supervisor provides day-to-day supervision of the student.

The Field Educator provides 7 (1-2 hour) group and 7 (1 hour) individual supervision sessions to students over their 70-day placement period. In meeting reporting and assessment requirements, the model proposes students' learning areas to be divided between the Field Educator and task supervisor. The Field educator oversees social work theory and practice learning areas, whilst the task supervisor oversees learning areas covering organizational context and inter-personal skills.

CISVic support for task supervisors and agency managers involved provision of resources and opportunities to develop supervision skills. The CISVic model sets out the mechanisms that can be put

in place for a successful student placement program that provides adequate levels of support for agencies and supervisors to create high quality work-based learning.

At commencement of the pilot project in July 2012, 6 students were placed across 8 agencies.

## Purpose of the evaluation

Program evaluation was built into the project at an early stage, engaging stakeholders in the evaluation process. Evaluation will contribute to improvements on the placement model and demonstrate the value of student placements in the community sector. Evaluation also assesses program effectiveness in order to capture lessons that can be used in future placement projects. This evaluation seeks to answer 5 key questions:



1. Has the project support structure been effective?
2. Has the project work-based learning been effective?
3. Has the project provided a satisfactory placement experience?
4. Has the project increased capacity?
5. What do participants think of the project overall?

## Findings

Students (6), task supervisors and/or managers (7), and educators (4) were invited to participate in the online surveys via an invitation email. Response rates were students (83%), supervisors and/or managers (100%) and educators (100%). Survey findings can therefore be said to provide a very accurate picture of the experiences of participants.

### ***Has the project support structure been effective?***

CISVic supported task supervisors and agencies at the start of placements with information about the model, checklists and other resources for placement-readiness. The majority indicated they were very satisfied (70%) whilst 30% were satisfied with the support structure. (Graph 1)

Among students, individual and group supervision with the Field Educator was rated highly, and CISVic and agency inductions were found to be useful. (Graph 2)

### ***Has the project work-based learning been effective?***

Educators rated the model more highly in meeting requirements and learning needs than agencies (Table 2). Expectations of placement were also ranked lower in agency response. Indicators in the evaluation point to student matching as a factor in determining the low response rating for this question. Group supervision and individual supervision with the field educator were rated at satisfaction and above (4.80). Students also indicate high levels of satisfaction in their learning about client diversity, community context and professional social work roles (Graph 3).

### ***Has the project provided a satisfactory placement experience?***

Students were encouraged to manage the reporting processes as part of their learning, and coordinated the process with supervisors and liaison officers. A positive agency and supervisor experience of these processes provide the foundation for future student placements. Student and educator respondents were generally satisfied with their experience of the placement processes.

### ***Has the project increased capacity?***

This key evaluation question sought to determine if student placements increased agencies capacity. Secondly, participants were asked if student placements presented a burden on agency capacity, in terms of management and supervision of students. In-depth interviews with task supervisors and managers elicited three capacities that were increased: casework capacity, emergency relief capacity and organizational capacity.

## Organizational capacity

Agencies report that organizational capacity was increased with student placement. This took various forms. In one agency, students were seen to increase volunteer capacity. Social work students act as a resource for culturally and linguistically diverse volunteers who lacked an understanding of Australian social systems and structures. Another agency took the opportunity of student placement to set up a new project that was being planned. The placement gave the organization time to recruit for a coordinator position, which was subsequently filled. Thirdly, for agencies that placed students within a casework or emergency relief program, the placement enabled the agency to increase program access with more appointments times and options.

## Casework capacity

Students on placement can assist caseworkers by taking on administrative and follow-up tasks associated with client files. This frees up time for caseworker to focus on support and capacity building aspects of client work. This also means that clients can be linked into services in a more timely manner because students could make the referral phone calls, contact with service providers which often takes up a lot of caseworker time.

## Emergency Relief capacity

Students also assist in various agency programs, including emergency relief. This may involve assisting with packing food, assess emergency relief clients, advocacy and referrals in the same way that trained volunteers do. This also increases agency capacity to provide more appointments.

## Other capacities

An interesting, and unexpected, finding is the opportunity placements provide for agencies to review and improve on their casework processes and practice. In one agency, student placement was a catalyst for the agency to consider how the caseworker position can be improved. Policies were developed to separate the caseworker support role with the provision of material aid. In this agency, the caseworker was providing material aid/emergency relief, which contributed to a perception that casework was a pathway to ongoing emergency relief. This was reviewed and policies were put in place that meant the caseworker refers the client to the emergency relief service for material aid. This meant outcome for clients are more focused and achievable. Additionally, in response to a perceived problem in the way long-term casework clients engaged with the service, the student set up an appointment system "*which broke the habit of existing client who would walk straight through to the caseworker's office*" (Agency Manager).

Related to capacity building is the issue of limitations or barriers to student placement. The principal barrier is the availability of physical space and facilities to accommodate the student. Concomitant with this is the availability of resources such as time and supervision skills and experienced staff. Task supervisors take on the supervision role over and above their normal duties. This places an additional burden on task supervisors' time.

## What do participants think of the project overall?

Overall, participants rated the project as good or excellent (Graph 6).

Participants were also asked to make recommendations and suggestions for improvement on the model. The Reference Group was also interested to see how the CISVic model compares with participants experiences of other placement models. When asked to compare their supervision experience, most task supervisors felt that the CISVic model "offered greater support, communication and structure. Students highlighted the level of support, communication and placement tasks as better than their previous placement experience.

Respondents clearly and consistently identified components of the project that worked well as being: supervision, support, sharing and having the student on placement itself.



The literature tells us that supervision and the supervision relationship are crucial to student placement.<sup>1</sup> Students identified the structured nature of supervision and the learning opportunities in a peer group environment as valuable to learning:



*“Supervision. Having both a Task and Field Educator meant that any issues could be brought up in the relevant area, where they related to task or theories/social work education. The group supervision was also fantastic” Student*

## Case stories

Identifying potential, tapping into opportunities and adapting existing ways of doing things are instances of innovation. The two case stories illustrated in this report demonstrate instances of innovative response to the question of how to enhance the provision of casework with limited resources. The replicability of inter-agency placement is of particular interest to CISVic as we seek to identify opportunities to increase volunteer-based agencies' capacity to provide services to complex needs clients. Similarly, the unique circumstances of the student-created casework model enables us to identify the factors that are critical to the success of setting up a casework position, and how student placement has the potential to enhance agencies' capacity to deliver casework in circumstances of limited resources.

Key learnings from the case stories are:

- Student matching is crucial in a volunteer only agency. The matching process needs to ensure that the student placed at an agency can work independently and has sufficient life experience to work with a diverse group of volunteers.
- In a volunteer only agency, the lack of a consistent, paid staff presence can act as a barrier to sustaining effective supervision. Flexibility and whole-of-agency engagement with the student placement process are key to ensuring successful accommodation to difficulties and challenges. Volunteer education and involvement in the lead up to a placement, and ongoing agency-wide engagement with the student throughout placement will better embed the student placement in the agency. Given limited human resources in volunteer only agencies, CISVic and a larger, better resourced agency in an inter-agency partnership need to play a greater role in supporting this process. This can include:
  - streamlining supervision arrangements by appointing a principal task supervisor with overall responsibility for the student throughout the placement;
  - establish clear and regular communication channels between the agencies and the Field Educator, including structured and regular meetings between all supervisors;
  - establish organizational readiness for student placement: educating volunteers in what to expect from student placements; how volunteers can support students when supervisors are not on site; and appropriate task allocation
- The level of experience of the student who set up the social work position, her familiarity with the organization, its ethos and workplace culture were critical to the success of the student-created model. The organisation's commitment to the establishment of the model, bolstered by funding to support the position beyond the placement period contributed to the ongoing success of the casework position.

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<sup>1</sup> See Tsui M.S. & Ho W.S., (1998). In search of a comprehensive model of social work supervision. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 16:2, 181-205. Also Beddoe L. & Davys A., (2010). *Best Practice in Professional Supervision: A handbook for the helping professions*, London: Jessica Kingsley.

## Conclusion

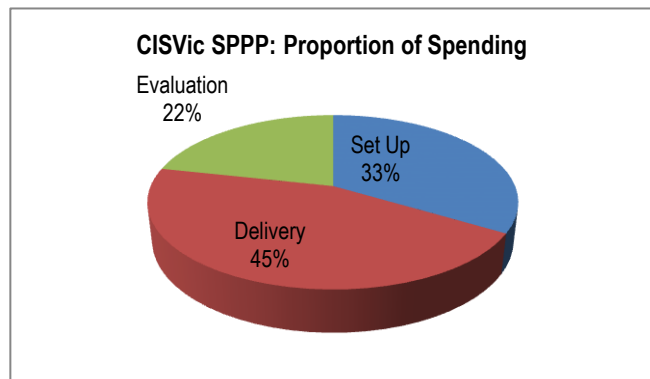
The CISVic SPPP is implemented in an environment of rapid change and multiple challenges in the community and volunteering sector. This was a pilot project that aimed to establish key relationships, processes and support structures for a coordinated student placement program. The project facilitated agency-university engagement to optimize student matching to placements. CISVic-university partnerships ensured that student learning opportunities and support met university requirements and student learning needs. As a peak body for a small volunteer based community sector, CISVic plays a crucial enabling role by identifying innovations in practice and service delivery that meets the needs of vulnerable and complex needs clients. There are both policy and practice implications for the CISVic SPPP, including:

- enhancing the role of a peak body in fostering community learning partnerships between the tertiary and community volunteering sectors;
- building agency capacity for internship workforce to support casework and programs targeting complex needs clients;
- addressing challenges to workforce capacity in the community volunteering sector;
- addressing challenges to community based student placements.

The challenge is to ensure that the program secures ongoing funding. The program is now established, and continuing improvements will be made on the existing model based on this, and future evaluation findings. Looking ahead, considerable savings will be made on initial project costs as once-off establishment costs no longer factor in the program budget. Savings due to economies of scale is therefore achieved as more students are signed onto the program, as demonstrated in Graphs 10-12 below.

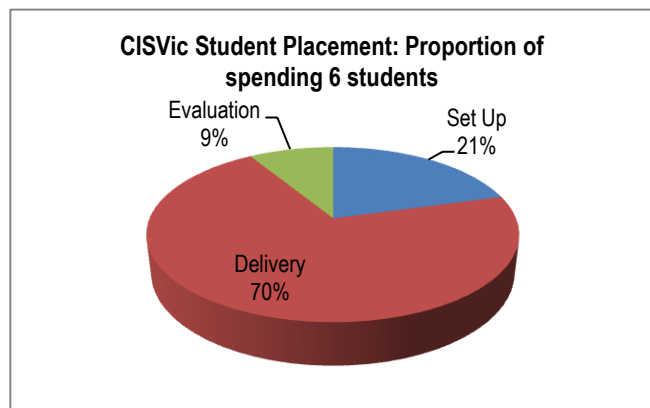
**Graph 10:**  
**CISVic SPPP: Proportion of Spending**

Cost per student: \$3531.18



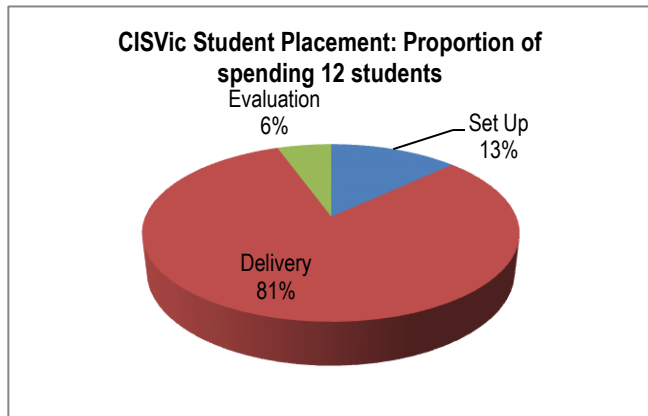
**Graph 11:**  
**CISVic Student Placement: Proportion of spending 6 students**

Cost per student: \$2757.89



**Graph 12:**  
**CISVic Student Placement: Proportion of spending 12 students**

Cost per student: \$2181.57





## Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- the federal government agency that funded this pilot, the Department of Families, Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) consider ongoing funding for the CISVic student placement program with the view that it:
  - increases agencies' capacities to deliver supported services to clients with complex needs;
  - addresses the broad aims of the community sector workforce capability framework including improved client outcomes, workforce capability, promote and enhance professional practice;
  - is an innovative program capable of replicability across jurisdictions and into the broader community services sector;
  - is cost effective with capacity for leveraging economies of scale.
- project partners pursue ongoing funding options including partnerships between:
  - CISVic, universities and government agencies (state and/or federal);
  - CISVic, universities and philanthropics;
  - CISVic, universities and friendly corporates.
- the Student Unit Model is promoted across the community sectors, focusing on peaks and state-wide bodies as an effective model that:
  - meets university requirements;
  - assists and supports placement agencies to provide high quality work-based learning;
  - enhances community based agencies' capacity to provide services and programs.
- the Student Unit Model be improved in the following areas:
  - further support for agencies during matching process;
  - provide clearer guidelines of role demarcation in supervision and assessment;
  - more opportunities for task supervisors to meet for peer support, supervision training and sharing;
  - work with project partners to consider how to better support educators, agencies and supervisors in situations where students are experiencing difficulties;
  - build on inter-agency placement case study and consider how to further support volunteer only agencies to host social work student placements.
- the Student Unit Model be further expanded to:
  - offer external group supervision to placements that have social work supervisors on site so that students can access peer and group support to enhance their work-based learning and sharing experiences;
  - continue to work with RMIT University to offer supervisors' workshop each year to develop supervision skills;
  - create a community of CISVic educators by promoting supervisors' network to share experiences, resources and training in supervision