



Social Worker in Schools program

University of New England



The Social Worker in Schools (SWiS) program is a collaborative partnership between UNE, its Social Work students and NSW public schools. UNE students gain valuable clinical skills and specialist expertise, contribute to vitally important wellbeing programs within disadvantaged schools, and forge enduring community and professional relationships.

Since 2010, UNE Bachelor and Master of Social Work students have undertaken

placements of up to 500 hours within disadvantaged primary, central and high schools across the state, supervised by a qualified social worker. From an initial 6 pilot school sites, this successful model has spread to more than 35 schools state-wide. Of the more than 100 UNE students who have participated in SWiS during the past five years alone, 25 per cent have gained permanent employment in schools.

Embedding the trainee social workers in schools enables them to help address complex social issues, improve educational engagement, and contribute to broader health outcomes for children and young people and their families as part of a whole-of-community approach. Many of the schools in which SWiS students have undertaken their placements are in low socio-economic areas, with high Aboriginal

and/or refugee enrolments, and often with limited supports. The SWiS students have commonly identified and intervened to support students experiencing learning difficulties or mental health and physical impairment that puts them at risk.

The profound impacts of the SWiS program have been educational, social and economic. UNE Social Work students engage in direct practice (working with individual school students), group work (focusing on developing resilience, social skills and emotion regulation) and community engagement (raising awareness of wellbeing with parents and service providers). They typically engage in supervised individual psychosocial and risk assessments, student counselling, advocacy, referrals and crisis intervention. In implementing projects

specific to the student community, they help to bolster collective student emotional and mental health, and engage with families to build coping skills and positive relationships. This has been highlighted during COVID lockdowns.

SWiS opportunities have allowed trainee social workers to interact closely with professional clients and to develop supportive relationships in a supervised workplace. This provides invaluable real-world experience and opportunities to grow and develop their practical social work skills, develop a strong professional identity and subsequent career. They become vital members of existing wellbeing teams within the schools.

School students and their families engaging with SWiS students have benefitted from individual assessments, and personal and family support. Having a dedicated SWiS advocate has helped to ensure the complex social, emotional and behavioural needs of school students are met, through therapeutic group-based work, education initiatives and intervention programs. This consequently addresses issues that may impact negatively on the students' own school engagement and learning, and the learning of others.

Social work students involved in the SWiS program conduct research as part of their placement (focusing on student wellbeing, practice evaluation, and school policy analysis and development), the results of which inform ongoing revisions to field education in schools. They are also invited to participate in the SWiS data collection survey on the scope and effectiveness of their interventions and this data is applied directly to their field education practice development.

Our key learnings from the first decade of SWiS include the importance of ongoing and open communication with schools and key staff within the Department. Without their support for our program, SWiS would have faltered long ago. Encouraging social work students to enter into a relatively new domain of practice is also key to success. For many social work students, traditional placement locations can seem more appealing as the social work role is clear and well established. When entering a new school, a SWiS student is paving the way, assisting the school community to begin to understand the role of a school social worker. This is a huge learning opportunity for everyone but can be overwhelming; support from the university to both the SWiS student and the school is vital throughout the placement. Finally, we view our students as experts from their experiences,

they assist us in continuing to further develop and refine what we do. Those who participated early in the program and have gained employment as social workers in schools are now also taking on supervising SWiS placements. This completes the learning cycle, and strengthens the overall, long term sustainability of the project and results in continuity of service to these schools and the communities in which they are located.

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UNE's Social Workers in Schools program was the winner of the 2021 EA Excellence Award for Excellence in Student Engagement.



