

Education is Just the Beginning for Young People: Collaboration, inclusion and paid placements vital to the youth homelessness services sector achieve greater equity and cultural harmony across communities

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The 2024 Australian Universities Accord Final Report outlines the importance of paid work opportunities which are aligned to students' studies. The Report found, *'much can be done and should be done, to support students to earn and learn successfully at the same time, because Australia needs more people participating to upskill and reskill in the decades to come.'*¹

For the youth homelessness sector, delivering paid work placement opportunities for young people with relevant industry skills from academia is a vital part of the future of the community housing and social services workforce, which can benefit and collaborate with communities across Australia, as well as with dedicated students.

In partnership with AFL SportsReady, Hope Street Youth and Family Services was thrilled to announce the engagement of two young people for a paid cadetship as part of their formal study.

This article features the insights of one of those cadets: Ruby Kelly-Gurthie, who is a proud Wemba Wemba, Yorta Yorta and Mutthi Mutthi woman from Swan Hill, Victoria. She is currently undergoing RMIT Placement as an AFL SportsReady Cadet for Bachelor of Youth Work and Youth Studies at Hope Street Youth and Family Services.

AFL SportsReady has provided a paid cadetship as an important step towards empowering social and youth work students to thrive in a supportive environment at Hope Street Youth and Family Services in the northern and western metropolitan communities of Melbourne, on Wurundjeri country.

This is an important feature of delivering culturally reflective and holistic youth homelessness services and community for young people.

According to Nicole Misurelli, People and Culture Manager at Hope Street: *'Fostering the sustainable growth of a diverse inclusive workforce ensures that expertise is drawn from a variety of cultural insights and connections, as well as providing equity in education by reducing students' financial barriers when undertaking placement hours.'*

Aspiring young professionals can thrive if they are paid for their placement hours whilst studying, achieving further equity and sharing their valuable insights in the youth and social work sectors. The myriad of organisations in the youth homelessness sector that provide wrap-around service delivery would benefit from funding support to enhance the participation of students in the field. This overall will benefit Australia society as young people are given the opportunity to thrive in a supportive work environment.

Young people studying youth and social work need to be able to access paid placement opportunities, especially if they are from marginalised and diverse circumstances, including rural, regional, first in family, culturally diverse, low socio-economic and First Nations backgrounds. This overall enhances equity and workforce inclusion across the youth homelessness sector and provides a pipeline of talent from those studying in related fields. Hope Street is excited to support this initiative and learn from the insights and knowledge of these young professionals. The cadetship is a practical opportunity and is onsite at Hope Street Youth and Family Services youth refuge centres.

Below, Ruby discusses the importance of student placements as a means for achieving equity, in the community and for students alike, as well as how they provide valuable sector-based knowledge and skills for future success in working with young people experiencing homelessness and social services more broadly.

Why are paid placements and advocacy opportunities important for people studying social and youth work and working in youth and community services sectors?

Ruby: Providing students with paid placements and advocacy opportunities are essential for those within the social and youth work field as it provides them with a chance to gain experience and new knowledge in a diverse range of sectors within the field, as well as gaining financial access which helps to minimise mental health and stress levels as they can work within the organisation without losing out on work, therefore the financial burden is somewhat eliminated. Furthermore, allowing students to work within the youth and community services sectors is essential as it will enable them to gain knowledge and experience of the fields they are interested in and learn more about industries they may be unfamiliar with.

Additionally, this ensures that students can make informed decisions about where they would like to work within community services. From a personal perspective, I have not participated in or have much knowledge regarding the youth homelessness sector; through having this opportunity to work at Hope Street as a paid cadet, I

can increase my knowledge and experience within this sector, which is essential for myself and my future profession of youth work. Lastly, providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with these opportunities is a great way to ensure advocacy. These placements allow Indigenous students to bring in their expertise from a cultural perspective and to enhance advocacy and support for all young Indigenous people as well as for themselves as strong Aboriginal people, coming into these spaces and providing their knowledge and practices within them.'

How can an organisation like Hope Street best mentor and support young people kick-starting their careers in social work, youth work and community advocacy?

Ruby: Hope Street and other organisations can mentor and support young people with their career start-ups within community services and advocacy in numerous ways: providing training and educational workshops, working in a collaborative framework, allowing students to work alongside those within the industry and, most importantly, through visual learning and hands-on work.

Educational and training workshops for students on placement allow us to gain insight into the organisation and how it operates regarding its policies and processes. At Hope Street, this involves workshops regarding youth homelessness and its different aspects, which ensures the placement students can acquire knowledge when working within this workplace. Working in a collaborative framework with young people is the benchmark for successful placement. A collaborative framework allows students to advocate and speak about what they want to get out of their placement, the goals they want to achieve, and the aspects they're interested in at Hope Street. Therefore, this ensures students gain the experiences and knowledge they need to make placement a positive learning opportunity. Collaborative frameworks are highlighted of significant importance in the aspect of Indigenous placement students. For indigenous students, it is vital to ensure they have input on issues

regarding their culture; therefore, they feel their culture and opinions are valued and appreciated. Additionally, Indigenous students who work within community services need the opportunity to preach and advocate their needs from a cultural perspective and work alongside an organisation that upholds this. It is essential to sustain these students' cultural needs and responsibilities to make their experience culturally safe and appropriate.

Moreover, when working within the community services sector, it is crucial to ensure young people can work alongside frontline workers to gain first-hand perspectives on what it is like to work within the industry. This interrelates with the understanding, allowing the placement experience to be a visual and hands-on framework when applicable. Through this, placement students can gain and further their knowledge and experience through interactions with clients and understand the day-to-day experience within the field. For example, a placement student at Hope Street can engage in hands-on and visual learning by watching an intake assessment for young people experiencing homelessness crises, giving them the required knowledge and processes on how this is conducted within the organisation.'

As such, the youth homelessness sector benefits from greater equity, as the expertise of these cadets cannot be underestimated, and this placement opportunity brings forth collaboration that is intersectional and culturally led. Measuring the success of Hope Street and AFL SportsReady's cadetship program begins with the student's learning goals and experience of a positive placement being met and, more broadly, seeing that paid placements support more young people to access the workforce and sustainable education, giving them the best opportunities to thrive and provide a valuable contribution in the youth and social work sectors.

The delivery of innovative and effective youth homelessness services that are culturally led and intersectional requires expertise from First Nations young people who specialise in youth and social

work. Such outcomes for the sector and the corresponding educational opportunities require student placements to be equitable and collaborative. It is vital the future of the workforce is not held back by lack of access to a paid placement, which allows for important skills development, industry learning and collaboration.

Donna Bennett, the CEO at Hope Street, further acknowledged the benefit of such initiatives for the sector and wider community:

'Paid placements for young people in youth and social work help bridge the gap between education and employment outcomes, as well as enhancing connection to country and communities. There is also a long-term and much wider community empowering vision of assisting with professional and career pathways for First Nations young people that could lead them to become historic change agents. That is, through their career development, they could enter areas such as research, executive and senior positions in the public sector, executive leaders of organisations, and members of parliament and many other areas of leadership and influence. These areas are where major social change is conceptualised, created and resourced, the success of which is driven by the people in these positions. History demonstrates that the greatest social changes benefiting people who experience major socio-economic disadvantage are driven by people who have had lived experience. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal influencers, advocates and leaders such as Evonne Goolagong Cawley, Cathy Freeman, Lowitja O'Donoghue, Eddie Mabo, Neville Bonner, Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, and Kevin Rudd are inspirational in the socio-economic changes their actions have led to.'

Endnotes

1. Australian Government 2023, *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*, <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>