

Response to the
Australian Universities Accord
Interim Report
2023



Students Against Placement Poverty
Queensland

1st of September, 2023

About the QLD Branch of Students Against Placement Poverty

This submission has been prepared by representatives of the Queensland branch of Students Against Placement Poverty from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

Students Against Placement Poverty (SAPP) is a grassroots student collective founded in New South Wales in 2020 by social work and teaching students. SAPP advocates for the remuneration of mandatory work-integrated learning, raising awareness of the burden that unpaid placements have on students, and the barriers they create to equitable participation in higher education – particularly for students from marginalised communities and cohorts already severely underrepresented in higher education.

As students, future professional practitioners, and parents of future students, we value our role as key stakeholders in the current and future wellbeing, sustainability, and innovation of higher education in Australia. SAPP QLD acknowledges the time, expertise, and contributions of other respondents to the Australian Universities Accord's calls for consultation. We also thank the Accord for the opportunity to respond to the interim report, acknowledge their critical work uncovering the systemic barriers to participation in Australian higher education, and their dedication to its innovation and reimagining.

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Executive Summary

“Our goal must be growth for skills through greater equity” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 14).

The Australian Universities Accord interim report identifies problematic areas, key considerations, and challenges within the current and future state of higher education in Australia. The need for significant, sustainable, and innovative change for equitable access to higher education was consistently highlighted throughout the report, including the need for equitable reform in ‘Supporting students to undertake placements’ (2.2.4); a consideration we believe must be a priority for the Accord. Healthcare, education, and social work occupations are facing critical challenges, with intensifying rates of attrition resulting in extreme workforce shortages, at a time when the demand for these professions is skyrocketing.

Unpaid placements are a structural barrier to achieving equity and participation, with evidence demonstrating definitive causal links between the current exploitative requirements of unpaid placements, and student poverty (Cowan & Robinson, 2023; Crisp et al., 2023; Hosken, 2018; Morley et al., 2022; 2023). Consequently, higher education remains inaccessible to those who cannot afford to quit their jobs or who have caring responsibilities, limiting participation to only those privileged enough to afford it. With the rising cost of living, this issue is only expected to worsen if urgent action is not taken, and innovative and sustainable systemic change is not implemented.

Our submission highlights the challenges caused by mandatory, unpaid work-integrated learning requirements across a range of affected disciplines, including social work. With reference to the Australian Universities Accord interim report findings (2023), we highlight the intersection between essential workforce shortages, inequity, and the correlation with mandatory, unpaid placement. Drawing on research and effective international practices, we put forward recommendations to address the drastic inequities highlighted in the Accord’s interim report, offering practical and achievable measures to ensure the longevity of innovative, sustainable, equitable higher education that meets the needs of students and Australian society at large – now and in the future.

Government-funded apprenticeship models, fast-track postgraduate programmes, and bursaries offer innovative and dynamic approaches to higher education; meaningful, critical praxis; and remuneration for several years of professional experience. The implementation of these systemic changes ensures accessibility for diverse and underrepresented cohorts, whose participation is essential to Close the Gaps and meet Australians’ dynamic needs. As such, our response provides rationale for the

following recommendations:

1. Amend the Fair Work Act 2009 to end to 'lawfully unpaid' student placements (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.);
2. Establish a government-funded bursary scheme commensurate with dynamic cost of living expenses, in line with English models;
3. Establish appropriately remunerated apprenticeship models and fast-track programmes for relevant degrees, including social work;
4. In light of reputable research evidencing that learning competencies can be achieved at reduced hours (ANZASW, 2022; Crisp et al., 2023; CSWE, 2022), reduce social work placement hours, in line with Canada and New Zealand;
5. That the government ensures the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and other disciplines' professional accreditation bodies, actively facilitate and protect accessibility, equity, parity, and diversity, by providing flexible opportunities for student engagement in field education, centred around learning and competency outcomes, *not* hours. This includes recognition of prior learning and experience; and allowing remote, part-time, simulated, work-based and/or indirect placements.

Work-integrated learning (WIL)

"In the absence of relief, more students are likely to defer or discontinue their studies" (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 77).

Across a multitude of disciplines, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees require mandatory work-integrated learning (placements) to fulfil programme and professional regulatory body prerequisites. Degrees within education, health, allied health, sciences, and the arts have mandatory, unpaid placement requirements, varying from hundreds of hours to 1,000 hours per degree.

Students are responsible for WIL course fees and student contribution fees, as well as any additional placement costs, including transport, uniforms, and equipment. Those required to undertake remote and rural placements are also responsible for all accommodation, travel, and food expenses.

Current challenges

“Without change, Australia’s higher education system will rapidly become unfit for purpose” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 29)

The Universities Accord interim report identifies current national workforce shortages across “Critical professions including teaching, medicine ... dentistry, nursing, veterinary science and allied health ...” (2023, p. 54), noting the significant need for additional graduates within these fields. The Australian higher education system requires nearly one million additional Commonwealth supported students over the next 27 years, largely comprised of currently underrepresented student cohorts (Australian Universities Accord, 2023). Consequently, it is imperative that systemic barriers and hindrances to parity, equity, diversity, and accessibility in higher education be identified and dismantled. Innovative, sustainable, dynamic solutions are critically necessary to honour an ongoing “... commitment to access for everyone with the potential and application ...” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 28) – not just those who can afford to study.

Marginalisation of underrepresented cohorts hinders equitable participation

“... we can’t progress without addressing equity in participation ...” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 16).

National essential workforce shortages identified by the Accord, are largely comprised of female students (Peetz, 2023). This includes social work students, whose cohorts are not dominated by ‘traditional school-leaver students’ but are heavily comprised of mature-aged women and students from equity groups (Cowan & Robinson, 2023; Morley et al 2023). Richly populated by First Nations students, students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, mature-aged students with extensive caring responsibilities, and young people, social work students are also more likely to have a disability (Crisp et al., 2023). The interim report identifies such cohorts as largely underrepresented within higher education (Australian Universities Accord, 2023).

These minority cohorts endure greater baseline incidences of poverty than the overall student population (Morley et al., 2023; Oke et al., 2022). Additionally, mandatory unpaid placement creates barriers to equitable participation, which impact and discriminates against students from equity backgrounds. This has an homogenising effect on social work student cohorts and the broader field, putting our profession at risk of being steeped in privilege, as degree completion is restricted to those with the financial, physical, mental, and social resources to complete 1,000 hours of unpaid placement. Social work as a profession espouses the value of practitioners with

diverse lived experience, yet such stringent placement requirements prohibit these cohorts from equitable access and participation.

The unique needs of marginalised, underrepresented student cohorts remain inadequately addressed. Current policies and requisites sustain systemic marginalisation and restrict equitable participation, forcing students to choose between continuing their education, or sustaining their individual and familial well-being and survival (Cowan & Robinson, 2023; Morley et al., 2023).

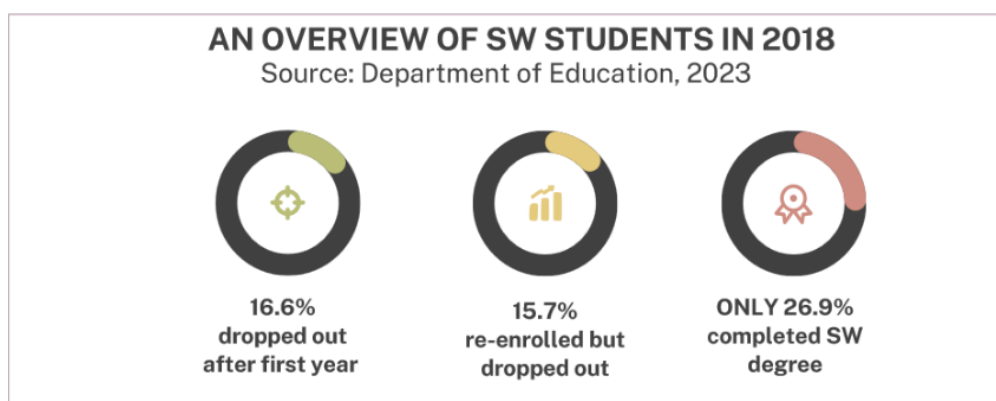
Financial strain

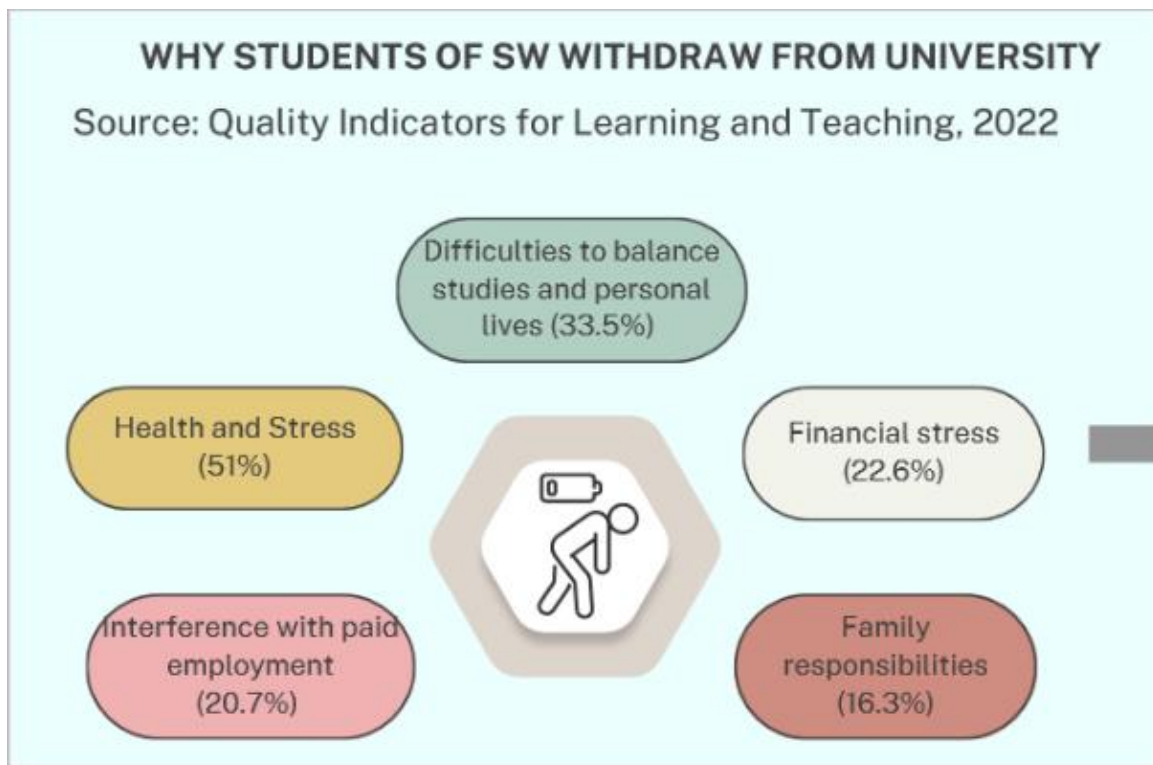
“... prevent excessive debt and rising student cost of living pressures from discouraging people of all ages from pursuing higher education and completing their qualifications” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 16).

Symptomatic of systemic barriers hindering equitable participation of marginalised students in higher education, financial stressors are especially prevalent in social work student cohorts (QILT, 2022). A survey of Australian tertiary students revealed (Morley, 2023):

- More than 66% expressed concern about their financial well-being;
- 17% frequently go without food and other basic essentials;
- 50% reported a budget deficit in their weekly expenditures (Cowan, 2017; Morley, 2023).

Additionally, despite one in four students needing 20 hours of paid work to survive each week (Morley, 2023), 20.7% indicate that paid employment commitments interfere with their studies, with financial stress reported by 22.6% of students (QILT, 2022).





In undertaking the requisite 1,000 hours of unpaid placement, Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work students lose more than \$21,000 of minimum wage income per degree (Wang, 2023). Diverse cohort populations already marginalised and disadvantaged, sacrifice paid work to meet placement requirements. These conditions result in extreme financial stress and have a significant impact on student learning (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2018; Morely et al., 2023).

Mandatory, unpaid WIL hours are exploitative and not conducive to achieving desired learning outcomes

“... a more integrated system to deliver the flexible, transferable skills people want and need” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 15).

Social work placement hours are not standardised internationally. Bachelor of Social Work students in Canada undertake 700 hours of placement (CSWE, 2022), and New Zealand, 840 hours (ANZASW, 2022). All accredited social work courses are internationally recognised as comparable, denoting that placement length does not equate to professional prestige or competency (Morley et al., 2023). Lengthier placements do not make for ‘better’ social workers; on the contrary, they contribute to early career burn-out and early attrition (Morley et al., 2023).

A reduction in mandatory social work placement hours has previously been successfully implemented in Australia. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the AASW reduced the required hours to 400 per placement, with students successfully achieving and demonstrating the required learning competencies during this time (Morley et al., 2023). These short-term changes implemented in 2020-2021, provided an evidence-base for reduction of placement hours as an effective, sustainable, and immediately implementable strategy to increase accessibility, whilst preserving competency. Further, Morley et al. (2023) found that an overwhelming majority of research participants (comprised of students, field educators, and practitioners) supported reducing placement hours in favour of a 'learning-outcomes-based' model. However, it is prudent to mention that reduction in placement hours alone is *not* sufficient to ensure equity in mandatory work-integrated learning and thus, participation in higher education; remuneration is also required to eliminate barriers to equitable participation (Crisp et al., 2023).

Rigidity of WIL requirements creates inaccessibility

"... helping all students access, move through and succeed in Australia's tertiary system wherever possible, and without financial or other forms of hardship"

(Australian Universities Accord, p. 25).

Placements are lengthy undertakings, often fixed and rigid, unable to be adapted to students' needs, mental health problems, and experiences of poverty (Hodge et al., 2021). However, the flexibility of placement options permitted due to COVID-19, evidenced that field learning outcomes could still be achieved whilst forgoing current Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education's (ACHSWE) rigid requirements (Crisp et al., 2023).

The ACHSWE submission to the Australian Universities Accord highlighted the support from students, educators, and field practitioners towards changes aligned with contemporary ways of learning and working (Crisp et al., 2023):

- recognising prior experience towards placement hours;
- reducing the number of required hours, focusing on learning outcomes rather than 'ticked' hours;
- allowing work-based placements when the job offers learning opportunities;
- allowing part-time placements over a longer timeframe, to accommodate for caring responsibilities, simultaneous part-time jobs, disability, or other student needs;
- allowing simulated learning;
- allowing two non-direct placements;

- allowing working from home or remotely

Having to comply with the longest allied healthcare field placement requirements alongside occupational therapy, social work students are “... often structurally disadvantaged ...” (Morley et al., 2023, p. 14). Such modifications would alleviate the circumstantial, status quo-induced physical, mental, financial, and emotional hardship that students endure due to placement (Morley et al., 2023). This improved equitable access would consequently benefit enrolment, attrition, and completion rates. Given the high percentage of equity students within social work degrees (Cowan & Robinson, 2023; Morley et al 2023), policy change of this nature would centre the marginalised, underrepresented cohorts the Accord has identified as key in engaging.

Prioritisation of social work

“... bold reform will be required ...” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 24).

Social work needs to be prioritised within paid placement reform. The demand for social workers is expected to grow strongly from 40,000 in 2020 to 49,300 in 2026 (JSA, 2023). The New South Wales Health and Social Work Report (2018) identified several major drivers in the increasing demand for social workers:

- the population's increasingly complex health and social needs;
- reported lack of services and supports outside the health system;
- role of social workers becoming more complex due to increasing demands for support;
- changes in service provision caused by recent government reforms.

Social work services are currently under strain, with social workers navigating extensive waiting lists, heavy workloads, and limited capacity. Demand is projected to rise significantly as the population ages and policies focus more on family violence, disability, and mental health support. Family violence, aged care, disability, mental health, child protection, and Indigenous mental health will be in high demand in the future (Victorian Allied Health Workforce Research Program, 2018).

The interim report identifies that “An increase in the number of people gaining a higher education requires an increase in enrolments by students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 47). Facilitating equity and accessibility of tertiary education for traditionally underrepresented cohorts relies upon change in curriculum delivery and participation requirements in higher education, including unpaid mandatory work-integrated learning requirements.

International WIL practices

“Old approaches are not working...” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 69).

The adoption of apprenticeship-based, work-integrated learning systems mentioned in the interim report (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 61), and/or fast-track postgraduate programmes akin to those in England, would be a significant and beneficial innovation for students. Classroom learning is undertaken alongside work-integrated field education under experienced supervisors, and students are remunerated for their work throughout their entire period of study. Beginning with a tax-exempt bursary of £18,000 - £20,000 in first year, students move to a full-time employee salary of £34,000 (average) from second year onwards (The Frontline, n.d.). Additionally, course fees are wholly government-funded (British Association of Social Workers. n.d.).

These approaches ensure that graduates accrue no HECS or related student debts, whilst providing students with several years of real-world experience and diverse opportunities for meaningful, critical praxis. More qualified, competent, and experienced graduates emerge from these innovative learning systems, likely with a better chance of securing meaningful employment as new graduates. Such pathways may be particularly life-changing for students with disabilities, caring responsibilities, and mature aged students up-skilling, re-skilling, and/or re-entering the workforce whilst parenting. This will assist in ensuring accessibility, diversity, and equity for underrepresented cohorts, including First Nations students – students rightfully identified by the Accord as underrepresented in the landscape of higher education, and essential for its success.

Impact on international students

“The Review sees international education less as an industry and more as a crucial element of Australia’s soft diplomacy...” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 18).

International students undertaking mandatory unpaid WIL experience unique circumstances with considerations differing from those of domestic students. Given the desire to ensure “... international students, particularly those studying in areas of Australia’s skills needs ... will ... help meet workforce shortages” (Australian

Universities Accord, 2023, p. 66), it seems pertinent to ensure that conditions are favourable to retain diverse international cohorts. Particularly in the wake of pandemic border closures, their detrimental impact on international student numbers in Australia, and the consequential loss of 40,000 tertiary educator jobs (Littleton & Stanford, 2021). Contextually, it appears counterintuitive to consider employing "... a funding mechanism such as a levy on international student fee income ..." (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 23); full fee-paying international students are already enduring the high financial costs and stressors of non-domestic university fees in addition to the financial impacts of mandatory placements. Introducing a levy does not seem conducive to preserving and nurturing soft diplomacy; "... providing a high-quality university experience for international students ..." (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 18); or ensuring that international students will be encouraged to study in Australia: "Effort should work towards a more sustainable, equitable, and fairer international student education model that delivers benefits for all stakeholders, including international students themselves" (Hurley, 2020, p. 21).

Recommendations

"The status quo will not suffice. Fundamental changes in tertiary education participation will be needed" (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 31).

1. Amend the Fair Work Act 2009 to end to 'lawfully unpaid' student placements (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.);
2. Establish a government-funded bursary scheme commensurate with cost of living, in line with English models;
3. Establish appropriately remunerated apprenticeship models and fast-track programmes for relevant degrees, including social work;
4. In light of reputable research evidencing that learning competencies can be achieved at reduced hours (ANZASW, 2022; Crisp et al., 2023; CSWE, 2022), reduce social work placement hours, in line with Canada and New Zealand;
5. That the government ensures the AASW and other disciplines' professional accreditation bodies, actively facilitate and protect accessibility, equity, parity,

and diversity, by providing flexible opportunities for students to meet field education learning outcomes and professional competencies, centered around learning and competency outcomes, *not* hours. This includes: recognition of prior learning and experience; and allowing remote, part-time, simulated, work-based and/or indirect placements;

Conclusion

“There is zero room for complacency” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 29).

The Australian Universities Accord interim report (2023) illustrates the dire need for change within higher education in Australia, if attainment rate of tertiary-qualified professionals is to stand any chance of meeting increasing demand over the coming years. Inextricably linked to this necessary revision and reimagining of Australian higher education, is systemic change within delivery of education, including mandated requisites. The reimagining of work-integrated learning, secondment, placement, and practicum is a key component in ensuring the future of higher education; a foundational element long neglected, and a main contributor to barriers to commencement, completion, and attainment of professional competencies.

Facilitating equity and accessibility of tertiary education for traditionally underrepresented cohorts relies upon the revision of placement conditions, including their unpaid nature. A consistent thread throughout the interim report and the Accord’s examination of ‘spikey’, contested systems: “An increase in the number of people gaining a higher education requires an increase in enrolments by students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds” (2023, p. 47).

The interim report consistently and repeatedly reiterates the desperate need for change within the higher education sector, noting current and predicted increasing shortages of appropriately qualified graduates within essential, irreplaceable fields and services. Across more than 150 pages, the same systemic issues and their symptoms are noted time and time again; a consequence of the previous Liberal-National coalition’s neoliberal approach to education, students, disability, poverty, social welfare, and human rights. However, when unpaid placements - one of the most significant manifestations of systemic inequity in higher education - are explicitly addressed in the interim report, assurance is provided that the Accord “... will explore the possibility of requiring some form of financial support for students undertaking mandatory placements” (Australian Universities Accord, 2023, p. 60).

If students' meaningful work remains "... lawfully unpaid ..." (FairWork, n. d.), the systemic issues identified in the interim report remain susceptible to preservation and relapse, irrespective of other changes implemented. Improving accessibility, equity, parity, and diversity requires innovative, sustainable, dynamic change; *this must begin with remunerating students' labour.*

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Student Testimonials

“Placement is a continued exploitation of women, where women are expected to care for others at their own expense.” (Hodge et al., 2021, p.795)

“The semester that I did placement, put untold pressure on my family financially. I was very close to doing what I was supporting my clients with—food hampers etc. Due to this financial struggle, I had no choice but to reduce from full-time study to part-time study so that I could resume paid work whilst studying.” (Morley et al., 2023, p. 8)

“Living off two-minute noodles every night (because that’s all you can afford) is unhealthy and does not lend itself to sustaining good energy for academia. I can’t afford healthy food. I have to ration everything. Some days I don’t have enough petrol to leave the house—I have to reserve all my petrol to get to and from field placement. I had my internet disconnected. I’ve defaulted twice with my finance company and my phone is about to be disconnected. (Morley et al., 2023, p. 10).

I struggle to put food on the table a lot of the time . . . I have accessed emergency food relief at times while studying. “ (Morley et al., 2023, p. 10)

My children have to attend after-school care and school holiday programmes, which is every day during placement. Travelling cost, parking cost to and from university and placement. The fact that placement has to be full-time or three days minimum, meant that I had to quit my part-time job in order to complete my yearlong (total) placement. (Oke, et al, 2022)

[Being a single parent was] Probably the biggest obstacle. It meant that I did turn away a couple of placements. I couldn’t work them in because they were too inflexible. It wasn’t going to work with also being a sole mum and not having the support at home. (Cowan & Robinson, 2023)

My eldest child is on the [Autism] Spectrum. My commitment to placement affected being able to attend appointments for his support needs. We were able to get the psychologist to see him during school hours at school. We were not able to make those arrangements with

the speech or the OT. So, for a period of time, he wasn't getting that support based on the fact that I needed to do placement. (Nenita) Cowan & Robinson, 2023)

Going from placement to work (working 16-hour days), working seven days a week (Saturday and Sunday) and basically scraping yourself through the whole thing. (Morley et al)

Being a single parent and barely managing to study part-time has meant that my degree is taking longer to complete, therefore, greater amount of time (12years) before I can gain employment which has significantly contributed to my children and living well below the poverty line and experiencing extreme financial hardship. (Morley et al., 2023)

I have had to negotiate this AS PART OF MY MATERNITY LEAVE. In addition, I have had to work extra-long days at both work and placement to try and complete the hours that are required in a timely manner, so it does not jeopardize my employment. I have had to sacrifice meaningful projects in my career and ask for compromise and understanding from my colleagues who are carrying aspects of my role while I am on leave (Morley et al, 2023)