

Executive summary

Purpose

The purpose of this Fellowship was to develop a nationwide collaborative strategy to improve the economic sustainability and geographic availability of niche social profession courses. The niche courses in social professions examined in this programme meet specialist social needs in disability services, social gerontology, and youth work.

Context and approach

Context: Specialist courses in social professions have limited availability across the Australian university sector and availability has declined over the last decade despite a continuing need for specialist graduates, as attested by the relevant professional bodies, and by policy implementation reviews (see Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, calls for Royal Commission into the Disability Services) in the areas where graduates from these courses might provide stronger leadership.

Approach: To improve learning opportunities for students and achieve collaboration, the programme leader worked with colleagues and professional bodies nationally to analyse trend data and develop a working plan for each field of education

Programme impact

The programme has **raised awareness** about the need for urgent system-wide action to support niche social professions and has **developed collaborative network(s)** to strengthen cross-institutional relationships between staff offering courses in niche social professions. The programme has **strengthened relationships** with relevant state and federal professional bodies in each field and has established a network of colleagues to help resolve these challenges. In addition, the fellowship has **proposed changes** to support a nationwide collaborative strategy that will enable institutions to offer viable programmes for the niche social professions. Dissemination has occurred to **move beyond known interest groups**, and staff from 16 universities and nine professional associations have been involved in discussions, consultations and planning for change. The issues and proposed strategies are outlined in this document. The working groups in each discipline will continue to collaborate to build momentum for change and to engage with colleagues at other universities to continue the work commenced by this fellowship.

Key findings

The fellowship programme found there had been a **sustained loss of degree availability** in specialist social professions over the past seven years. This had occurred particularly for undergraduate courses in social gerontology and disability. Youth work undergraduate student numbers have increased, but the specialist youth work degrees were still only available in public universities in two states (Victoria and WA). There was considerable **variability between disciplines**, for example, in 2019, only one university offered a specialist undergraduate degree in disability (Flinders University), and only one university offered a specialist undergraduate major in social gerontology (Charles Sturt University), whereas four public universities were offering specialist undergraduate youth work degrees (Australian Catholic University, Edith Cowan University, RMIT University and Victoria University).

Professional associations expressed concern about the consequences of lack of specialist undergraduate degrees. Concerns focused on the decline in availability of specialist undergraduate degrees in disability and social gerontology and lack of availability of youth work degrees in most states and territories. More advanced **professionalization** in the youth work field of education, compared with either social gerontology or disability, has supported **clear career pathways** and the growth in youth work student numbers (and lack of decline in availability of degrees). Other **indicators of continuing external need for specialisms** include on-going documented workforce shortages (for example all professions are also on the State Priority Occupation List (SPOL) in WA) and workforce education and leadership recommendations emerging from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Standards, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse and from concerns expressed by the disability sector and users of disability services.

Universities were **somewhat aware of the problem** at the commencement of the fellowship. Both staff and senior managers, **expressed concern about course losses** in these fields of education. However, **no-one is monitoring the big picture** and unlike special provisions made to monitor and protect low-availability foreign languages courses from closure, no similar provision is in place for specialist social welfare courses. Even those teaching in these fields of education expressed surprise at the extent and rapidity of the decline in availability of specialist undergraduate disability and social gerontology courses across the university sector. For course coordinators spoke of their **struggle to maintain courses** within their institution.

Three **models for collaboration** were examined (informal cross-institutional enrolment, formalised cross-institutional collaboration, for example, through joint double-badged courses, and a Collaborative Teaching Centre model). Informal cross-institutional enrolment arrangements are simplest to implement but the establishment of Collaborative Teaching Centres (CTCs) would offer the most stable solution. Identified **barriers to collaboration** between institutions included the fierce competition engendered by the change to demand-driven funding. This had intensified **competition between courses within universities**. Coordinators of small courses perceived they were disadvantaged by internal competition because larger courses were allocated bigger marketing budgets, which they used to attract students away from small courses. This does not prioritise the students' best interests, the needs of specialist professions or social need.

Changes to university **funding mechanisms have unintentionally contributed** to the loss of specialist undergraduate courses in social professions. The transition from centrally planned university funding to demand-driven university intensified competition within and between institutions, and universities that previously collaborated have become direct competitors. This has reduced willingness of universities to participate in cross-institutional collaboration without additional incentives. This is exacerbated by allocation of these courses to a **Commonwealth government funding cluster (CGFC) classification that does not reflect the costs of course provision**. These courses (ASCED FoE Code 090505, 090507, 090509) along with social work and other welfare courses, are allocated to Commonwealth Government Funding Cluster 3b (behavioural science or social studies). Pedagogically they are unlike lecture-based courses in this cluster (politics, policy studies, human geography or anthropology) because of supervised practicum requirements. The pedagogy and costs of specialist social professions are more akin to allied health or clinical psychology in funding Cluster 5, (clinical psychology, allied health, foreign languages, visual and

performing arts) (Department of Education and Training, 2019). Cluster 5 receives a higher level of government fee support than Cluster 3, and this affects the attractiveness to universities of offering these courses. Another structural problem is the well-documented (Kemp & Norton, 2014; Noonan, 2015), is the **diversion of teaching funding into research**. Universities are using teaching derived income to support research as a means of achieving higher ranking on university league table. A consequence of this is that courses that cover costs but are not highly profitable, have become vulnerable to being discontinued.

During the fellowship, it became apparent that other specialist and emerging disciplines were facing similar challenges: these included careers (guidance) education; leadership and development training (for police and others); integrated palliative care; and permaculture.

Recommendations

This report makes the following recommendations

- 1) **Establish Cooperative Teaching Centres** as centres of teaching excellence in specialist social professions disciplines. This will provide seed money for the development of shared teaching resources and will encourage and support cross-institutional collaboration
- 2) **Reclassify social welfare courses to the same CGFC as allied health or clinical psychology**. Align the CGFC decisions with the pedagogic requirements of teaching, as well as social and economic need, and future graduate income.
- 3) **Monitor and report** on the availability and discontinuation of specialist courses across the sector and prevent closure (similar to protection of low-availability foreign languages).
- 4) **Provide additional support** for the provision of specialist courses in social professions where there are skills shortages or unmet social needs through lower student contribution costs
- 5) **Teaching funds for teaching related activities**: Where student places are supported by Commonwealth Grants Scheme (CGS), limit the capacity of universities to divert funds away from teaching and student services. This will necessitate reinstatement of better research funding for universities.
- 6) **Teaching recognition**: Instigate or reinstate programmes that give status to university teaching that is responsive to social needs, values community service, and support human well-being.
- 7) **University funding models**: adjust to reduce barriers to collaboration between universities, and to actively support provision of diverse specialist collaborative courses to meet specialist social, cultural and economic needs.

Outputs:

Website (<https://ywdaf.org>), publications (see Appendix G, also see website), contact information for course coordinators and professional bodies in the three disciplines (see website). Strategic trend data for each cluster (see website). See Action Plans (Appendix H).