

# ACWA Research Agenda



**ACWA**

AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY  
WORKERS ASSOCIATION

*The Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) is the professional association for the thousands of community work practitioners in Australia and leads the development, identity, and recognition of the profession.*

Community workers hold a variety of occupational titles and come into the profession from a range of disciplines and educational backgrounds. And whilst this diversity is the very strength of community work, it can create fragmentation that undermines the ability of the sector to present itself as a coherent profession able to demand recognition, career development, appropriate pay and good employment conditions.

ACWA believes that current research into this vital workforce is ad hoc, narrow and in the main underpinned by a misconception regarding the professional standing of community work practitioners. In light of this we have developed a research agenda designed to assist and encourage researchers, governments, the community sector and educational institutions to identify areas for research that will lead to a better understanding of the community work profession.

Only by putting the spotlight on the profession will we be capable of building a body of knowledge to address the challenges of limited public recognition and availability of appropriate roles for community work professionals.

The aim of this agenda, therefore, is to promote and support research that provides insight into the community work labour force and highlights any issues or factors that impact on their professional identity, and the public's recognition of their professional skills.

Over the past two years we have consulted with ACWA members and other stakeholders and have identified three main areas we believe worthy of research: the minimum qualification requirement for professional practice and recognition; the workplace within which community workers are employed; and public policy and legislative frameworks that have an impact on professional practice.

We are vitally interested in any areas of enquiry that will add significantly to the body of knowledge about the community work profession and would appreciate being informed of any new or impending research relevant to this agenda.

# Questions we are interested in:

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## QUALIFICATIONS

Most, if not all, professions require a comprehensive body of knowledge and theory to enable practitioners to become sufficiently competent to practice. In relation to community or human services qualifications we are especially interested in gaining new knowledge through the following research questions:

- Do community and human services qualifications adequately prepare students for professional roles?
- Does the community, including employers, have expectations around minimum qualifications for community workers?
- Is there a variation in the quality of education provided by private RTOs and TAFEs? Does this have an impact on the work available to graduates?
- Do VET providers and universities conduct interviews prior to a course commencing? Would this help students?
- Do fieldwork placements adequately prepare students for the types, stresses and responsibilities of professional community work? Is there anything else that might replace fieldwork (e.g. supervised practice/internships)?
- What is an appropriate length for fieldwork placement? What impact on not for profit organisations do fieldwork placements have?
- Should students specialise before or after they enter the workforce? Does specialisation assist or hinder career progression?
- Could specialised courses be brought together with a standardised core component, for example, Diploma Community Services, Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs?
- Does the curriculum and practical education component of courses allow for articulation into higher courses? Is it easy for students to move from a diploma to a degree, or from a certificate to a diploma?
- Do educational institutions work together, or even internally, to encourage students and graduates to take up packaged or articulated opportunities? Is this a good idea?
- Are the entry standards for community and human services qualifications set sufficiently high to enable students to graduate, or once graduated, provide a service that meets community expectations?
- Are higher education graduates getting comparable recognition to social workers? What can a social worker do that a well-qualified community worker cannot, and is the difference perceived or real?
- Do workforce shortages have an impact on the quality of education?



## THE WORKPLACE

Most people who graduate from community services courses have a career in the sector in mind. The type and quality of the qualification has a direct bearing on a graduate's career trajectory, how long they stay in the sector, and how much they enjoy their work. We are particularly interested in the comparisons between VET and higher education, and between community work and social work graduates.

- Do the conditions and pay levels of community workers reflect the complexity of their work, their qualifications, and their expectations of the role?
- Do graduates with community service qualifications advance as far in their careers as say social workers?
- Are graduates sufficiently work ready? Do employers have to invest in significant training for new graduates?
- Is the transition from education to the workforce easy?
- How long do practitioners stay in the sector?
- How long does it take to get work? Why don't some students practice after graduation?
- What brings about stress, burnout and attrition in the sector and what is the cost?
- Are community workers more, or less likely to suffer stress than other professionals?
- What are the high-risk areas for community workers? What workplace safety issues have the most impact on community workers?
- Where, and in what type of occupations, are community work professionals mainly employed?
- Do shortages or excesses in the workforce have an impact on the types of employment graduates take up? Are graduates of diploma courses, for example, likely to take up roles for which they are over-qualified?
- Do practitioners pay for their own professional development? If so, is this a disincentive?



## PUBLIC POLICY AND LEGISLATION

Policy decisions by governments have a direct effect on the practice of community workers whether through funding cuts or increases, imposing conditions on welfare recipients, adjusting sentencing laws, expanding mandatory reporting, or even strengthening or relaxing regulations in childcare. We are interested in how organisations that employ community work practitioners respond to public policy changes and how such changes might directly or indirectly impact on their workforces.

- Do organisations have strategies in place to respond to public policies that affect them or their clients?
- How do organisations and staff respond to changes in public policy that are inconsistent with their own ways of operating?
- How do organisations address public policy requirements that are inconsistent with the code of ethics for their profession?
- Do changes in public policy influence the retention of staff?
- Do organisations have the right/obligation to comment on public policy that has implications for staff or clients? Do organisations act on that right?
- Does public policy that affects individuals have a direct impact on community workers?
- Should the sector and/or community workers be regulated in some way?
- Do changes in public policy have an impact on the missions of organisations that employ community workers?

## THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY WORK

ACWA's Journal aims to stimulate discussion, debate and research on all aspects of community work. It is part of ACWA's commitment to foster shared practice wisdom and rigorous research. Articles are welcomed from all areas and demographic groups that fall within the community work arena. For more information visit the ACWA website or email [ajcw@acwa.org.au](mailto:ajcw@acwa.org.au)



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