

Australian Community Workers Association: Research agenda

The Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) is the professional association for thousands of community work professionals in Australia. Community workers hold a variety of occupational titles and come into the profession from a number 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. Consequently, we have developed a research agenda designed to assist and encourage researchers, governments, the community sector and educational institutions to identify areas of enquiry that will lead to a better understanding of the community work profession.

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

In line with the overarching policy direction of ACWA as a professional association, the objective of this agenda is to promote and support research that will provide insight into the community work labour force, and to highlight any issues or factors impacting on the professional identity of community workers, and public acknowledgement of their professional skills.

Over the past two years we have consulted with members and other stakeholders and identified three main areas we believe worthy of research and enquiry: minimum qualification requirements; the workplace; and public policy and the legislative framework. We are vitally interested in these areas of research that will add to the body of knowledge about the community work sector and would appreciate being informed of any new or existing research relevant to this agenda.

QUESTIONS WE ARE INTERESTED IN REGARDING:

QUALIFICATIONS

Most, if not all, professions require a body of theory and knowledge which ensures that practitioners are sufficiently competent to practice. We are interested in the level, length, mode of delivery and practical fieldwork components of the community and human services qualifications, and how well they align with community expectations.

- Do existing community and human services qualifications adequately prepare students for professional roles?
- Does the community believe community workers (holding a diploma and above) are sufficiently qualified and do they have an expectation around qualifications?
- Is there a variation in the quality of education provided by private RTO's and TAFE's? Does this have an impact on the work available to graduates?
- Do VET providers and universities conduct interviews prior to a course commencing and would this help student retention?
- 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 does 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 a higher course? 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 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 similar recognition as social workers? What can a social worker do that a 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 in mind a career in the sector. The type and quality of the qualification has a direct bearing on their career trajectory including, how long they stay in the sector, and how much they enjoy their work. We are particularly interested in comparing VET and higher education graduates and comparing community work and social work graduates.

- Do the conditions and pay levels reflect the complexity of work, the qualifications, and the expectations of the role?
- Do graduates with community service qualifications advance as far in their careers as, for example, social workers?
- Are graduates sufficiently knowledgeable and educated to provide a service in the workforce? Does the workplace have to invest in significant training for new graduates?

- Is the transition from education/training 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 likely to suffer stress in the workplace than other occupations?
- What are the high-risk areas for community workers? What workplace safety issues have the most impact on community workers?
- In which sector are community work professionals most commonly employed?
- Do workforce shortages/over supply have an impact on the types of employment graduates take up? Are graduates of Diploma courses likely to take up, for example, roles for which they are over-qualified?
- Do practitioners pay for their own CPD? 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' future-proof themselves against changes in legislation and public policy that impact on their work.

- Do organisations have strategies in place to respond to public policies that affect them?
- 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 that is inconsistent with their professions' code of ethics?
- Do changes in public policy have an impact on retention of staff?
- Do community work practitioners have the right/obligation to comment on public policy that impacts on their clients and/or their clients? Do organisations acknowledge that right?
- Does public policy that affects individuals have a direct impact on community workers?
- Should the sector be regulated?
- Do changes in public policy have an impact on the missions' of organisations that employ community workers?