

Staffing the child protection system: Education, professional development and regulation

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June 2016

Introduction

The starting point for any discussion of staffing the child protection system must begin with a statement of the constituents of that system. The responsibility for children is a shared responsibility of community, families, carers and all service providers who have contact with children. There are a number of agencies that have particular responsibility for child protection through their service and statutory responsibility. Apart from the designated child protection agency the direct government service providers who are engaged with the care of children include departments such as education, disability, health and police. Of course there is another level of government service providers who engage with children through service delivery to families and adults who have responsibility for children. These include departments such as housing, mental health, community health, drug and alcohol services, health and the justice system. The legislative responsibility for mandatory reporting reinforces community and service providers' responsibility to report and alert the designated child protection agency where there are concerns or known risks to a child because of sexual abuse, physical violence, neglect or deprivation. At the point of intervention where a child or children are at risk the child protection system depends on police, legal services and the courts for specialist investigation, support and decision making. The child protection agency plays a central leadership role in the system on issues of child protection. However, in an effective child protection system, the child protection agency does not carry total responsibility. It should not be viewed as the default and solely responsible agency whenever child protection issues come to the attention of other agencies, services or the community.

The non-government sector is also involved in the child protection system. Historically the South Australian child welfare sector has been served by a combination of a designated government agency and services provided by the non-government and traditional not-for-profit organisations.¹ Church-based and charitable organisations have contributed to the child protection system and have been able to attract grants for this purpose to complement their own resource base. This pattern of service delivery continues today. However it is significant that in the late 1970s there was an increased involvement of these organisations as the state government started to contract out specific aspects of their service provision.² Illustrative of this point is the contracting out of state-wide foster care services. The state did

¹ Dickey, B. 1986, *Rations, Residence, Resources: A History of Social Welfare in South Australia since 1936*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide.

² Oxenberry, R., Dickey, B. 'Welfare and Change Since 1965', in Dickey, B. 1986 *Rations, Residence, Resources: A History of Social Welfare in South Australia since 1836*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, Chapter 12, pp. 269–315.

not forgo all interests in this area but sought increased involvement from the non-government sector in the task of recruiting, training and supporting foster carers. The state remained focused on the child and maintained responsibility for children coming into state care in terms of resourcing the cost of care, case managing each child's long-term needs and controlling the approval of carers.

Over time this pattern of 'partnered' service provision has grown and in the contemporary South Australian child protection system non-government organisations have become involved in areas such as foster care, emergency care and residential care, transition care and therapeutic placements. In addition to early intervention, family support and reunification programs are increasingly offered through the non-government sector. The most recent development documented here is that the non-government sector itself has diversified from traditional church and charitable organisations to include for-profit organisations, increasingly national and international corporations. This development has prompted an international debate on state responsibility for vulnerable populations such as children and in particular the management and cost of outsourcing, variable standards of contracted services and levels of accountability in these procurement processes.³ Petrie uses the language of a sea change to describe contemporary United Kingdom experience and goes on to argue that the creation of welfare markets signals a changing role for government.⁴ In her words this has contributed to a political environment where the 'underpinning foundation of policies and legislation has moved away from the principle of universal benefits of right to market mechanisms designed to target those considered most deserving and sanction those judged socially irresponsible'.⁵ Inevitably such change in the child protection systems brings to the fore philosophical debates about the role of the state in terms of children.

Service providers in a child protection system are usually identified as human service organisations, and employees are identified as being part of the human service workforce. Kennedy, Leiman, Richards refer to Zins' (2001, 7) definition of human services to capture the broad scope of this service system 'designed to meet human needs'.⁶ The critical factor here is that the human service workforce is diverse. At the government level social workers have dominated more recently in the child protection agency. However psychologists are also part of the agency and to a minor extent there have been some teachers and health practitioners employed. In relation to management in the agency it is evident that some of the professionals identified here may move into middle and senior management roles. However in terms of senior management positions, particularly at the executive level, there are a significant number of appointments sometimes described as 'content-free'. These senior managers have no training or experience in the work of the agency but are appointed for their executive experience. The challenge is maintaining a balance in leadership between these content-free appointments and those with professional and practice knowledge. South Australia was seen as a leader in child welfare in the 1970s and it is noteworthy that the then government brought in a recognised social welfare expert who developed strong professional and practice-based teams to support reform.

³ For example, Petrie, S. 2015, 'Commodifying Children: The Impact of Markets in Services for Children in the United Kingdom' *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, p. 283.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 283.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 288.

⁶ Kennedy, R., Leiman, T, Richards, J. 2016, *Integrating Human Service Law, Ethics and Practice*, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

In the non-government sector the workforce is even more diverse than in the government agencies. It is not unusual to find a staff base in child protection and related programs that includes youth workers and other TAFE graduates, nurses, university graduates with generic degree such as in Arts, students as casual employees, teachers, people with no formal human service training and volunteers. Demand for staff in the human services has outstripped graduate output from universities and the TAFE sector. In addition, the level of pay and status of 'caring work' are generally low and this makes employment in the sector more accessible to a wider range of people who have few other options.

Traditionally this sector has provided opportunities for women re-entering the workforce. While there is a trend to a stronger professional base in non-government agencies as they develop into social enterprises, particularly in senior and supervisory roles, many workers come into the sector with limited training, and skills primarily developed through life experience. Expectations of service needs vary depending on the strength of the leadership in the organisations and the resource bases available to them. In some agencies the type of service provided can be done by volunteers. However in the complex area of child protection there is a need for a skill base that is appropriate to task and role. This is not to argue that only university educated professionals should be employed in a child protection system as the diversity in the human services workforce and in particular the workforce that supports a child protection system must be acknowledged. The Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry⁷ documents that the child protection workforce includes health and allied health professionals, educational professionals and child care providers, legal and law enforcement professionals, salaried and non-salaried carers and providers of social and family services. Importantly the report notes that this broader workforce is often overlooked in terms of training and professional or industry-based development.⁸ This is a theme reinforced in the evidence available to the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission (the Commission).

The Institute of Child Protection Studies'⁹ analysis of the national statutory workforce found that women make up over 75% of the workforce, with a significant number of young practitioners and, at the other end of the scale, an older cohort of workers. While social work is a major profession in statutory child protection, the report recognises that not enough graduates are attracted to this field to meet demand and this has led to various strategies to fill positions. The strategies include the recruitment of overseas graduates, drawing on professional staff with a range of occupational backgrounds and the recruitment of individuals selected because of their life experience. It can be argued that in Australia, building a multi-disciplinary base in statutory child protection agencies has been serendipitous rather than systematic. Observation of the South Australian experience would suggest an ebb and flow of preferred staff profiles in the main government agency without any clearly articulated rationale for or evaluation of shifts in those positions. An ideal staff mix is difficult to achieve in practice. The reasons are many but include levels of pay, limited career pathways, lack of suitable candidates, varying employer preferences, and the disinclination of many professionally educated social work and psychology graduates to seek work in difficult statutory areas. All jurisdictions have concerns about the limited presence of

⁷ Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry, Vol. 2, 2012, Chapter 16, pp. 410–428.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 426.

⁹ National Statutory Child Protection Workforce Analysis: prepared by the Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University, 2012.

Indigenous practitioners and this is a serious issue in light of the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families that come to the attention of child protection systems.¹⁰ However it is also difficult to find an evidence base for the best combination of personnel to staff an effective and quality child protection system. This issue is worthy of exploration as reform is implemented in South Australia.

Problems of recruitment and retention of social workers in child protection agencies are endemic in many countries.¹¹ The failure to retain staff can contribute to reduced quality of services, lack of continuity for children in care and negative financial consequences for child protection agencies. If child protection agencies develop a negative reputation for service quality and practitioner support, graduates may be discouraged from considering child protection as a career. Without doubt the most complex work needs to attract the most able graduates and the best experienced professionals. Sustained training and professional development have been found to build confidence in decision making and improve practice, particularly for young practitioners.¹² Child protection work involves decision making that is much more than 'just common sense'. In most child protection situations practitioners are dealing with adults who may have experienced childhood trauma themselves and who face complex financial, health and social circumstances as they attempt to care for their children in an often hostile and judgemental environment. In these circumstances a practitioner needs the ability to engage those individuals, make comprehensive assessments and apply professional judgements that lead to evidence-based decisions. At times these decisions need to be made quickly to ensure the safety of children. The practitioner needs access to strong leadership, professional advice and supervision to support effective decision making and to build positively from each experience in the practice world. Child protection work addresses the most complex social issues, where stakes are high and the work is done under intense scrutiny. A child protection agency needs resilient and intelligent workers who have the confidence of their managers and who are in turn confident they will be supported. If this environment does not exist the organisational environment becomes closed, defensive and unresponsive, and those in need of protection face the greatest risk.

This paper informs the chapters in the Commission report that address screening, human resources and staff selection. The particular focus of this paper concerns social work education, professional development and registration. In part this focus reflects the attention directed to the work of Families SA social workers through recent coronial inquiries, media reporting, and the department's own employment strategies that have prioritised social work. The professionalisation of child welfare in South Australia began in the 1970s¹³ and has been pursued, albeit with different approaches and preferences, by all leaders of the main child protection agency in South Australia since then.

This paper presents a summary and analysis of relevant evidence available to the Commission.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Searle, R.H. and Patent, V. 2013, 'Recruitment, Retention and Role Slumping in Child Protection: The Evaluation of In-Service Training Initiatives', *British Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 43 (6), p. 1112.

¹² *ibid.*; Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children's Inquiry, 2012.

¹³ Oxenberry, R., Dickey, B. 1989, p. 293.

Evidence available to the Commission

The Commission has evidence from a variety of sources. The evidence is organised around four areas: the responses to the Commission's early discussion paper that focused on social work¹⁴, transcripts of hearings, general submissions and, finally, a limited literature review.

Where it is appropriate tables have been presented to make it easier to identify the range of commentary from transcripts and submissions. It is evident that management and supervisory staff in Families SA (FSA) were the most highly represented contributors in hearings and submissions with views on training, professional education and professional development. It does not appear that residential staff in FSA or any non-government agencies were represented in the views put forward about the abovementioned topics. The voice of the non-government sector in relation to staffing was very limited despite the increasing level of partnership it has with the statutory child protection agency. However, there were three submissions from senior management in non-government organisations that give insight into issues of concern from their perspective.

Responses to discussion paper prepared for the Commission

This discussion paper¹⁵ was circulated to 13 identified stakeholders from academia, the social work professional body, FSA, social work educators and particularly the two schools of social work in South Australia.

There were seven responses to the paper, including from the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) national and SA branch; Etienne Scheepers, Deputy Chief Executive of the Office for Child Protection (and head of FSA); and both South Australian university schools of social work.

Professors Dorothy Scott and Lesley Cooper had previously sent submissions to the Commission that covered material relevant to this paper.

The respondents provided specific supporting and background documents with their responses to the discussion paper. These are outlined below:

- AASW national office–
 - Scope of Social Work Practice in Child Protection: Social Work in Child Protection, November 2015
- Families SA, Department for Education and Child Development–
 - Social Work Student Field Education Placement Handbook, prepared by FSA Social Work Field Education Co-ordinator, Jessica Pellegrino, undated
 - 2013/14 Study Support Applications
 - Families SA Study Support Policy, November 2013
 - Policy DECS 09/11001-2 Performance and Development, July 2014.
- Professor Scott provided reports prepared during her time as Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection (ACCP)–
 - ACCP, Professionals Protecting Children–Child Protection and Social Work Education

¹⁴ Gursansky, D., 2015, *Social Work Education, Professional Development and Registration: Perspectives, issues and implications*, Discussion paper prepared for the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, www.agd.sa.gov.au/child-protection-systems-royal-commission

¹⁵ *ibid.*

- ACCP, Professionals Protecting Children—Child Protection and Nursing and Midwifery Education Curriculum Standards
- ACCP, Professionals Protecting Children—Child Protection and Psychology Education in Australia.

In addition, the Commission had access to the following documents relevant to this topic:

- Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW, Volume 1, The Hon James Wood AO QC, November 2008, Chapter 3 'DoCS workforce capacity', pp. 43–80
- Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry, January 2012, Volume 2, Chapter 16 'A workforce that delivers quality services', pp. 409–428.

Transcripts from hearings

A key word search was used to select transcripts relevant to the current paper. The key words applied were: social work training; training social workers; training; education and training; training and child protection training; training graduates; training and professional development; training and graduates; training graduates and registration; training and education; training, registration and professional development; child protection training; training, education and graduates.

The tables show contributor identifiers. The classification process was completed by the author of this paper to ensure consistency. There was some overlap of contributors of submissions and transcripts. However, as the latter allow for more detailed commentary they are recorded in both tables.

Table 1: Profile of contributors—transcripts

N=70 contributors: 61 transcripts

Role of contributor	FSA	DECD	Health CPS	Non-govt agencies	Former FSA staff	Private practitioners, consultants and researchers
Teacher		1				
CP front-line worker	4		1		1	
Supervisor	10					
Senior SW	3					
Senior Practitioner	3					
Principal SW	2					
Manager/ Executive	13		3	2	3	1
Business support	1					
Consultants						5
Psychologists	2		1			2
Medical staff			5			2
Researchers						1
Foster carers	2					
Program director				2		

FSA = Families SA; DECD = Department for Education and Child Development; SW = social worker

Notes:

- A significant number of FSA workers did not want to be identified.
- Some consultants had previous experience in differing roles in FSA.
- One of the senior social work presentations was given on behalf of a team of staff but it has been recorded as a single submission.
- The contributions included detailed material from the Guardian for Children and Young People, Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee, Australian Association of Social Workers, Australian Psychological Society SA Branch and the Government of South Australia.

Written submissions made to the Commission

The key word search used with transcripts was applied to written submissions.

Table 2: Profile of contributors—submissions

N=45 submissions

Source of submission	Metropolitan	Country	South Australia	Interstate
FSA staff	11			
FSA Managers	1	1		
FSA supervisors, Senior SW, Senior Practitioner	8	2		
Principal SW	1			
Academic/research			1	3
Consultants			2	
Former FSA			1	1
Non-government organisation			4	
Prof. association			2	
Government and government offices			3	
Health and CPS	3			
Foster carer		1		

FSA = Families SA; SW = social worker; CPS = Child Protection Services

Notes:

- A significant number of FSA workers did not want to be identified.
- Some consultants had previous experience in differing roles in FSA.
- One of the senior social work presentations was given on behalf of a team of staff but it has been recorded as a single submission.
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Literature review

A brief literature review on social work education was incorporated into the earlier discussion paper circulated to key stakeholders. The set of articles used for that exercise has been included in the references for this chapter. The goal of the education references was not to provide an in-depth literature review, but to identify major themes in the contemporary literature.

Analysis and discussion

Key themes identified in the discussion paper

As background for these responses some key points from the discussion paper are presented again here. Subheadings highlight the most relevant themes.

Social work education in Australia

Social work education in Australia dates back to the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹⁶ In 1935 the first training for social service workers in South Australia was established at the University of Adelaide. By the late 1960s social work education had expanded with a course opening at the newly established Flinders University of South Australia and the University of Adelaide course moving to the South Australian Institute of Technology (SAIT), which was later to become the University of South Australia (UniSA). Flinders University offered a new innovation with an end-on degree in social administration and SAIT offered a three-year integrated undergraduate degree that was subsequently converted to a four year degree. Both degrees were accredited by AASW.

The AASW and its role in education

The AASW has maintained an active role in the accreditation of schools of social work since the 1960s. The professional body sets standards for social work education and practice. The AASW also promulgates a code of ethics. The AASW has a process for reviewing schools of social work based principally on an input assessment. Graduates of AASW-accredited social work programs are eligible for membership with the AASW. The AASW website provides a full listing of Higher Education providers that offer social work programs.¹⁷ Of relevance to this Commission is the offering of entry-level social work qualifications that can be taken at undergraduate or qualifying master's level. In addition, programs may be offered in different modes, including on-campus, combinations of online and on-campus, to fully online programs and, in some situations, offshore programs. Students may enter social work programs through a number of pathways, including TAFE/RTO, foundation programs offered by the universities, Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT), Open University or transfer from other universities. The entry score for social work undergraduate degrees has been relatively low and often university administrations have used these relatively popular undergraduate programs to satisfy funding quotas for the whole university. Social work schools/departments generally do not have power over student selection.

In articulating the principles of social work education three key points are particularly relevant to the issues of training around child protection.¹⁸ The first point is that Australian entry-level professional social work education is designed to prepare a generalist practitioner for employment in a diverse range of settings. Preparation of graduates focuses on building a knowledge base that incorporates content from social and behavioural science as well as social work theory, skills and methods relevant to practice. It is assumed that generalist skills are transferable. The AASW also specifies that current programs include some content on mental health, child wellbeing and protection, cross cultural practice and practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Curriculum guidelines in specialist areas are developed by the AASW and made available to schools of social work.

¹⁶ E. Martin in B. Dickey, 1986, 'Social Work and Services', Chapter 11, p. 227.

¹⁷ AASW, website <https://www.aasw.asn.au/careers-study/accredited-courses>

¹⁸ AASW Education and Accreditation Standards, revised January 2015, p. 9.

At any given time the emphasis on specific focused curriculum content will reflect current social issues and policy direction. There can be a lag time in the introduction of new content as evidenced in relation to child protection. However, there has always been a challenge to balance core content with interests in specific fields of practice or contemporary social issues.

The second point relates to the level of commitment to field education. A core component of Australian entry-level professional social work education is 980 hours of field education. It requires a co-operative endeavour between the higher education provider, the student, agencies and field educators and it is argued to be the critical point for integration of theory and practice. The AASW guidelines specify that this learning must have the full status of an academic subject in the program. Students undertaking field education are not routinely paid. The model of field education learning is not identified as an apprenticeship, internship or work experience per se. It is usually described as 'learning in practice'.

With the increased numbers of programs and students there are challenges in finding suitable placements. The number of students being taken into social work programs has stretched traditional placement opportunities. The availability of on-site professional social work supervisors is problematic with changes in the human service workforce. Field education can be confronting for the student as skills, personal and professional values, communication styles and knowledge are under scrutiny. This is the environment where the 'fit with practice' becomes more evident as competence levels and interaction between clients and colleagues are exposed. Not every student finds it easy to work in teams or as a single social worker in a setting where the professional orientation may not match expectations developed through university teaching and professional literature. Not every student finds it easy to be faced with situations well beyond their life experience or where personal difficulties and life stories are triggered and exacerbated. Failure in a field education course can represent a significant personal and professional crisis. A skilled assessor and supervisor are needed to manage the process and outcome from a sound performance evidence base and with integrity. Field education could be described as the crucible of a social work program. However there are imperatives for universities, supervisors and organisations hosting placements to pass students regardless of performance to the detriment of service quality, the integrity of the profession or longer term consequences for the individual graduate. Maintaining standards of learning in field education is a critical challenge for all stakeholders.¹⁹

The final point to be noted in relation to social work education is the diminishing authority and autonomy of social work programs and leaders in universities. With universities moving to corporate organisational models, social work has lost its individual school base. Local universities are illustrative of that pattern, with UniSA having a School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy within the Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences and Flinders University having a School of Social and Policy Studies within a Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences.

In these corporate structures social work is but one interest group and inevitably this has limited senior leadership control over budgets, decisions over student numbers and screening/selection of students.

¹⁹ Gursansky, D., LeSueur, E. 2012 'Conceptualising Field Education for the Twenty-First Century', *Social Work Education* 31, No.7. pp. 914–931.

The growth of the social work profession and the human services

The origins of social work are identified with the response by charitable and philanthropic organisations to social need during the world economic crisis of the 1890s.²⁰ At this time the concept of social philanthropy was introduced and the training of charity workers established a base for a new profession in the early 20th century. In a contemporary environment social work is a service profession and shares some of its professional activity with other groups and areas of expertise, for example, policy analysis, social action and advocacy.²¹ The social work profession's growth and development have been intimately linked with governments' increased involvement in service delivery in the postwar period. With the development of the welfare state social work became an essential part of the diverse service systems that were established to address social needs. The profession is often identified with unpopular social issues. And when these issues gain public attention it is social workers who are seen to have failed to 'fix the problem'. Child protection highlights this characteristic blaming response, which is well illustrated in the Chloe Valentine inquest and also in the United Kingdom with the matter of Baby P.²²

AASW as a voice for social workers

The AASW was formed in 1946 to provide a voice for the growing profession. In its own documentation the AASW currently estimates a membership of some 8,600 and calculates that this means at least 18,000 social workers operate outside its self-regulatory framework. The AASW will deal with complaints about social workers and terminate the membership of members found to have acted outside acceptable standards. To promote the profession, the AASW has established for members trademark access, accreditation of mental health social workers for Medicare purposes, a professional development strategy with a range of nationally based courses available online, and regular conferences and symposia.

The AASW makes representation to governments and public statements on matters affecting the profession and vulnerable populations. However membership is voluntary and not seen as essential to practice for the majority of practising social workers. It has been noted by the AASW SA Branch that there has been limited involvement of FSA staff in the activities of the AASW.²³ A positive outcome of recent media publicity is the SA branch's declared intent to strengthen the links with social workers engaged in child protection practice.

Professional supervision

AASW members are encouraged to complete a minimum of 30 hours professional development per year. This is a requirement for a member wanting accredited status beyond baseline membership. The endorsement of professional development reflects the commitment to ongoing learning, self-development and reflective ethical practice.

The AASW strongly maintains the stance that social workers require professional supervision. The AASW can assert the importance of this supervision but cannot enforce workplace commitment. Professional supervision addresses issues in practice, implications

²⁰ Austin, D.M., 'The Profession of Social Work In the Second Century' in M. Reisch and E. Gambrill (eds), *Social Work in the 21st Century*, 1997, p.396.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Jones, R. 2014, *The Story of Baby P: Setting the Record Straight*, Policy Press, University of Bristol Press, United Kingdom.

²³ AASW submission to the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission.

for the practitioner and reflection on these experiences. The process may prompt discussion around professional development, self-management and the inherent tensions between the ideals expressed in professional rhetoric and the realities of practice. It is distinguished from organisational or administrative supervision, which focuses on organisational policies, measures and outcomes. Administrative supervision is a process that ensures organisational practices are adhered to and expectations for quality service delivery are met. It may or may not overlap with professional supervision processes.

Among contemporary debates it is sometimes asserted that orthodoxy in professional thinking is rarely challenged in professional supervision.²⁴ In looking to the future of supervision Phillipson argues that 'if practice is to be flexible, pragmatic and undogmatic, supervision could model this in terms of when, where and how without abandoning the more formal expectations and opportunities'.²⁵ Child protection workers deal with painful, confronting and violent situations in their practice. Professional supervision can assist practitioners manage the impact of their work and create a safe environment in which to acknowledge the demands, reflect on experience and maintain the resilience so essential in a child protection career.²⁶

The social work profession's current stance on registration

State registration has been on the AASW agenda since the 1980s. Early advocacy for registration of the social work title divided the profession. Moreover, state governments were not satisfied that there was sufficient risk for this more expensive model of accountability to be adopted. However, the profession has been active again in the last few years with national registration structures being introduced for health and some allied health professions (the National Regulation and Accreditation System, or NRAS). While the AASW presents itself as an experienced self-regulator, its public statements on registration recognise the need for accountability beyond membership of the AASW. In South Australia the Coroner has recommended registration of social workers following his review of the Chloe Valentine case. The Coroner highlighted the potential for social workers to do harm either by action or inaction. The profession has used this argument previously in its lobbying for registration and has argued that the potential for harm lies not only in the field of child protection.

The likelihood of social work being incorporated into the existing NRAS has seemed low.²⁷ However the findings from the Chloe Valentine coronial review and the media attention that has generated public concern may enliven this argument for inclusion in the existing National Health Practitioner Scheme.²⁸ It is relevant to note that social workers are covered by the National Code of Conduct for Unregulated Practitioners, which is being rolled out across the country and already operates in South Australia and New South Wales. Under this scheme public warnings and statements can be made about social workers and other unregulated

²⁴ Phillipson, J. 'Supervision and Being Supervised' in R. Adams, Dominelli, L and M. Payne (eds), *Critical Practice in Social Work*, 2002, Palgrave, United Kingdom, Chapter 24, pp. 244–251.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 249.

²⁶ Lishman, J. 'Personal and Professional Development' in R. Adams, L. Dominelli and M. Payne (eds), *Social Work: Themes, Issues and Critical Debates*, 2nd edition, 2002, Chapter 9, pp. 95–106.

²⁷ NRAS 2015 review, <http://www.coaghealthcouncil.gov.au/Publications/Reports/ArtMID/514/ArticleID/68/The-Independent-Review-of-the-National-Registration-and-Accreditation-Scheme-for-health-professionals>

²⁸ COAG Health Council Meeting as the Australian Health Workforce Ministerial Council, 8 April 2016.

practitioners whose conduct is unsatisfactory and they can be prohibited from future practice.²⁹

AASW President Karen Healy states that the AASW will continue to lobby for registration as it will improve public safety in relation to all social workers.³⁰ The professional association acknowledges the limitation of self-regulation as it applies only to members and has limited impact on employment options for anyone breaching standards. In addition the AASW has indicated it will continue to work with other allied health professions to establish a national alliance of self-regulating health professionals.

From the submissions

The responses to the earlier discussion paper generally endorsed its content and provided some points of clarification or embellishment. There is one caveat here. There is a limitation in this commentary because the discussion paper focused on social work rather than the mix of professions and human service workers who contribute to the child protection system. It is interesting to note that most contributors do not extend their discussion beyond social work although FSA material does recognise the wider range of practice groups in the child protection agency. Suffice to note here that issues of training are relevant beyond the single profession that dominates the rhetoric of the child protection workforce in South Australia.

Professional training in child protection work

There is a consistent theme that professional training is a desired entry qualification for practitioners in investigation and assessment, guardianship and the work with families of high risk. Implicitly social work is seen as a relevant profession for this field of practice. There is no such emphasis in the area of residential services although it is noted that there are a number of social workers in management and team leadership roles in this area of the child protection system. Again it should be noted that South Australia in the 1970s was in the forefront of training in residential care when it supported this staff group to complete formal training with a partnership agreement with SAIT (now UniSA). Currently, youth work training is a baseline and preferred qualification. In the FSA response to the Commission it is clear that there has been an expectation that someone entering without this qualification would obtain the Certificate Four in their first year of employment. However, what is not clear is whether similar expectations exist in the staff of non-government service providers and those contractors providing the 'casualised' workforce in residential care in both government and non-government facilities.

The AASW takes a strong position that social work training provides a sound base for this field of practice. The argument offered in the documentation asserts that the value base of the profession is consistent with goals of individual and community wellbeing. The profession supports the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child. The AASW clearly states that its curriculum standards provide a base of knowledge, values, skill development and learning in practice that prepare students for a diverse range of practice settings and the application of differing methodologies. It should be noted that in 2013 the AASW included child wellbeing and child safety as desirable content to be addressed in accredited social

²⁹ For example, see <http://www.hccc.nsw.gov.au/Hearings---decisions/Public-statements-and-warnings/Public-statement-in-relation-to-Andreas-Kirbach>, accessed 27 June 2016.

³⁰ AASW National Bulletin 2015, p. 3.

work programs.³¹ In the literature and across the submissions from social work educators there is recognition that entry-level training does not and cannot make graduates experts in child protection. The AASW identifies the scope of social work practice in child protection as follows:

Early intervention of vulnerability and risk	Facilitation networks and social supports
Risk assessment in relation to child abuse and neglect and cumulative harm	Socio-legal and ethical decision making in a complex practice environment
Comprehensive psychosocial assessments	Planning for continuity of care
Crisis intervention	Family intervention and support
High level communication skills	Child-focused therapeutic interventions
Collaborative partnerships and role clarification	Leadership in case management
Therapeutically informed interventions	Advocacy for the rights of the child and their families or carers
Using statutory authority to safeguard children and encourage change	Providing and receiving adequate professional supervision for reflective practice and professional development for ongoing learning
Supporting foster carers to provide practical and therapeutic care and residential care services	Developing policy, engaging in research and publishing

Cooper and Scott commentary

Professor Scott has made significant contributions to the discourse on child protection through the literature and during her role as foundation Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection. Professor Scott refers to research undertaken during her tenure as Director that audited child protection content in undergraduate and qualifying training across psychology, nursing/midwifery and social work. The research identified deficits in this content area across each of these professions. Professor Scott has endorsed recent action of the AASW to require greater curriculum content in child wellbeing and protection. It is interesting to note that Professor Scott considers that the content around child protection and child wellbeing places Australian social work programs at least equivalent to professional programs in comparative countries.³² There may well be value in extending this research agenda to review current teaching and to broaden the professions to include medicine, law, teaching, allied health and policing. It would also be relevant to consider the child protection content in TAFE level community service and youth work qualifications as this level of training is more likely to be relevant in the non-government part of the child protection system.

Professor Cooper provides a broad commentary on social work education³³. Significantly, she challenges the dominant teaching paradigm in social work education and argues for stronger focus on assessment of skill at all levels within a program but particularly in the areas core to professional business: namely engagement, interviewing, assessment, collaboration with other team members, learning from clients and carers. Professor Cooper

³¹ AASW education guidelines 2013, p. 5

³² Professor D. Scott submission.

³³ Professor L. Cooper submission.

identifies the AASW guidelines as providing direction for program and course input but questions the extent to which the guidelines can be monitored. She also discusses the importance of experienced practice teachers and laments the fact that so many teaching staff members lack the depth of practice experience that can extend students' theoretical knowledge and adequately assess practice performance. This issue of performance assessment is essential given the demands on a profession that works with some of the most complex client situations, where risks to children can be profound and where the heart of practice is relationships through which change and intervention are achieved.

In relation to the preparation of social workers, Professor Cooper presents a final challenge about the validity of distance and/or online practice education. In her view it is not enough to hear about practice. She strongly argues that during the education process student practice needs to be scrutinised, explored, reflected upon, and skills nurtured both in the classroom and during field education. In her view the educational process has been weakened with the distance mode of teaching in these aspects of learning.

The schools of social work

Both South Australian schools of social work provided detailed submissions in response to the discussion paper.

Flinders University declared at the outset that it was introducing a new focus in courses that will take full effect in 2016. It is relevant to detail the key points here as they are germane to the critiques that have been made of social work education and in particular at Flinders University the commitment to significant levels of international students undertaking professional entry at the Master's level. The university's Dr Lorna Hallahan identifies changes including full revision of all topics in the Master of Social Work and in particular the redesign of the core child protection topic; stronger orientation processes for all students; increased attention to language and communication skills for international students; design and development of a set of skill laboratories; fresh approach to industry collaboration; digital resources to improve reflection in field education and first year progress, and a discipline-wide review of curriculum with a goal to embed practice in the programs.³⁴ The final goal is to build stronger collaboration between UniSA, FSA and Flinders University to increase field education links and other contributions. If these goals are achieved, some of the major reservations about the existing program would be addressed.

UniSA's response acknowledges the contribution of industry to field education and teaching.³⁵ The school states that the government field education opportunities are valuable to students and, as with Flinders University, the work FSA has done to develop a stronger learning experience is recognised. There are some valuable insights reported from student evaluations of field education that suggest that many students see this part of the curriculum as critical learning. However, obviously some students find the commitment to the long placements difficult to juggle with work and other responsibilities. UniSA sees the regional campus arrangements as a strength for local students and a major recruitment base for regional services. It also notes that the recent removal of caps on undergraduate student places has opened up higher education to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The comment is made that a proportionately high number of these students end up in social work, with its lower entry scores. While this is a positive in terms of equity it is stated that this

³⁴ Flinders University submission.

³⁵ University of South Australia submission.

places additional demands on student support services and individualised teaching arrangements.

The barriers to quality social work education are primarily linked to the capacity to provide quality field education. The changes in the human services are identified as placing pressures on industry partners, making it difficult for them to accommodate students. The UniSA response claims that the school has adequate support from the university, school leadership and budget resources to meet good standards of professional education.

Obviously both schools want to be positive about their programs but it is Flinders University that provides deeper analysis of the challenges and its commentary aligns with issues raised in the literature and from other academic responses. The Head of School comments on the input and prescriptive focus of AASW guidelines resulting in some limitations on innovation. She also articulates a tension in universities between the focus on research and less interest in practice teaching. Universities are rewarded for research outputs in particular and as a result there can be resource pressures on classroom teaching, stakeholder engagement in terms of professions and casualisation of tutoring staff. This last factor has been noted to reduce time for student access to staff and to affect the cohesion in schools.

The encouraging aspects of the responses from both schools are the recognition of the importance of curriculum review to build child protection content in a variety of ways, the explicit recognition of FSA as it extends its capacity to support learning opportunities and the need to strengthen more generally the links to human service organisations. Flinders University comments that social work status is limited because it is not a registered profession. However, there is limited evidence of a substantial correlation between professional status and registration. As has been indicated previously, social work practice draws attention to social issues that often cause consternation and dismay. The nature of these complex problems can place those trying to resolve such issues in no-win situations. The problems are multi-faceted and reflect systemic failure as well as individual responsibility.

Making sense of regulatory options for social work and other occupational groups engaged in child protection

Registration was discussed in the AASW submission but did not attract much comment from other contributors. This is hardly surprising in terms of the declared agendas. The AASW position has been outlined previously but here is a brief summary of the current position on the regulation of social workers. For the purposes of child protection system staffing, state regulation currently applies to teachers, nurses, medical practitioners, lawyers, allied health professionals and psychologists. The unregulated occupations are dominant in the non-government sector.

Community concern about social work has been elevated by recent public reviews here and overseas. It could be argued that social work has suffered major damage in this process and the implications are significant for its dominance in sectors such as child protection. However this is not the focus of discussion on regulation beyond reinforcing the point that this political climate may ensure that regulation of some form is now more likely to be addressed. The options seem clear: maintaining the self-regulatory status quo for social work, including social work in the existing NRAS, or establishing a national approach to a framework for unregistered practitioners. South Australia has already taken action on the last approach.

The first option has limited impact as the AASW does not represent all social workers and the profile of child protection social workers has never been high in the association.

The second option of mandatory state registration with the current Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) appears to remain attractive to the AASW despite the fact that NRAS focuses on health and not community service. This structure poses difficulties for professions such as social work that straddle several sectors. While COAG has not made a definitive statement to exclude social work from AHPRA, there appears to be limited enthusiasm for an expanded role in compulsory registration in this format.³⁶

The third option of introducing more formal and national arrangements for non-registered professions is gaining increasing interest. Models in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia give health or health and community services complaints commissioners the power to investigate and make orders about unregistered practitioners. The effectiveness of this option depends on adequate funding at the state level. If this is seen as a relevant option it may well be useful for the current Royal Commission to give some direction. If this option is endorsed there is a need to review the jurisdictional parameters, because in many states the primary focus is on allied health (although the exception is South Australia, where the commissioner has jurisdiction for health and community services).³⁷

In reality, registration of individuals will not solve systemic problems. There is always a risk that registered professionals in high risk service delivery areas will become scapegoats for system failure. Many inquiries around child protection here and overseas demonstrate this risk. As a consequence, child protection agencies find it even harder to attract quality staff.

Much of the current demand for registration focuses on social work. Whatever direction emerges from the current dynamic environment of regulation it is critical to recognise the range of occupational groups that engage in child protection work. Some of these professions are already regulated but the focus is on their primary professional tasks within their institutional base. Consideration needs to be given to the specifics of practice in child protection across professional and occupational groupings if there are to be standards of practice that can be endorsed and enforced. It might well be argued that practitioners need to be identified and registered as child protection workers.

From the transcripts

This section is structured around the themes raised in the transcripts. The analysis will use the language of a child protection system in keeping with the Terms of Reference of the Commission, the context as outlined in the introduction and the breadth of contributions relevant to this chapter. The ordering does not indicate priority.

On being a social worker in a child protection system

When talking about their work in child protection, social workers consistently identify the challenge posed by the complexity in the situations they deal with on a daily basis. There is concern that their professional education was not adequate preparation for this major field of

³⁶ NRAS 2015 review, <http://www.coaghealthcouncil.gov.au/Publications/Reports/ArtMID/514/ArticleID/68/The-Independent-Review-of-the-National-Registration-and-Accreditation-Scheme-for-health-professionals>

³⁷ http://www.hcsc.sa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/h_Plain-English-Version-Code-of-Conduct.pdf and <http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/clinical+resources/safety+and+quality/governance+for+safety+and+quality/credentialing/unregistered+health+practitioners>

practice. This might not be surprising as most contributors had many years of experience. Some more recent graduates have been able to choose electives, assessment activity and placement choice towards their interest in child protection. However, the contributors all desired more attention to child protection in professional training.

There was even more consistency around comments on the inadequacy of induction for new workers, particularly for younger new graduates, ongoing professional development and supervision. There is consistent feedback to the Royal Commission about a lack of systematic preparation of new graduates and staff entering FSA, large workloads, chronic crises increasing numbers of investigations and inadequate resourcing. A number of contributors commented that there are inadequate staff levels for co-working. Contributors argued that a team approach would be appropriate for complex situations. There was no reservation expressed about the value of multidisciplinary teamwork, particularly in the investigation and assessment stage, although it was also identified in ongoing work with children in care.

A significant number of contributors expressed frustration with a perceived devaluation of social work practice, lack of respect for professional judgement and failure to build on strengths of the organisation. It is interesting to note that for all the difficulties of recent years, the contributors remain committed to child protection despite the challenges this brings to themselves, the community and governments.

The culture of the organisation

Professor Scott commented that there is evidence that professional socialisation is soon eroded by organisational culture.³⁸ If there is not a strong connection between these cultures, the organisational expectations and practices prevail.

Of the previous management structure, contributors describe constant change without adequate consultation. The rollout of Redesign is offered as a failed exercise because it was devised with token staff involvement and any critique led to what were seen as punitive responses from senior management. For some it was identified as a cover for cost saving. The introduction of OPS3 staffing in hubs was seen to further emphasise a cut in resources. While contributors stated that the new staffing arrangement was presented as support for social workers with less complex work, it was reported that these staff are being asked to carry workloads in the same way as professional staff and without formal training to support them in this work.

A significant number of contributors recorded that there was a culture of bullying and harassment of staff identified as trouble makers and such staff were generally described as the ones asking questions or challenging decisions. Management is described as distant from staff but at the same time micromanaging particularly political or sensitive cases. Some contributors saw this as demonstrating a lack of trust and respect for social work and professional practice. There were positive comments on the recent appointment of executive staff with recognised content knowledge but concern that their voice can be constrained where the majority of senior management do not have child protection experience. And a further point was made about a top-heavy organisation with complicated delegations and an overload of policy that is constantly changing but never reviewed and rationalised.

³⁸ Professor D. Scott submission.

Positioned in DECD

There were comments about the negative history of the child protection agency being part of larger departments. Staff commented on the experience of being in human services and now DECD, where their view is that the culture of the larger organisation dominates. Particular examples given were around learning and development opportunities. There was a general view that the learning opportunities were no longer there for FSA staff beyond the prescribed training agenda set by management: Solution Based Casework. A significant number of staff spoke of the positive impact of the Learning College established some years ago under the leadership of Sue Vardon, the Chief Executive of Families and Communities from 2006 to 2008. Despite some reservation about the RTO model applied in the College, contributors saw it as formalising a training agenda and giving broader access to learning opportunities.

Contributors expressed no reservations about the notion of co-location with other services but considered the attempts at mergers were not successful because they were imposed arrangements and rarely a priority for the more dominant agency. It was acknowledged that child protection work was often viewed as a contaminant to organisational identity in departments such as DECD and Human Services. The view consistently expressed by FSA contributors was that child protection warranted standing in its own right. By implication contributors spoke of giving a focus to a child protection system, recognising the significant responsibility the agency holds and valuing staff employed to fulfil the legislative authority resting with the agency.

Interagency collaboration

A number of contributors expressed concern about the variable effectiveness and quality of services provided through non-government agencies. It was also suggested that non-government agencies could 'cream' referrals under present contract arrangements, increasing the vulnerability of some families, young people and children. In addition contributors saw this as exposing FSA to further criticism as it tries to manage the most difficult cases. Comments were made about the level of skills and training provided to non-government agency staff. This was seen in part as a reflection of the contract staff base in agencies, particularly the for-profit organisations.

A significant number of staff expressed concern that interagency collaboration and community linkage were made more difficult after Redesign because FSA hubs were designated specialist centres and were working across broad geographic boundaries that did not enhance community or interagency collaboration.

Aligned to this theme of interagency collaboration was the issue of educating child protection stakeholders. Contributors said this went beyond the training of service providers to education at community and specialist agency levels. The Family Court, Youth Court and staff in the Crown were identified as needing to be included in training.

Decision making

In one contributor's words, 'the leadership of FSA has lost its way' and this is not seen as a recent phenomenon but a continuing pattern under different leadership teams. The issue of delegation was raised as a complication to practice and as a signal of the lack of trust in staff and local managers. As a result, staff reported that they now needed to seek endorsement on practice decisions that complicates work with families and carers. Some of the

illustrations of this came from guardianship cases where the allocated worker needed authority to facilitate such things as school excursions and holidays.

For practitioners there are frustrations expressed around an online recording system that is time consuming and not responsive to the linear flow of practice. C3MS has ensured a central online resource but a number of contributors suggested the system had not met the promises made at the time of its introduction. Contributors spoke of the difficulty of gaining a sense of the history around a child and family. The focus on incident reporting distracts from recognising repeated patterns in reporting or intervention responses.

An agency that is hard to influence comes through in the transcripts from the Guardian for Children and Young People and Child Death and Serious Injury Review Committee. Both these key stakeholders have listed recommendations presented to the Minister and the Department. In reality both of these important voices report difficulty in having recommendations acted on, despite the fact that the Minister is the point of reference for both these statutory offices.

Human resource issues

Contributors from FSA commented with regret that child protection is not a specialisation of choice and the agency is not an employer of choice for many graduates. There was a view that FSA needed to be more actively involved with the schools of social work to generate interest in this field of practice. Student placements were seen as a positive way to give insight into child protection work and to gain some experience of that work. But it was acknowledged that even when graduates came into the agency there was a high turnover, particularly in the early years of employment. Most contributors saw a direct link to the complexity of the work, resource pressures leading to high workload regardless of the level of experience, poor supervision practices, and inadequate induction and ongoing training.

A number of contributors were concerned about the centralising of all human resource decisions and the reduced role of managers in selection and performance management. This was a particular issue for regional offices.

Policy and practices

FSA staff contributors were critical of the overwhelming number of policies in need of review. They indicated that they have been promised review by senior management but this task has not been addressed. It was commented that the volume of policies is overwhelming, particularly for new staff. There were concerns raised about the continuing emphasis in FSA on the principle of Keeping Families Together to the detriment of children. For staff this meant accommodating higher levels of risk. Commentators pointed out that when things did go wrong it was the front-line workers who carried the brunt of criticism.

What is clear from the commentary is that Executive management has not provided leadership around the direction of the agency. Contributors stated that when there have been tragic outcomes in cases, it is the workers that are scrutinised, not the executive leadership who are responsible for policy and practice management. From the comments made in the transcripts, these experiences have undermined confidence in leadership, built distrust and led to defensive responses in many staff.

Professional identification and respect

The issue of registration was not raised to any significant level in the hearings in this sample. The more important issue was professional recognition and respect from Executive managers. Many of the front-line workers and supervisors said they had felt exposed and vulnerable as media attention had intensified during recent coronial inquiries. They expressed concerns about the support they received and felt a sense of abandonment by Executive management.

There was no sense that the contributors identified the AASW as part of their professional life. They primarily looked to FSA to provide opportunities for their professional development. The overriding impression was disappointment, with decreasing access to training and professional supervision. The loss of the College was frequently seen as signifying the reduced commitment to professional development opportunities. The merger of FSA into DECD was identified as the point where FSA was forced to change its professional development focus.

From the general submissions

Inevitably there is some overlap with the issues raised in the transcripts and those in the general submissions. Again a series of themes has been drawn from the review of the documents.

The non-government sector perspective

Several senior managers from the non-government sector made submissions. There was commentary on the disruptions that follow from funding processes in terms of length of timeframes, late renewals of contracts and funding quantum. The current characteristics of contracting arrangements were seen to affect continuity of service delivery, retention of staff and effectiveness, particularly where intensive service provision is needed. One senior manager expressed very positive views about social impact bonds as an alternate means to address current shortcomings. In a similar vein, an argument for the separation of assessment and investigation tasks from family preservation and reunification tasks was presented, with a proposal for an increased role for the non-government sector in the latter.

The non-government organisations with well-established histories in welfare services expressed interest in building partnerships with the child protection agency and sharing knowledge through joint training. These contributors took the position that their organisations were well positioned to provide early intervention, family support, and therapeutic and other care for children and young people.

A non-government organisation in the north of the state recognised the positive value of its connection with UniSA's Whyalla campus, which also helped with the recruitment of staff.

This contributor commented that the organisation's commitment to training and professional development was an important factor for staff seeking employment.

Commissioner for Children

From the non-government sector there was support for the establishment of a Commissioner for Children. Some contributors from the child protection agency also commented on this initiative but it is evident that FSA practitioners are more focused on the changes needed to re-establish a strong child protection agency.

Rural and remote locations

There were a number of contributors from regional areas who identified the need for stronger services in rural and remote South Australia. FSA contributors spoke of the difficulties in recruiting qualified staff, leading to teams covering vacancies and OPS4 staff picking up what would be identified as social work responsibilities. This situation is further complicated with less access to senior practitioners and supervision of practice. Comments were made about the issues of centralised staff selection leaving local managers with no input to the process. Similarly, country-based contributors identified the reduction of localised delegations as complicating work and generating slower decision making. This point was particularly emphasised in the work with foster carers who needed, for example, quick decisions in terms of organising school and holiday activities.

FSA contributors spoke of the complications to travel time with the rationalisation of offices across the state. Managers spoke of the decreased commitment by FSA to community development and engagement as a negative factor in terms of building collaborative practices with organisations in the child protection system and in building capacity in local communities.

The introduction of Solution Based Casework (SBC)

The vast majority of contributors expressed disappointment at the process and choice of this practice framework introduced into FSA. Social workers saw SBC as an approach to practice rather than an assessment or intervention framework and in most cases described it as a method with little or no applicability to the complex work faced by child protection workers. However, there were voices that supported FSA in making explicit its practice approach and developing the skills of staff to work at this complex level. In contemporary professional language the ideas could be described as building a framework for practice, albeit prescribed, and articulating the evidence base for intervention strategies. Social work education introduces students to a range of practice frameworks and theories and as practitioners they are expected to apply relevant evidence-based intervention strategies depending on assessment of client need, capacity and outcomes to be achieved. The organisational context will set broad parameters for practice but the professional judgement and skill of the practitioner are critical for positive outcomes and change.

Contributors saw the combined rollout of Redesign and SBC under David Waterford's and Tony Kemp's leadership as overwhelming the child protection agency. In addition they spoke of the change process as limiting to a negative degree the support for everyday practice because of training responsibilities placed on senior supervisory staff, redirection of the FSA training agenda and reduced opportunities for professional development. The contributors did see SBC as providing a practical model that would be relevant to the work undertaken in early intervention and family support programs.

Psychologists in FSA

There were only a few contributors who spoke specifically about their professional role in FSA. It was stated that work had been undertaken to develop a therapy services framework but was never enacted. The framework proposed a more diverse and active role for psychologists in FSA extending their contribution to supporting foster carers, assisting with the development of assessment tools in a range of areas, parenting assessments and extended therapeutic work.

There was a view that psychologists were not being used well, with more of the therapeutic and advice work contracted out. It was suggested by one psychologist that more could be made of psychology services through Medicare.

External views of FSA

A number of contributors from specialist areas expressed concerns about the level of knowledge in the child protection agency around specific factors such as drug and alcohol addiction, medical neglect, and mental health. Professor Freda Briggs has consistently raised concerns about the level of training of social workers in child development and investigation processes.³⁹ These external commentators were identifying deficits in the training of the professions and other staff involved in the child protection system as well as ongoing professional development. Other specific areas of knowledge identified for development included medical and child health as well as drug and alcohol additions.

Just as significant were the issues raised about the potential for interagency partnerships with outreach services being located in FSA. By implication there is a critique in the commentaries about FSA being bunkered down and overwhelmed by the complexity and demand. Contributors recognised that these issues were longstanding but had been exacerbated as the Department had come under more scrutiny.

Again the external commentators drew attention to the limited resources available in regional areas. Access to specialist services hampered effective service provision. One contributor also spoke of the problems created in the child protection services because of the differences in approach in the existing teams in the hospitals providing child protection assessments.

Overall it could be said that contributors identified issues of concern about service delivery. However they also acknowledged the challenges for FSA offices in the regional areas because of staff complements not being maintained, supervisors covering extra caseload demands, recruitment challenges and the level of support available. The comments made did not disparage the good intent of front-line staff but recognised the challenges resulting from high demand, inadequate resourcing and decreasing control of decisions at the local level.

Literature

Acknowledging again the limited and social work orientation of this literature, some general themes inform the issue of effective staffing of the child protection system.

³⁹ Emeritus Professor F. Briggs submission.

The early work of Dorothy Scott and her colleagues in the Australian Centre for Child Protection in relation to child protection content in professions that contribute to the child protection system has already been noted.⁴⁰ The research team reviewed a number of professions to consider the question of how issues of prevention and identification of and response to child abuse and neglect are addressed in each education program. This work was completed in 2008 and illustrated that while Australian professional courses are comparable with international standards, more needs to be done to strengthen this curriculum content. The emphasis of recommendations, particularly those in social work, is on extending the breadth of content beyond investigation and reporting aspects of child protection, reviewing curriculum standards to support the content and continuing research in the area.

The challenge of the transition from student to practitioner is well documented in the literature. There is evidence that students have knowledge of the challenges in the workplace, both from field work and their course content.⁴¹ However, the reality of the practice world in terms of its busyness, complexity and limited supervision creates anxieties and pressure for new graduates. These findings align with comments made in the submissions about the tension between what is taught and requirements of the workplace. In a negative cultural environment the pressure placed on the new graduate or new employee to comply with established practice rather than to draw on new ideas acquired from the classroom is not easily resisted.

There is an implicit tension between the ideals of practice taught and the realities of practice on the ground and a shift in expectation from guided learning as a student to independent practitioner.⁴² Keeping curriculum content aligned to contemporary social problems and practice is a challenge for accrediting bodies, academics, field placement processes and industry stakeholders. Educators need to retain focus on ensuring core content is relevant and based on sound research evidence, to continue to extend thinking around social issues and current practice.

The professional educational process is not about preparing the student for a specific current practice setting.⁴³ It is about preparing a student for a professional career where professional socialisation evolves, where practice and professional learning are seen as essential responsibilities of each practitioner and where professional focus is on the practice within the wider political and social environment. The place of postgraduate qualifications is an international issue. The experience in Scotland highlights concerns raised in Australia in terms of shaping such training.⁴⁴ Australian university funding arrangements, competitive relationships and limited industry support for staff engagement in postgraduate studies complicate the development of specialist professional training.

Field education remains a critical element of social work education internationally.⁴⁵ It is valued by many students as it brings practice alive and it is embedded in the social work educational discourse, but in the university environment it is seen as a labour-intensive and expensive element of the educational process. Schools of social work do strive to protect the

⁴⁰ Australian Centre for Child Protection reports, 2008

⁴¹ Agllias, 2010

⁴² AASW Education and Accreditation Standards, 2015.

⁴³ Kelly, L., Jackson, S. 2011.

⁴⁴ Tham, P., Lynch D., 2014.

⁴⁵ Zuchlowski, I., Hudson, C., Bartlett, B., Diamandi, S. 2014.

resource base for field education and there are particular challenges for regional/rural students and the increasing number of international students undertaking placements. This is an area of teaching that requires further research to test and scrutinise educational processes and outcomes and means of strengthening learning outcomes for the increasingly diverse profile of students coming into social work education.

Professor Cooper's submission to the Commission argued strongly for increased attention in social work education to active skills development, detailed practice teaching and continuous feedback processes to establish student competence in the practice skills. Similarly there is a trend in the literature to argue for stronger evidence-based practice in social work. The position argued is that evidence-based practice involves 'encouraging the most conscientious, judicious and explicit use of the best of the best available scientific evidence in professional decision making'.⁴⁶ There are some debates in the literature about the place of scientific method in social work but there is less contention that professional practice must be rigorous, well informed and continuously refreshed. This responsibility for quality practice and service provision is a joint enterprise of practitioners, educators, supervisors and child protection leadership.

Concluding comments

There are some gaps in the evidence underpinning this discussion and it is concerning that the themes around non-government staffing issues, evidence of national and international staffing practices, registration, and staffing in agencies involved in the child protection system (other than FSA) have not had more attention. It might have been expected that senior leadership would have provided the Commission with more relevant commentary on its research and reflections for future development of the child protection system. However, this is not evident in the evidence reviewed.

The evidence base for this chapter demonstrates the need for decisions to be made about the best mixture and number of staff to support the child protection system. The introduction to this paper presents a concept of a child protection system: a partnership between the child protection agency, a range of government and contracted non-government service providers, the community, families, carers, children and young people. In that discussion the leadership role of the child protection agency was recognised but it was argued that a child protection agency should not be the blame and responsibility default for all involved in the system or every concern about the safety or risk to children and young people in South Australia. There is a critical task to educate all parties about the part they can play in supporting children and identifying when the child protection agency needs to be advised on action proposed or engaged to intervene directly.

The opportunity for individuals and organisations to participate in hearings and provide submissions on the issue of social work education, professional development and registration has given voice to concerns about the current child protection agency. There is little doubt that FSA senior leadership has lost credibility with many of its own staff. This loss of credibility has been growing over an extended period but the commentaries from staff indicate that more recent initiatives around Redesign, the implementation of a single practice

⁴⁶ Howard, M.O., McMillen, C.J., Pollio, D.E. 2013, 'Teaching Evidence-Based Practice: Toward a New Paradigm for Social Work Education', *Research on Social Work Practice* 13, No. 2, p.234.

framework, centralised decision making and the ongoing cutbacks to resources have alienated and demoralised many staff, both front-line and middle management.

The more recent scrutiny of deaths of young children known to FSA has exposed front-line and middle management staff to critique and public exposure in ways that have further undermined confidence in organisational leadership. While commentaries provided to the Commission acknowledge that practice errors have occurred, staff report limited recognition of the complexity and difficulty of maintaining quality service delivery in the current environment. Of particular concern to staff has been the perceived lack of support for staff facing these difficult inquiries into their work and organisational practices. For a significant number of commentators the response of senior leadership was viewed as self-protective, leaving front-line individuals to carry blame.

This is a significant issue in the context of the registration argument. Front-line workers, if registered, may be pursued through the registration investigation process. This is an extremely expensive, time-consuming exercise and can be damaging for the individual. The practitioner will need legal advice, as will the authority pursuing the matter. It could be argued that the individual concerned was engaged in practice that was considered 'normal' in the particular setting and timeframe. In these circumstances the practice may be viewed as a systemic or industrial issue. The registration investigation is not appropriately placed to address the systemic, organisational or industrial issues that have been at the crux of the complaints about the practitioner. This commentary does not oppose registration. It does, however, highlight the limitations of registration and the more fundamental challenge of systemic reform.

The insights into practice from this evidence indicate that there has been organisational malaise and this has contributed to a culture of defensiveness and passivity. For many staff the focus has been on personal survival in the face of high demands, workload pressures, devalued practice, inadequate professional supervision and change processes that were not managed well. This is not to excuse poor practitioner practices, but current critiques often minimise the leadership responsibility and scapegoat the practitioners. Not surprisingly in view of these factors, staff commentary generally provides the insights but few comprehensive solutions for the future. The chance to speak or document the concerns has been important but there is a sense of disbelief that the will exists to implement positive and constructive change.

There are a number of proposed developments noted from submissions that are in part positive:

- AASW has included child protection content as core curriculum in social work programs. Nonetheless, while the AASW educational standards give guidance on content they do not have measures for outcomes that can be assessed at course review. The documentation provides limited evidence of how the AASW engages universities around the support for social work education and in part the authority with which AASW can engage in these areas.
- The issue of registration has been a longstanding goal of the profession and the efforts to pursue options available to the AASW are to be encouraged. As has been stated elsewhere, registration per se will not address concerns with child protection practice. It may address social workers engaged in this field of practice

but will not place all the other unregistered occupational groups, carers and volunteers under any additional level of accountability.

- The initiatives outlined for the social work courses at Flinders University indicate a serious commitment to strengthen core curriculum offerings, explore the practice research agenda, review field education processes and placement options, and to build stronger industry links well beyond the baseline guidelines set by the AASW. The cooperation between the two South Australian schools of social work is an advantage to all stakeholders.
- The FSA strategy to facilitate an increased number of student placements for social workers has been noted positively by both schools of social work. This initiative has been in place for a number of years and there would be great value in FSA evaluating outcomes from an industry perspective to recognise the contribution of their own staff and to generate a stronger base for future development in terms of recruitment and retention strategies.
- The submissions from staff note that there would be advantages in co-location of the child protection agency but consistently comment on the detrimental impact of mergers of the past that have been imposed without adequate attention to preparing all parties for the merger. There is a general sense that the child protection agency requires a new start.

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