

Action plan for politicians and policy makers

This action plan is intended for politicians and policy makers who are interested in youth work, disability and aging policy, workforce planning or higher education policy and planning.

Problem

The availability of specialist undergraduate degree courses in youth work, aging and disability has declined over the last 15 years, as the demand for a more highly skilled workforce in each of these areas has grown. There are now insufficient specialist degree courses available in Australian universities.

The problem is multi-causal. To reverse this trend will require concerted action many stakeholders including by:

- **politicians and federal government policy makers;**
- **senior managers and strategic planners in universities;**
- **professional associations, advisory and lobby groups and employers** in each of these fields;
- **university course coordinators**

Consequences

For politicians and policy makers the loss of undergraduate specialist degrees in social professions means

- A loss of **leadership to implement social policy**
- A loss of expertise and a **risk of low service standards**, with potentially for further Royal Commissions to investigate standards and poor service quality
- University undergraduate courses overly responsive to student demand (that can be manipulated by advertising) and **insufficiently responsive to workforce needs**. The market is not operating to redress this balance.
- This is leading to a worsening match between graduate skills and workforce requirements and an **on-going reliance on skilled migration** to cover skill shortfall

Causes of problems

Politicians and policy makers can address some of the causes of these problem

- Youth work, aging and disability courses (and social work) are **underfunded** because they have been placed in a Commonwealth Government Funding Cluster that does not match costs of required pedagogy (especially practicum)
- Demand-driven funding (capped or uncapped) does not adequately link undergraduate degree course availability to **workforce needs**
- Overly cumbersome TEQSA processes which means that universities have **high indirect compliance costs** if they offer small-enrolment specialist courses
- Current demand-driven funding policy (capped or uncapped) promotes **unhelpful competition** between and within universities, which discourages cross-institutional collaboration and rewards universities that fill courses irrespective of workforce or social needs
- University **league tables and a reduction in research funding** mean universities are directing teaching revenue to support research, which provides an incentive to offer only the most profitable courses.

Actions required by politicians and policy makers

Each of the causes of the problem could be remedied as follows

- **Underfunding:** move these courses immediately to CGFC 5, with pedagogically similar courses (like clinical psychology or with allied health) which have similar costs
- **Better linkage to workforce needs:** provide incentives for students to enrol in these courses by **lowering the student contribution** (and compensating through additional government

funding). If university places are capped, **direct extra commonwealth support towards areas of high workforce demand** (by providing more places) and do not permit these to be re-allocated to other courses. **Require universities to gain permission** before they can close (as is already required for some other low-availability specialist courses).

- **Compliance costs:** so compliance requirements do not act as a disincentive to provision of specialist courses **simplify TEQSA compliance requirements** for lower enrolment courses
- **Unhelpful competition:** for niche specialist courses only, **establish Cooperative Teaching Centres** (modelled on the Cooperative Research Centres) to promote cross-institutional collaboration between universities and collaboration with professional associations to develop shared teaching materials and shared teaching capacity
- **Use of teaching funds to support research:** provide **extra support for university research**, and **ring-fence teaching revenue** from commonwealth supported places to ensure it is spent on teaching activities and student support. Apply appropriate criteria for full-fee paying courses to ensure this does not distort the provision of places.