



Specialist courses:
social need, employers' expectations,
student demand and universities'
interests—some conundrums

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This presentation

- Outlines **decline in specialist courses in social professions** and policy contribution in Australia
- **Consequences** for students, employers, for public good and for universities
- Progress of research project to address this problem through **cross-institutional collaboration**
- Identify how **contemporary policy hinders** this initiative
- Suggest **possible future policy directions.**

Decline in courses

Courses examined

- HUMAN WELFARE STUDIES AND SERVICES 0905
- Youth Work (ASCED FoE 090505)
- Social Gerontology (ASCED FoE 090507)
- Disability (ASCED FoE 090509)

ASCED -Australian Standard Classification of Education



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Method

1. Manual search of university websites and handbooks
2. Automated search on courses by ASCED code 2011-2015
3. Interviews with course leaders

Multiple methods used independently to check for consistency



Snapshot: Courses by ASCED Code

2011

- **090505:** YW **394** VU, RMIT, ACU (Vic), UWS (NSW) and ECU(WA)
- **090507:** Disability **293** (UNE NSW and RMIT Vic)
- **090509:** Social Gerontology **32**

2015

- YW **561** VU, RMIT, ACU (Vic), UWS (NSW) and ECU(WA)
- Disability **150** (UNE NSW)
- Social Gerontology **?0**
- **090599:** UTAS Bachelor of Dementia (ASCED) **202**



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Unit enrolments (ASCED Code)

Row Labels	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
90505	190.3852	284.1183	377.75	430.8061	464.2892
90507	38.75	29.875	114.75	248.5	253.125
90509	313.5	320.5417	366.8333	394.7917	414
Grand Total	542.6352	634.535	859.3333	1074.098	1131.414



What is happening? Courses

Undergraduate courses

- **Youth work course numbers are growing** -but the course is only available in public universities in Victoria and WA
- **Disability is disappearing**, UNE course as a double with primary education (also Flinders Developmental Disability and integration)
- **Social gerontology has disappeared** as a separate course



What is happening? Units

Undergraduate units

- Youth work unit numbers have **more than doubled**
- Disability unit numbers have **increased from sevenfold**
- Social gerontology unit numbers have **increased by 50%**



Consequences

- **Youth Work:** **No national coverage** for courses, but all existing courses numbers have increased.
- **Disability:** **Loss of distinct courses**, but strong gain in numbers enrolled in disability units. Implies disability units are being taken by students enrolled in other courses. Loss of Disability courses weakens Disability studies as a discipline.
- **Social gerontology:** **Loss of courses**, limited growth in unit enrolments. Implies social gerontology studied by some students in other disciplines. Total loss of social gerontology as a discipline



Policy context and small courses

- **Prior to 2012: central funding model:**
 - 1) institutions received subsidies for an agreed number of places for domestic students on each course, and
 - 2) allocation of funded places was capped –each degree had an allocation of government subsidised places
- **From 2012: ‘demand-driven’ model:**
 - 1) funding provided to universities follows student course preferences, and
 - 2) no caps on numbers of subsidised places available to domestic students
 - 3) Universities stopped offering less profitable course

Cause and effect?

- Decline in availability commenced prior to 2012
- Centrally planned funding slowed this trend
- Rate of decline increased after 2012 and since then Social Gerontology has completely disappeared, Disability almost gone

Effects of central planning funding model

- Central planning
 - Directed funded places to areas of **social and economic need**
 - Allocated funding according to **likely graduate employment and social need**
 - **Controlled degree mix** within universities and across the sector
 - **Protected specialist courses** to some extent when places could not be transferred to more profitable courses

Effects of demand driven funding model

- “Demand-driven” funding
 - Allowed universities to decide their degree mix
 - Resulted in universities axing small specialist degrees in favour of profitable large-enrolment generic degrees
 - Abolished oversight of sector-wide degree mix and abolished links to social or economic need
 - Reduced diversity of courses and student degree choice overall
 - Exacerbated graduate unemployment by increasing the disconnect between graduate employment and university courses

Why important?

- **Social need:** Australian Government social policy requires specialist graduates,
 - examples National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), Domestic and Family Violence, Aging-in-place Age Care Policy, Closing the Gap; Youth Justice Reinvestment and Countering Violent Extremism
- **Imperfect market:** Unmet need for graduates in specialist social professions currently met by migration

What I am doing

- To **mitigate loss of courses** I was granted funding for an Australian Fellowship in 2016, to promote university collaboration
- *Achieving economic sustainability for niche social profession courses in the Australian higher education sector - a nationwide collaborative strategy*

Progress to date

- Successful collaboration needs to **be embedded in the institutions** and
- Requires support at both **grass roots and senior management level**
- Grass roots support is easiest to achieve where academics do not see this as reducing the number of students in existing courses (**through intra-institutional competition**)
- At senior levels, the problem is acknowledged but there is **little incentive to act**
- The loss of courses and hence expertise within universities was greater than anticipated (**key staff already made redundant/ retired**)

Analysis

- Cross-institutional collaboration has been hampered by inter-institutional and intra-institutional **competition engendered by policy environment**
- **Loss of expertise difficult to reverse** –will affect future teaching and research
- Requires policy change to
 - **rebalance provision of courses to meet social need,**
 - to provide **incentive for support cross-institutional collaboration,**
 - to provide **funding to recruit expertise**

Summary

- Specialist courses disappeared despite social need –now a **mismatch between social need and graduate supply**
- Demand-driven policy hastened the decline but was not the only cause
- Attempts to use cross-institutional collaboration may lead to small changes but are unlikely to make much difference unless there are **changes in the policy drivers**

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