

'It's time'

A case for the professionalisation of youth work

Michael Emslie argues that the time is right for youth work in Australia to be professionalised in line with other human service practices such as nursing, education and psychology. He identifies a groundswell of activities that support the professionalisation of youth work and a concurrent growth in high-level interest in strengthening social and community services. He argues that this context presents an opportune time to professionalise youth work. Emslie provides reasons why it is imperative to regulate and monitor the youth sector as a profession, and explains how professionalisation will help address the critical shortage of qualified youth practitioners and also improve the quality of service young people receive.

by Michael Emslie

Despite decades of reports on institutions, policies and interventions failing young Australians, the youth sector in Australia, unlike other human service practices, is not regulated. Unlike teachers, nurses or psychologists, youth workers are not required to complete an accredited qualification before they can practice, and they do not need to register with a professional body that recognises their credentials. There are no uniform standards of practice or ongoing professional development expectations, and no formal complaints mechanism to deal with breaches of conduct. In other words, youth work is largely uncredentialed and unregulated, and has not been professionalised.

This article follows on from earlier discussions about the professionalisation of the youth sector, and argues that it is timely and important to professionalise youth work now (Barwick 2006; Bessant 2004; Corney, Broadbent & Darmanin 2009; Grogan 2004; Sercombe et al. 2002). I discuss a range of current "on the ground" and high-level activities that represent a critical watershed for the development of youth work as a profession. I also present reasons why the professionalisation of youth work is urgently needed and these include to help alleviate the prevailing threats to youth work education and to improve the quality of service that young people receive. Possible obstacles to professionalisation and ways of addressing these are also identified. This article will be of interest to policymakers, researchers, practitioners and

educators who follow the professionalisation debate and have an interest in improving the standards, standing and practice of youth work.

The time is right to professionalise youth work

There is a groundswell of activity and initiatives that support the professionalisation of youth work. The youth sectors in Victoria and Western Australia have established youth worker associations in their respective states as they recognise the need for improvements to the preparation, performance and management of youth workers (Western Australian Association of Youth Workers (WAAYW) 2008; Youth Workers' Association (YWA) 2011). Simultaneously, there have been other recent and disparate activities taking place across Australia that also aim to improve the education and training and quality of service delivery within the youth sector, as well as prevent harm as a result of youth work practice (Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF) 2010; Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) 2010; Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CS&HISC) 2010a; Department of Justice (DoJ) 2010; Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) 2007). At the same time there is a growing array of agencies and initiatives with a shared interest in organising, regulating and monitoring the Australian social and community sector, which includes the youth sector, in ways that support professionalisation of the youth sector and could be mobilised to realise it. (Australasian Housing Institute (AHI) 2011; Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE) n.d.; Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) 2010; Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS) n.d.; Case Management Society of Australia (CMSA) n.d.; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) 2011; Department of Human Services (DHS) 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Healy & Lonne 2010; Quality Improvement Council (QIC) 2004).

These "on the ground" developments are complimented by renewed high-level interest in strengthening the social and community

services sectors. The Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, is backing non-profit sector reform and has recognised the need for a highly skilled community sector workforce (Australian Labor n.d.; Gillard 2007). Baldwin (2009) identified 11 recent Australian Government inquiries and initiatives aimed at reforming and strengthening the social sector. Barraket (2008) has argued that Australia has entered a "new era of governance", which is characterised by changing relationships between the state and the not-for-profit sector that are based on collaboration and partnership. The aim is to enhance the role the sector can play in implementing various government policies. Similarly Smyth (2008) has suggested that Australia's welfare system is in a "state of transition ... from hierarchical and market, to network forms of governance" and that this "new paradigm ... will require different funding and accountability arrangements" (pp.212-31). Mendes (2008) also observed that, after years of "welfare retrenchment" under the Howard Coalition government, the Federal Labor government is committed to greater social investment to tackle poverty and disadvantage, and welfare services have a key role to play in this development. If the Australian Government is serious about improving the capacity of the youth sector, then professionalisation is a good place to start.

There are also peak national advisory and intergovernmental forums in place that have an interest in improving social and community services, as well as the jurisdiction to formally progress the professionalisation of youth work nationally (Australian Government 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) 2010; Community and Disability Services Ministerial Advisory Council (CDSMAC) n.d.). For example, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2009) recently recognised the urgent need for reform to child protection systems across Australia, and Healy and Lonne (2010) recommended "COAG examine the need for national regulation of the social and community services workforce" (p.68).

The Australian Government's "innovation agenda" has also prioritised improvements to service delivery in the community

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sector, and professionalising youth work would be a fitting way to improve the quality of service that young people receive (Australian Government 2009). Likewise, the Productivity Commission (2010) recently recommended “workforce planning” for the community services sector and observed a “clear trend to the professionalisation of the community services direct care workforce” (p.262). Skills Australia (2010, pp.24-25) similarly recommended “skill strategies” for high-growth industries such as community services. A national strategy aimed at building and improving the youth sector workforce should prioritise the professionalisation of youth work.

Australian governments across all jurisdictions have recently taken unprecedented action to strengthen the health sector workforce. In light of the synergies between health and community services, these developments provide strategic opportunities to formally move on professionalising youth work. COAG, for example, recently introduced the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA), a new statutory authority responsible for the national registration and accreditation of 10 health professions across Australia (AHPRA 2011a). In 2012, registration will expand to include a further four professions (AHPRA 2011b). One of these is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practice, which demonstrates the scope of AHPRA to oversee the professionalisation of specialist practitioners whose work focuses on a specific population, as is also the case with youth work. Health and community services also share much in common, often working collaboratively to achieve similar outcomes for people and communities. This puts AHPRA in a strong position to expand its expertise and operations and take on the regulation of the social and community services workforce, including youth work.

Professionalisation would assist in securing youth work university courses

The professionalisation of youth work is urgently needed to help stem the tide and threats of cuts and closures to undergraduate

youth work education in universities. In 2010 the University of Western Sydney youth work course closed, and concerns have been raised about the upheavals and effects of changes to the quality of the youth work program at RMIT (Parliament of Victoria 2010). There are only five government-accredited youth work degrees or degrees with youth work majors offered within Australian higher education institutions and typically the numbers of students who commence youth work courses are small. At the same time, universities are under increasing pressure to make financial savings as a result of prolonged and significant government underfunding. This context places “boutique” courses such as youth work more and more at risk of restructures and rationalisations, which involve generalising youth work into other disciplines such as social work, education or psychology to enable larger class sizes and cost savings; moving youth work courses into the vocational education and training (VET) or technical and further education (TAFE) sector because they are cheaper to deliver; or closing the programs altogether. An accreditation authority, which is commonplace for professions, is desperately needed for youth work to set and enforce standards of education within higher education programs. Universities would only be able to alter youth work courses if such changes were in line with the accreditation standards.

Regulating youth work as a profession would increase demands for more university-based youth work education, which would in turn help prevent the closure of university youth work courses and facilitate the offering of new programs. All professions require an accredited university qualification that is both scholarly and practical in orientation as a minimum for registration. At the moment, youth workers do not need to be a graduate of an accredited university youth work course to practice. This means that anyone can call themselves a youth worker whether or not they have had any formal education. It also means that governments and universities are not required to invest in youth work education to ensure the ongoing supply of professionally educated graduates. The Senate Community Affairs References Committee

(2009, 2004) recommended the establishment of specific tertiary courses in recognition of the value of higher educated professionals in improving responses to vulnerable young people. Ross, Shafer and Klein (2006) similarly argue expertise and expert performance is achieved by well-designed domain-specific training. However, most Australian states and territories do not have university youth work programs and are unable to educate their own local youth work workforce. Filling this gap is long overdue. The professionalisation of youth work is needed now to ensure more quality youth work education across the country.

Professionalisation would help address the shortage of qualified youth practitioners

There is a growing need to produce competent and qualified youth workers, and professionalisation would lead to improvements in youth work education, which could satisfy that need. The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) (2010), Healy and Lonne (2010) and the Productivity Commission (2010) have indicated that there is an undersupply of professionally qualified human service practitioners to meet community sector workforce demands. Access Economics (2008), Rose (2008) and Rose and Atkins (2006) also report critical skill shortages in the youth sector.

Child protection and youth justice services struggle to attract and retain suitably qualified staff (Bamblett, Bath & Roseby 2010; Brouwer 2009). Likewise, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2009) reported consistent growth in employment in child and youth services from 1996 to 2006, and Access Economics (2009) as well as the CS&HISC (2010b) predict this trend will continue in community sector industries, which include youth work. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (nd) also reports job prospects for youth work are good. The CS&HISC (2010b, pp.28-29) forecasts that community service workers will need higher levels of education and qualifications. There is ongoing and sustained funding in services for young people across Australia, and new

government initiatives continue to emerge that specifically seek to employ youth work graduates. Government youth policies and agendas also identify workforce development and producing “capable people” as a priority (Baillieu & Wooldridge 2010; COAG 2009; DHS et al. 2010).

Professionalisation would make youth work more attractive to newcomers and encourage experienced practitioners to stay. High staff turnover is a critical problem that jeopardises the sector’s viability and capacity to provide quality services. There is a greater demand for youth services, as well as an increase in complex “cases”. The need to stop worker “churn” is more urgent than ever because of the dearth of qualified, skilled and experienced youth workers. There would be a number of benefits associated with registration such as that offered by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) (2010), for example a structured induction program to support youth workers in their first year. Professionalisation would also improve the status of youth work, making it a more attractive career to enter and stay in. It would demarcate practice domains and the settings and situations in which it would be preferable to employ youth workers rather than other professionals, because their skills would be the most appropriate and effective.

Professionalised management could also result in improved pay and working conditions. Decent wages, reasonable workloads and quality supervision would also assist in addressing the critical workforce concerns of recruiting and retaining qualified, skilled and experienced youth workers.

Professionalisation would help prevent harmful interventions

Improvements in the quality of service young people receive are long overdue, and could be achieved by professionalising the youth sector. The record of intervention into the lives of young Australians is littered with cases of abuse, neglect and unprofessional conduct, as well as repeated failures to adequately and appropriately manage such instances (Bessant, Hil & Watts 2005). The violations of young people’s human rights by governments, churches and other agencies

have been extensive (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1997; Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004). Official reports on the systemic failures of statutory child protection systems, youth justice centres and out-of-home care services have also become commonplace (Bamblett, Bath & Roseby 2010; Brouwer 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Commission of Inquiry 1999; Layton 2003; Wood Commission 1997a, 1997b). Accounts of serious misconduct and negligence by staff employed by government and community sector agencies meant to care and protect vulnerable young people also regularly feature in the media (Francis 2011; Hagan 2010; Nader 2010; Robinson 2010).

In addition, Kelly (2007) and Tait (1995) have argued that too often interventions by “experts” into the lives of young Australians are oriented towards regulating and controlling populations of young people problematised as “at risk”.

Examples of failure to care for and protect young people or deal with structural inequities that cause youth poverty and disadvantage demonstrate that tighter regulation of the youth work workforce is desperately needed. Basically it is time for youth work to be oriented towards realising youth rights, and professionalisation could assist in this reorientation.

Professionalisation entails compliance with set standards of behaviour, codes of ethics and practice guidelines (Professions Australia 1997) and these regulatory mechanisms should be introduced as a priority to enhance the quality of professional youth work practice, prevent harm and restore public confidence in services that care for young people. Most states and territories have mandatory working-with-children checks; however, in the light of ongoing failures, they are insufficient to elicit good practice (Rayner 2007). If youth work were regulated, the ethical values and dispositions youth workers commit to, the reasons why they commit to them and the ways they can give effect to them would be clarified in a code. Professionalising youth work would build a “community of practitioners” who were trusted and expected by the public to deliver youth work. Using the Australian Medical Association (AMA)

(2009) as a model, a youth work professional association would act in the public interest by challenging governmental and organisational policies that have the potential to cause harm to young people. Formal sector-wide mandatory notification of misconduct, investigation, and disciplinary mechanisms that aim to address instances of malpractice and protect young people are urgently needed and would be put in place if youth work were regulated.

Overcoming obstacles to professionalisation

I have presented a case for the desirability, necessity and urgency to professionalise youth work; however, there are possible obstacles to professionalisation that may need to be overcome before significant progress is made. Arguments for the professionalisation of youth work in Australia have been aired for over 20 years, but nothing has happened (Sercombe 2004). One obstacle could be doubts and conflicts within the sector around the issue of professionalisation (Quixley & Doostkhah 2007). Sercombe (2004) argued that youth workers are difficult to organise, and reaching a consensus in the sector is hindered by competition between players. Organisations have to compete for funding and contracts, which is an effect of reform to the public and non-government sectors shaped by neoliberal ideas. The economic rationalist approach to welfare provision and governance has been characterised by the closure and appropriation of the sector’s peak organisation, curtailment of advocacy, generic management, inadequate levels of funding, underpayment of workers, increased casualisation of the workforce, and short-term and insecure funding contracts (Bessant & Weber 2003; Eddy 2004; Phillips 2007). These concerns further limit the capacity of the youth sector to work collectively in ways that could progress professionalisation.

An inability to secure adequate resources for professionalisation could be another reason for inaction. Grupper (2003) identified professionalisation as costly, and a youth work professional association would need to charge fees; however, low youth worker wages may restrict the setting of fees at a level

that would make an association viable. At the same time, underpaid workers are unlikely to pay registration fees when registration is not required for practice. The trend to new forms of governance between Australian governments and the community sector may provide opportunities as well as the political will and leadership needed to overcome these barriers. Efforts within various states towards professionalising their youth sectors, as well as Fair Work Australia's recent ruling on social and community services industry wages, could also assist (Fair Work Australia (FWA) 2011).

Another hindrance could be resistance from youth workers who have not undergone tertiary training who fear that they may be excluded from a professional association, making them ineligible to practice. Different levels of and pathways to membership, based on type and level of education as well as work experience, could be offered initially as a way of addressing such concerns. Diverse membership options could be complemented with "grandfather" or "sunset" clauses, which are one way professional associations provide workers time to upskill and retrain to meet eligibility criteria. An investment in university youth work education enabling the delivery of flexible and accessible upskilling and retraining opportunities, such as high quality distance education and online courses, could also assist. In addition, education providers could offer recognition of prior learning that includes crediting demonstrable capabilities acquired through work experience as a way of supporting workers to secure necessary credentials.

Conclusion

I have argued that it is time youth workers were required to complete an accredited university qualification and register with a professional body that recognises their credentials. Uniform standards of ethical practice, ongoing professional development expectations, and a formal complaints mechanism to deal with breaches of conduct are long overdue. The groundswell of activities and initiatives that strategically make now the right time to professionalise youth work have been identified.

Reasons for professionalising youth work at this time were also examined. Professionalised management is urgently needed to help protect, secure and expand university-based youth work undergraduate courses, as well as address the critical shortage of qualified youth practitioners. I also argued that professionalisation should take place now as a way to prevent further harmful interventions into the lives of young people. Professionalisation should be a priority to improve the quality of service to young people in ways that they deserve but have gone without for too long.

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