Changing social work education in Australia

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Abstract  This paper explores contemporary issues in Australian social work education. It examines formative influences on the structures and content of education, specifically the ways over time in which demographic, political, economic and social forces have influenced the composition, demand and domain of social work education and practice. It describes the current political context of social work and social work education and the response of the authors’ own institution to change and uncertainty. It concludes by proposing that for change and diversity to be addressed, three moves would be productive. The first is to establish structures for closer dialogue amongst schools of social work, the professional association and employers. The second is to extend experimentation and innovation in social work curricula. The third is for educators to establish a collective voice and promote the values which should desirably underpin tertiary education in Australia.

Social work education in Australia feels to us like a battleground these days. In this article, we attempt to put a 5-year involvement in the design, introduction and development of a new curriculum in the final 2 years of the Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of Sydney into a broader picture of Australian social work education overall. Leonard (1994) suggests that in contemplating social work education it is helpful to discover the origins, exclusions, changes and lasting tendencies which characterise the discourse on social work. This we attempt to do through addressing four questions:

- What have been some formative influences on the shape of social work education?
- What are the forces at work shaping social work education now?
- How are we in our university addressing this?
- What issues are raised by this case study?

Formative influences on social work education

Social work education in Australia has been influenced by several key factors: the diversity of social, political and economic contexts in a federal system of government; increasing diversification of Australian society; changes in Commonwealth Government approaches to tertiary education; professionalisation of practice and education in the context of competing theoretical frameworks; and the dominance, until the last two decades, of North American and British models.

Australia has been a Commonwealth, a federation of six States, since 1901. At federation,
the Commonwealth constitution specified the powers of the central government and left those not specified, or not held concurrently, to the States. Put simply, the Commonwealth has powers over matters of national interest, like immigration, defence, marriage, health, and specified pensions and social welfare benefits. The States are responsible, for example, for law and order, child welfare and hospital services. Local government is a third tier. Since the Second World War, the Commonwealth has had powers over income tax, which is used to support a general revenue-funded social security system, adding to the existing age and invalid pensions and maternity allowance a range of benefits including, for example, unemployment benefit and child endowment (family allowance). A universal health insurance system giving access to medical and hospital care relies partly on a separate levy on income.

The Australian ‘welfare state’ is changing in response to pressures towards economic efficiency, privatisation of responsibility and of core services. The newly restated moral injunctions are self-reliance, ‘mutual obligation’, the latter being the foundation of the ‘social coalition’ between families and government. These changes are disturbing and conflictual.

The effect is a complicated system where the Commonwealth funds welfare benefits and States provide services. Tertiary education is a Commonwealth responsibility. Social workers are employed mostly in the public sector, in Commonwealth, State and local government departments, in health, social services and corrective services and at all levels, front line, management and policy/planning. The non-government welfare sector is the other major employer. A more recent trend is for social workers to contract themselves out as service providers. Thus university professional education must respond to a wide range of employer needs.

Martin (1992) has characterised the themes in a history of social work in South Australia as ‘gender, demand and domain’, a useful jumping off point to describe social work education.

The nexus between practice and education

Formal social work in Australia followed its development in the United States and United Kingdom and was influenced by both traditions, leading to an emphasis on casework, but never excluding the work with communities pioneered, for instance, by the settlement movement. The timing of the first social work education, 1929, is significant: that year saw the establishment of the New South Wales Board of Social Study and Training and in Melbourne, the Victorian Institute of Almoners. By 1939, there were five training institutions: three general schools and two training hospital almoners, in only three of the six States. Social work education began, then, during the Great Depression, where Australia shared the European experience of high levels of unemployment (around one-third of union members), poverty and associated ill health and misery. Social work at this time was heavily concerned, in hospital and community settings, with relief for families experiencing distress. During this period professional associations emerged, both generic and specialised.

Educators were practitioners. Some were Australians, with overseas qualifications from universities such as the London School of Economics or Chicago, and some were social workers brought from Britain or North America to assist in the development of the profession. Numbers were small—by 1940, 120 social workers had been trained nationwide, of whom five were male (Lawrence, 1976). Since public sector employers required women to resign on marriage and many agencies on having children, a substantial number were not in practice. Thus, both the gender distribution and auspice of social work influenced the occupation’s capacity to grow.
Demand: the professional and educational responses

The Second World War brought demand into the equation: during the war, for workers with families dislocated by war, bereaved, disabled or poor, employed by the Australian Red Cross and the Commonwealth Government. With the promotion of a ‘never again’ agenda for postwar reconstruction, social work was seen as a key occupation, in casework, research and social policy development, with positions opening in the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. At this time, there remained just three courses at the universities of Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, still relying heavily on overseas influences (Lawrence, 1976). Given the excess demand over supply, agencies employed ‘untrained’ workers for roles later seen to require ‘professional’ qualifications. It was not until the 1960s that the position was to change significantly.

By 1958, there were 1,000 graduates in Australia, many not in the labour market. During this period both the University of Sydney and the University of Adelaide programs had to justify their existence within the university, successfully. By the 1960s, Lawrence (1976) indicates that a 3-year diploma, with a final year specialisation, was the general qualification. By the late 1960s, following the lead of the new University of Queensland course in 1960, a 4-year degree program became, and has remained, the standard. The professionalisation of education at this time was linked with the pressures on the professional association, the Australian Association of Social Workers, formed in 1946 to decide on membership criteria, which in turn required consultation with the schools of social work.

This occurred in the context of the expansion of diverse courses of study in universities, the development of social welfare courses and applications for membership from immigrant social workers. Increasingly, the professional association took on the role of standard setting for qualification for membership and accreditation of programs. 1974 produced the landmark document, the Minimum Educational Requirements, a response to Commonwealth attempts to establish a National Council of Social Welfare (Lawrence, 1976). This power of the professional association has continued as a significant feature of Australian social work education, partly because membership is an employment credential, in lieu of registration, and partly a result of its stronger organisation compared with the loosely affiliated schools of social work.

Currently, accreditation requirements include foundation knowledge in sociology and psychology together with professional knowledge and skills building in social policy, principles and methods of social work practice, research and ethics, and field education in at least two practice settings of a minimum 140 days. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) determines the eligibility of graduates for membership through assessment of social work programs. Graduates are expected to be able to demonstrate a range of qualities and abilities, including ‘respect for, and acceptance of human diversity, and of the dignity and worth of all persons’, together with ‘a commitment to act in accordance with the AASW Code of Ethics, in just, equitable, non-oppressive and empowering ways’ (AASW, 1998, p. 5).

Domain: continued professionalisation of social work education

Social work in Australia was influenced, as elsewhere, by the shifts in orientation resulting from the ferment of ideas in the 1960s. Australia’s immigration program in the post Second World War period was substantial, first from the United Kingdom and northern Europe, with refugees from central and eastern Europe, and increasing groups from southern Europe and the Middle (Near) East. Continuing prosperity ‘on the sheep’s back’ and from mining
industries, with increasing industrialisation, was accompanied by a policy of assimilation of ethnic and racial minorities. The general economic growth masked levels of poverty identified through the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty announced in 1972, showing pockets of hardship amongst old people, especially those in private rental accommodation, single parents, migrants, disabled people and indigenous people. Between 10 and 15% of the population was without medical and hospital insurance at that time (Australia, 1970) in a system which provided minimal public support. A referendum in 1967 resulted in the inclusion of Australian Aborigines in the constitution as equal citizens.

Research and social protest elevated social issues on the political agenda as the power, since 1949, of the coalition conservative government, waned. Conscription of young men to serve in the Vietnam War in the late 1960s was a source of substantial public conflict, which turned to a protest movement. Lane (1987) has suggested that the Vietnam war was ‘perhaps the major catalyst which heralded in the era of protest’, marking the beginning of modern day community action. Calls for greater participation of citizens in decision-making, linked with an increasing discourse of civil rights, and with the emerging liberation movements of women, migrants, indigenous Australians, gay and lesbian people, for instance, fuelled an Australian community work literature already developing from the United States.

These contextual changes, as Cornwell (1976) so eloquently describes, led to an elevation of large scale social change and a marginalisation of casework. As he points out, contradictory forces were at work, since this period saw increasing technical specialisation. With the election of a labour government (the Australian Labor Party) in 1972, these seeds of social change were ready to germinate into enquiries into health, welfare, participation, poverty, to name a few. Migrant issues came to the forefront, resulting in an enquiry and then in a report (the Galbally Report) recommending a policy of multiculturalism, a shift in thinking from the former assimilation approach. Community development programs were funded in health and social welfare, including the politically radical Australian Assistance Plan. This plan aimed to link central government with local communities, by-passing State governments, in an effort geared at participation, equality and efficiency in resource allocation. A national community health program, requiring co-operation of State governments, also attracted social work staff. Social workers entered this field in social policy and planning, community work and community development. Lawrence (1976) notes that by 1975, 46% of students of social work at the University of Queensland chose to specialise in community work.

By 1975, there were 11 schools of social work covering all States, with total enrolments of 2,363 students. As well, 209 were enrolled in a postgraduate Masters degree and seven in doctoral studies. Given the gendered nature of the profession, as noted above, the profession’s ability to provide educators locally was strained, and this period saw a number of educators drawn from the United Kingdom and North America to fill Chairs of Social Work, bringing fashions from their home base. Although Australian social work education was already characterised by a generalist approach, requiring specialisation only in the final year, this was the era of genericism, with unitary approaches being introduced to some curricula.

The dismissal of the Whitlam labour government in 1975 marked the end of central government commitment to experimentation in health and welfare. The re-election of a labour government in 1984 was accompanied by the rhetoric ‘towards a fairer Australia’ and a major review of the social security system. However, the oil crisis, neoclassical economic theories and high levels of unemployment moved Australia inexorably towards economic rationalism, privatisation and managerialism, processes felt in social work and social work education, regardless of the party in power, and demonstrating a strange continuity, despite the rhetoric, from the mid-1970s on.
The past two decades have produced an enormous expansion of Australian scholarship, and an indigenous literature, that is tied to neither North America nor the United Kingdom, has developed. It may draw from both, adapting, extending and contextualising. From 1947, a professional journal, first named Forum, now Australian Social Work has been published. In education, the journal Contemporary Social Work Education was followed by Advances in Social Work Education, now Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education and by Women in Welfare Education. The 1970s saw, for example, the publication of social policy research into new communities (Brennan, 1973; Bryson, 1972) and a collection examining social work in the changing Australian context (Boas & Crawley, 1976). The first Australian text on community work by Thorpe and Petruchenia (1985) and the first local feminist collection (Marchant & Wearing, 1986; see also Rabbitts, 1985) were landmarks. Now, Australian publishing of textbooks and monographs in social work and social policy flourishes. Given the dimensions of diversity in Australian society, the debate about how knowledge is built in social work is very important, and is reflected in this literature.

Over this period, social work has grown in size, professionalised, developed diversity in fields of practice and professional function, working with groups increasingly diverse and complex, affecting the nature of social work education. The outcome is a hugely disparate occupation.

The current context—governments, employers and social work

In the 1990s, Australia is one of the most multicultural societies in the world. Fifty per cent of the population have at least one parent born overseas, many in non-Anglophone countries. The 1990s have seen slow and uneven steps towards reconciliation with indigenous people, the Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, who comprise 2.1% of the population. The society is ageing (12% are 65 years and over), and we share with other countries the social exclusion of groups marginalised because of class, gender, age, disability, ethnicity and other sources of diversity. With a conservative Commonwealth government since 1996, further exclusion is demonstrated in restriction of access to social welfare for groups seen as unworthy, newly arrived migrants, young unemployed people and single parents.

The broad context is one of economic restructuring, in the context of globalisation (O’Connor, 1997), affecting the competitiveness of the manufacturing sector and promoting a growth in the service sector. In 1997 and 1998 Australia experienced healthy GDP growth of around 4% per annum. While the effect has been to reduce unemployment from 8–9% at the beginning of the decade to around 7% in 1999, this has been achieved partly in part-time work and a reduction in the participation rate. Economic restructuring has included the privatisation of health and welfare services, adversely affecting, for example, old people, who do not have resources to pay for services, three-quarters receiving at least a part age pension from the Commonwealth, including health benefits. Effects are felt seriously by way of reduced access to quality services by disabled people, chronically ill, frail old people entering nursing homes, children, immigrants and people seeking retraining.

Managerialism has affected professional practice, as demands for economic efficiency, outcome measurement, performance indicators, multiskilling and flexibility have cut across the centrality of the client, economic effectiveness and any certainty about what knowledge and skills identify the professional role. A competitive market environment has developed in social and community services, one of the fastest growing sectors of the labour market. Most people employed in this sector do not hold social work qualifications. As well, there is a declassification of positions formerly designated ‘social worker’, requiring eligibility for membership of AASW as a qualification.
A further trend is the reduction of managerial positions within social work, as downsizing results in smaller organisations and the loss of middle management positions, with workers accountable to managers who may not be social workers. The trend for social workers to move into managerial roles as managers, not social workers, and in so doing competing for generalist, rather than professional social work positions, has educational implications.

Along with these changes, the former emphasis on community and social development has reduced. This is occurring even though the needs of urban development, rural recession, ethnic diversity and the inclusion of mental health as a national government priority restate the importance of developmental work with communities. And this is happening at a time when, theoretically, it is clear that postmodern fragmentation and the globalisation of communications and economic relationships promotes grouping of local communities of interest with others external to the state (George, 1999; Ife, 1998). This demands allocation of resources to community development, not withdrawal from it.

It is no wonder, then, that the profession and social work educators are concerned with whether and how to change. The historical themes identified by Martin (1992) remain important, though modified by context. Social work remains a predominantly female occupation, sharing with others, such as nursing, a disproportion of men in management and academic roles. The feminist movement since the 1970s has influenced the promotion of women to senior appointments in practice, management and academia, and employer policies, social attitudes and availability of middle class child care now mean women can have a continuous professional career. But now, what may that be?

In summary then, the need for social work has never been higher, both in direct service and developmental roles, yet demand for social work specifically is retracting under economic and managerial dominance over social need, at the same time as university social work departments are pressed, as they were in the 1940s, to secure their position. And the domain which had 50 years of vigorous expansion since then is now at risk. How are universities taking on the issues?

**University restructuring, resources and social work education**

The tertiary education sector has paralleled the changes driven by economic imperatives. From the 1950s, central government had supported the expansion of universities, particularly with respect to, but not confined to, scientific and technological advance, providing scholarships on the basis of merit at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and from the mid-1970s espousing equal opportunity of access principles. In the 1980s, the costs of maintaining a system of three tiers (universities, colleges of advanced education and technical colleges) with public funding were examined and the labour government moved to rationalisation, by requiring students to contribute to the costs of their education by way of fees, and by amalgamation of institutions. The early 1990s therefore saw the amalgamation of universities and colleges of advanced education in the name of efficiency, downsizing, but with the effect of proliferating universities in regional centres.

In 1999, Australia had 21 schools of social work, quite diverse, in all states and territories. Not only has central government amalgamated disparate and different purpose institutions, it has pushed competition by reframing the basis of funding, promoting ‘user-pays’ and exercising muscle against the autonomy of the university sector through its power over the public purse, since all but two universities in Australia are publicly funded. The effect has been to set competition amongst universities to the point that the eight traditional research universities are pursuing their interests with government separately from the rest.
The overall reduction in public funding of universities has been experienced variously by social work schools, depending on which university they are part of and which faculty (grouping of departments), rich or poor, they inhabit. There is great diversity and this exacerbates a lack of cohesion or strength amongst the schools, as they are either competing for students in the same city or State, simply absorbed in making ends meet, or doing quite well. The experience of our own department, located appropriately in a Faculty of Arts that comprises humanities and social sciences, is not unusual. Economies of scale are seen as the way forward. As student numbers increase and staff numbers reduce or remain static, the rewards lie in managing this situation—teaching excellence is increasingly seen as the capacity to lecture to large classes of students; to run tutorial classes of up to 50 students; to produce economies by taping and reproducing lectures, using IT so that there need be no face-to-face contact with students and promoting efficiency in assessment, usually by formal written examinations (the most efficient of which are of course multi-choice questions, assessed by computer). This is not to say that these solutions are all bad. There is no doubt that IT with flexible learning packages is the way of the future and formal examinations give some certainty that it is the candidate’s work that is being assessed. The problem with these financially driven changes is that students are forced into self-directedness and independent learning by default, rather than acquiring those capacities in a nurturing environment. It is a serious problem for social work education, since social work is so much about the ‘use of self’ that requires development of a critical self-awareness through small group and interpersonal experience.

Universities are now a market place for education and students are ‘consumers’, by way of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), that they pay either upfront or on employment. On the one hand, they are expected to evaluate their educational experience through course and unit of study evaluation mechanisms; on the other, the capacity of the academy to meet their demands is limited by resource shortages, for example to maintain small group class sizes. Further, the notion of ‘consumer’ is at odds with the ‘partnership in learning’ philosophy which underpins egalitarian pedagogy and which is central to the sort of joint knowledge-building approach that is required for critical analysis of competing theoretical approaches.

Globalisation affects the tertiary education market place, with competition for students not only local, but international, as departments are increasingly expected to produce their own resources, encouraging enrolments of full fee paying overseas students or offering distance learning packages. Locally, full-fee paying summer schools are promoted as a way to reduce the shortfall between government funding and departmental needs. The implication of these trends is to distract academic staff from research and teaching and reduce time for essential partnership activities in the world of social policy and social work.

As resource constraints affect universities and agencies alike, the capacity to maintain a stable program of field education is strained. While accredited programs must provide 140 days of agency-based education and this is seen as central to students’ learning and socialization process (AASW, 2000), there is increasing pressure to change this relationship. Barber and Cooper (1997) have suggested that social work has had a ‘sentimental attachment to the formative influence of fieldwork’. They argued that a competency-based approach offers output-, rather than input-based standards, and may provide a way to overcome the resource costs of the traditional program. However, the AASW’s report on competency-based standards has been rejected and the centrality of field education restated in its recent policy and procedures document (AASW, 2000). The implication is that schools and departments are stretched to meet these requirements: the nurturing of partnership arrangements, locating and supporting placements and supporting practice teachers tend to be set against demands
to generate income, be excellent teachers, generate research grant income and capture niche markets.

How is social work education dealing with all of this?

The accurate way to answer this question is—‘variously’. Old and new universities have been differently affected. Our own department provides a case study, one lens through which to examine educational responses in context.

By the early 1990s, it was clear to us that changes in the context were not to be transitory. While we did not want to descend into the treacherous shoals of management jargon, of performance indicators, outcome measures, benchmarking, total quality management, outsourcing or even customer focus, we did want to put some changes in place to take advantage of the opportunities change offered. We also wanted to undermine some of the hoary stereotypes that still bedevilled professional education, like the splits between theory and practice, university and field education, teacher and practitioner. We wanted to combine this with better equipping new practitioners to take on the self-defeating rhetorics and replace them with something of value, and we wanted to address problems in the existing curriculum.

So far as the classroom curriculum was concerned, it was important to retain the best of our ‘trademark’. For example, the department always had as a key element of its rhetoric the encouragement of students’ own self-confidence to develop themselves as active learners rather than passive absorbers of teachers’ wisdom. We had tended to invite ongoing curriculum innovation. Although the 4-year degree had retained a traditional structure of two general years and 2 years of concentrated social work and social policy education, these latter 2 years were continuously reviewed and revised. From the late 1970s, radical, feminist and structural perspectives were emphasised: we came to be stereotyped as ‘radical’.

Existing disciplinary boundaries were retained, and separately developed. Students learned ‘Social Work Theory and Practice’ and ‘Social Policy’, ‘Social Justice’ and ‘Research’ as separate subjects. New subjects were introduced. ‘Anti-racist Practice’; ‘Feminism and Social Work’; ‘Unemployment and Social Policy’; ‘Immigration—Policy and Practice’, for instance, were introduced to focus on diversity. Study units were focussed on particular groups and on methods—community work, casework and group work.

The central planks of the two ‘professional’ years—Social Policy and Administration/ Provision’ and ‘Social Work Theory/Practice’—symbolised the department’s commitment to interdisciplinarity, and a new study unit ‘Interdisciplinary Studies’ attempted integration. We worked to highlight the interdependence of social policy and social work practice and the articulation and illumination of the policy role of social workers working at every level of intervention. It mattered to us as teachers. Given their diversity, for many students it mattered not at all: many loved one and were indifferent to the other.

Some of our innovation had also been directed to a closer association between ‘field’ and ‘school’. So far as field education was concerned, we continued to eschew a separate field education unit: all social work staff were (and are) responsible for maintaining and developing field education. More had been needed to link classroom with placement learning. One strategy had been to introduce the study unit ‘Research Through Practice’. This aimed to face students with the need for a research conscious practice and to prepare them to be able to address issues such as the evaluation of practice in their day-to-day work. It was taught in a way that forced students to relate it to their placement experience. As it turned out, however, only part of their practice was thought to be relevant, that bit that directly related to the assignment they had to complete for the course!

Overall, we continued to ‘crowd’ a curriculum in which there was ever present pressure to
add in more substantive knowledge to appease those crying for the curriculum to address their particular professional needs, or agencies’ peculiarities of practice. Duplication of material ensued. Staff expanded the long list of indicators of diversity—age, sexuality, aboriginality, for instance. But the rhetoric of integration was not expressed in the curriculum structure: many students had great difficulty experiencing the worlds of policy and practice as anything other than separate. They complained of a shopping list approach to knowledge. They were overtaught, and required to absorb a vast quantity of material in a short period of time. Most of them also had to work to live, pay compulsory fees and cope with domestic and international upheavals.

Our initiative was to devise a radically different curriculum in the two professional years of the degree. In doing so, we referred to a range of literature, from disciplines including medicine, education and social work, where various terms are used to describe similar pedagogical approaches—Problem Based Learning, ‘Enquiry and Action Learning’, for example (Boud & Feletti, 1991; Burgess, 1992; Candy et al., 1994; Schon, 1983, 1987; Sefton, 1994). We consulted with colleagues locally and in the United Kingdom and North America, to tap their experience of such pedagogy. We chose the term ‘Issue Based Learning’, as to us it strengthened the interdependence of social work and social policy.

Partnerships and issue based learning

After much struggle, integration became a key concept. Overall this meant integration of learning about social policy and social work practice; of practice and research; of context and practice. The struggles included the pull between leaving the theoretical ground open or closed, the idea of foundation knowledge, the question of disciplines as discrete (and how to integrate learning from different disciplines), the tensions between specialisation and generalism; the loss of specialised methods teaching and the identities methods’ expertise provide for teachers; and the terrible anxiety of what might be lost by way of input (not what could be learned) when the new program is outcome, not input, driven. These struggles were never resolved. Handing over responsibility to students for their learning is not easy.

The changes in the classroom were organised in a program of issue based learning. This consists of intensive ‘core study units’, where the starting points for learning are a context of policy/practice and some typical issues and scenarios. Context provides the springboard for learning about theory, research, values and skills. Titles of study units include Social Development and Urban Futures; Children, Young People and Families; Interpersonal Violence; Social Justice, Social Work and Social Citizenship; Illness, Inequality and Intervention; and Ageing. ‘Scenarios’ might include a white paper on children’s rights; the report of a national enquiry into the effects of the policy of systematic removal of indigenous children from their families; individual case scenarios about illness and its progression. Students work in small groups with a staff member or autonomously, developing their capacity for exploration, toleration of uncertainty, and self-directedness. The lecture is reserved for the presentation of ‘cutting edge’ analysis, to satisfy the performance needs of ourselves and to respond to student request, not primarily as an efficiency tool to make sure that students have been ‘given’ the material.

The well-established relationships with human service agencies were intended to be elevated into a program called ‘partnerships’. These were founded on the principle of reciprocity in teaching students, conjoint research and consultation, and professional development (Davis et al., 1996).

Our intention then and now was to produce graduates who on entry to the labour market,
demonstrate knowledge building capacity (through a research consciousness and literacy); see themselves as inextricably involved in social policy; are capable of critical reflection on the ideas and values they espouse and enact; and are able to transfer knowledge and skills between contexts of practice.

In sum the design is characterised by: the centrality of theory, research and values across the issue based learning program; the integration of disciplines; the student learning group as the centre stage for learning; explicit recognition of prior learning; inductive learning processes; increasing expectation of capacity for self-directedness; a tighter relationship between learning objectives and outcomes; contextualising learning in agency practice; assessment which mirrors typical tasks of practice and the process of learning.

It is an experiment at innovation, albeit designed to conform to accreditation requirements.

How have the more recent contextual changes impacted on our program?

At a very early stage of curriculum transformation, we were aware that the survival of social work education, ourselves as educators and our idea of the university were at stake. The task was to manage a way through the market place of education while giving priority to a pedagogy true to the knowledge and value claims of social work.

But even in 1995, we were slow to predict the magnitude of the changes which would be brought to higher education by the new conservative government of 1996, despite the reduction in resources flowing from higher education reforms. As indicated earlier, student numbers have swollen; staff resources have diminished. More and more our performance is measured by our income generation capacity, our research and publication profile, and our ability to teach by remote control, at a distance. While the small group was not intended to be reified, it was anticipated to provide the conditions for debate. The small group may now number 30.

What does the case study show? What more general issues does it raise? What are the points of tension?

Diversity

Australian society is one of the most multicultural societies in the world. Students of social work reflect diversity, including diversity of ethnicity, race, class, sexuality and age, for example. Attention to diversity is mandated by the AASW requirements. How individual schools and departments of social work interpret diversity and incorporate it into their programs is an open question; empirical evidence is poor. We have argued the importance of examining diversity in ways that burrow into the complexity of the concept, first to appreciate the interrelatedness of diversities, secondly to appreciate both the ‘big picture’ and people’s individual experience, and thirdly to situate knowledge about diversity historically and comparatively (George & Napier, 1997a, 1998). Emphasising difference and diversity also applies to consideration of diverse theory. The state of social science theory must continue to influence the choice of context as the starting point for the analysis of ideas and practices. Though, as Leonard (1994) points out, social work is a ‘frankly partisan enterprise’, it is particularly important that at present the classroom is both a place of certainty and uncertainty. The excitement of scepticism, the outrageousness of questioning received ideas, the embracing of uncertainty might just produce innovations that will help our students as graduates take on the challenges.
Maintaining a focus on interrogation of the new individualism, of the worship of a ‘fast moving product focussed world’ (Greene, 1993), of the idea of constant change of subjectivities and identities, and of the meanings of inequality and justice, is essential (Hugman, 1999). It is important to retain the classroom as a laboratory of doubt, uncertainty and imagination. The question is what are the resources and rewards for creating such a space?

It is also important to address the diversity of students, who vary in their capacity and will to manage the tension between being co-enquirers and consumers, and in their views about what constitute social work and social justice.

**Accountability of social work educators—university researchers and/or members of a profession**

In Australia, universities rely on practitioners’ commitment to the profession for the provision of practice teaching, in most places voluntarily. Partnerships have the capacity to make this commitment worthwhile through strengthening the research capacity of practitioners and bringing current realities into the classroom. As noted above, there are views in Australian social work education that would marginalise field education. Cloward (1998), writing about North America, cogently argues that increasingly academic staff are expected to turn away from practice, from the sites of social work, to focus on research as an academic discipline and that this devalues practice and field education. At the same time it is rewarded in the academic career ladder. In Australia we know this only too well. There is certainly room for concern about the consequences of this trend should it remove the centrality of field education as defined in the AASW Policy and Procedures manual (1998), which states: ‘There should be clear connections between the academic and research pursuits of university staff members, and field education experiences offered by the school’ (AASW, 1998, p. 9).

**Curriculum experimentation or conformity?**

The standard degree is a bachelor’s degree at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Its principles, goals and outcomes, organisational arrangements and governance, structure and content are closely specified by the professional association. At the same time, there is a case to be made for social work education to diversify to take on the opportunities of changes in human services.

In light of the extensive theoretical and professional diversity in a context of economic markets and political conservatism, where social work is fighting to consolidate new roles, to create new opportunities, to appreciate the implications for practice of new theories and what are increasingly accepted as new global processes, we would argue that the idea of an essential curriculum must give way to innovation, experimentation and acceptance of these diversities. This may mean rethinking the goals, structures and outcomes of professional education. One way could be through the establishment of a new egalitarian partnership—a new ‘Accord’—amongst schools, the professional association and diverse employers.

**Conclusion**

There can be no doubt that Australian social work has always been characterised by multiple roles and identities. The directions for where these roles are enacted, which knowledges are utilised, how power and authority are distributed and what meanings are accorded social
justice are, at this point in time, both anxiety-producing and deeply contestable. Of itself, this is healthy and is paralleled in education. In education, however, the contest is not out on the table. It is our view that until the issues are debated, social work educators cannot claim a powerful collective voice for their constituencies.

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