



**Submission by the Australian Association of
Social Workers**

**Review of the
Qualifications and Training Pathways
Department of Child Safety Queensland**

AASW CONTACT:

Professor Bob Lonne, AASW National President

Phone: 0401960580

E-mail: aaswnat@asw.asn.au

Kandie Allen-Kelly, AASW Senior Executive Officer

Phone: 02 6273 0199

E-mail: Kandie.Allen-Kelly@asw.asn.au

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Executive Summary

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the key professional body representing more than 6,000 social workers in Australia. Professional social work has a long history of engagement with child and family welfare systems. Many of our members, particularly those who work in Child Protection, identify the need to rethink recruitment, training and retention issues in the Department of Child Safety. The current issues and need to attract and retain quality staff are recognised as being critical to the delivery of effective services and interventions.

This submission makes a general comment about underlying causes of the workforce problem. It argues that the overwhelming focus on surveillance, hazard detection and risk assurance in Queensland will continue to prevent people who have the required knowledge, skills and experience from staying in the workforce often regardless of workforce strategies. We urge the Review to recognise that it is the desire to help children and families (even where removal from home is the most appropriate intervention) and to work collaboratively with others who are also important to children, that attracts well balanced, highly skilled, ethically motivated and resilient people to work in human service areas. If they cannot do this, they will look elsewhere for employment that meets their professional needs and orientation.

To increase children's safety and wellbeing staff must be able to use a combination of specialist forensic/ investigatory skills and skills which build the capacity of families and communities to keep children safe. A national approach to workforce planning is required.

Proposal 1

We argue that social work and human services trained graduates are best suited to child protection work because of the high degree of fit between their education and the job requirements. We also endorse the proposal to employ other graduates with degree level human science qualifications on the proviso that high quality post graduate training with external providers is available to boost their knowledge and skill base to the required level. Staff could be attracted through:

- the development of enhanced partnerships with universities to encourage human science professional courses to undertake specialist child protection pathways
- specific child welfare input and opportunities for a child protection field placement which can often lead to employment on graduation
- financial support to students whilst studying,
- supported employment during academic breaks
- practice placements in Child Protection during undergraduate degrees
- developing supported internships.

Proposal 2

We agree the Training Branch should develop partnerships with tertiary education providers. However we understand that the Vocational Graduate Certificate Qualification does not meet the industry standard as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations to be regarded as a professional qualification. Accredited courses at the post-graduate level which assist practitioners to develop the particular skills and knowledge are essential. The AASW, the Australian Centre for Child Protection (Professor Dorothy Scott), and the Heads of Schools of Social Work recently undertook a curriculum mapping project with the aim of identifying best practice and developing increased curriculum, relevant to child protection .

Proposal 3

This proposal contradicts international and Australian trends to professionalise the child protection workforce and we are therefore opposed to it. The proposal sends an unhelpful message that professional qualifications are not essential in an area of practice now universally recognised as among the most complex in the world for social care. It is critical that the level of professionalism among Child Safety Officers is not compromised in adversarial settings such as the court where other professionals may seek to undermine their credentials. Child Safety officers must have training that is accredited and independently reviewed. A reliance on the internal training branch, which is already overstrained, to deliver this training, is unjustified and counterproductive, and will adversely impact on the transferability of qualifications and to the attraction of future well qualified staff.

Proposal 4

While there may be some advantages in CSSOs working to assist CSOs with statutory tasks there are many more contra-indications. It is unlikely these roles can be sufficiently clearly defined to avoid serious role conflict; it is easy to blur boundaries and to give CSSOs duties that are outside their area of expertise and their comfort level. We agree that CSSOs should be supported to upgrade their qualifications to degree level and to be eligible for the role of CSO.

Proposal 5

We strongly advocate for professional qualifications for CSOs rather than the diploma and certificate level qualifications described in the proposal which have para-professional, not professional occupational status (see ASCO).

Proposal 6

We disagree with a Vocational Graduate Certificate in management. The generic 'management' qualifications (widespread in the 1990s) have been discredited as being too narrow for developing current and future leaders in human services. There are a range of quality management and leadership courses that include units of study such as Supervision, Leadership and Management of Human Services Organisations currently offered by universities that would have much greater credibility in the broader human services industry than the vocational certificate.

AASW submission to the Review of the Qualifications and Training Pathways - Department of Child Safety Queensland

Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the key professional body representing more than 6,000 professional social workers in Australia. The Association has a key role to strongly advocate on behalf of its members and the profession more generally as they are a longstanding part of the workforce in child welfare. Another key role of the AASW is to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable groups in society. The AASW has a nationwide committee of experienced practitioners and scholars in child protection who have participated in the development of this paper. The strength of this contribution is that it comes from a group with considerable breadth and depth of professional experience in this specialist field.

Professional social work has a long history of involvement with child and family welfare systems in Australia and internationally. It is a major field of practice for social work graduates who work in multidisciplinary teams in human services departments and non government agencies throughout Australia and at all organisational levels in operational and policy areas.

Workforce issues are of great relevance to the Association because these are central to the delivery of humane, ethical systems which care for children and families. Many of our members who work in Child Protection systems in Queensland and throughout the country continually identify the need to rethink the recruitment, training and retention issues which impact on the capacity of the system to deliver effective services.

Before turning to the specific proposals outlined in the Consultation Paper this submission makes a general comment on what we consider is an underlying cause of the workforce crisis currently confronting the Queensland Department of Child Safety. The Association is of the view that the overwhelming focus on surveillance, hazard detection and risk assurance in Queensland will continue to prevent people who have the required knowledge, skills and experience to work with vulnerable children and families staying in the workforce often regardless of qualifications and retention strategies.

Internationally and across Australia over the past two decades Child Welfare Departments have struggled with the right mix of qualifications and skills for work in child welfare. Within practice frameworks dominated by risk and protection rather than child and family wellbeing most have failed to address fundamental workforce issues. This is not to minimise the importance of good investigation skills or the need to remove children from their families where

there are clear threats to their safety. However, we urge the Review to base any future decisions about qualifications and training pathways on the established evidence that it is the desire to help children and families (even where removal is the most appropriate intervention) and to work collaboratively with others who are also important to children that attracts well balanced, highly skilled, ethically motivated and resilient people to work in human service areas. If they cannot do this, they will look elsewhere for employment that meets their professional needs and orientation.

With ever increasing numbers of notifications to child protection authorities and continued “bad press” about child protection systems’ failure to ‘prevent harm’ to children it is unlikely that unless there is significant re-casting of the system to one which is fundamentally concerned with child safety *and* child and family wellbeing there will ever be enough practitioners to keep up with the increasing demand.

Furthermore, to increase children’s safety and wellbeing staff need to be able to use a combination of specialist forensic/ investigatory skills alongside the ability to build the capacity of families and communities to keep their children safe. The latter role is very important as around 90% of concerns about children coming to the attention of Child Welfare Departments in Australia (according the statistics from all the States and Territories) [1] will not reach a legal threshold where action in the Children’s Court will be deemed necessary.

The Department of Child Safety has asked for comments on a specific set of proposals however, before turning to these we take the opportunity to make some general comments about workforce planning including the need for a national approach.

Workforce planning

The AASW supports the key areas for action described in the recent discussion draft “Towards a National Child Protection Strategy for Australia” developed from a National Forum of experts in the field and held in August 2007. This includes the need to improve the capacity of the workforce to meet the needs of children, young people and families involved in the child protection system. Forum delegates called for the development of a national child protection workforce plan which incorporates recruitment, training and retention strategies that meet current and future industry needs. Such a strategy we believe needs to build organisational and systems capability consistent with a renewed focus on child and family wellbeing, relationships and community based approaches.

Furthermore we think the Queensland Department of Child Safety should be mindful of this emerging interest at the national level in child protection issues including workforce. A question for the department is the extent to

which it wishes to diverge from a clear move by the rest of the states and territories to professionalise their respective child protection workforces. Taken overall, the proposals are significantly out of step with contemporary thinking both in Australia and elsewhere.

Although workforce planning alone cannot be expected to balance out the economic, political and social forces at play in workforce supply and demand it is a vital process [2]. It is important for example, for the sector to

- know who comprises the care and protection workforce at a number of levels,
- understand the emerging demographic and demand trends in different areas,
- understand the key practice and other issues that impact specifically on the care and protection workforce.

As this workforce is fluid and moves across national and international boundaries a national plan is essential.

For Queensland (and other jurisdictions) to specifically deal with its workforce strains, effort to address the resource issues of supply and demand of the workforce now and into the future is required. It is important for example, as a specific workforce planning issue for the sector, to recognise that there are human factors that strongly impact on the nature, retention and quality of the care and protection workforce. A national approach to workforce planning is required. The work of protecting children involves a complex and wide set of skills, abilities, experience and knowledge in order to be effective in such a challenging work environment.

At the same time, this difficult work has been pressured by ever-increasing notifications of child abuse, the constant scrutiny and pressure to perform in difficult practice contexts, and the challenges that emerge from the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of those involved in child protection practice. Successful workforce planning for the whole system will require a full understanding of these pressures and human factors and their implications for recruitment, retention and workforce development.

We now turn to the specific proposals.

Proposal 1:

That Department of Child Safety: broaden the Bachelor level qualifications; use rigorous selection; develop a training program to ensure the transition of this broader range of professionals.

Overseas evidence and our own experience points to the appropriateness of social work qualifications as the best entry level qualification for child protection practice[3, 4]. Social work education, with its required broad knowledge base of human psychology and behaviour, field placements and

emphasis on reflective practice, along with the profession's ethical framework and supervision practices, assist practitioners to withstand some of the challenges and dilemmas of child protection practice, such as appropriately using authority within a relationship context, and properly balancing the social care and social control nexus.

That said, we also endorse the proposal to employ other graduates with degree level human science qualifications to enrich the professional services available to children and families and to increase the pool of available workers. This endorsement is on the proviso that high quality post graduate training with external providers is available to boost the knowledge and skill base of these practitioners to the required level.

What is needed to support this transition

Whilst we recognise the need for recruitment from a range of different professional human science disciplines attracting and retaining enough graduates with these qualifications is not without challenges. For example, the Review needs to recognise that many other human science disciplines (eg: Nursing and Occupational Therapy) face equally severe staff shortages.[5]

There is also a need to take into account what post recruitment training and support is necessary to develop the skills required among these groups to undertake in depth assessment, complex case management, and the participatory and collaborative practices with children, families and communities necessary for effective work in Child Protection. The level of skill required to do this work is much greater than can be achieved through internal staff training, particularly given the operational realities of child protection work. Underpinning the work profile described for the various phases of departmental involvement is the need for staff with strong assessment skills – these assessment skills relate to being able to identify key issues and risks that impact on the safety of a child and the parents' functioning, which requires an understanding of child and family issues, broader issues around parenting, attachment, the implications of harm on children, psychologically, emotionally, socially and physically, and being able to appropriately and reliably assess the array of contextual factors affecting human behaviour.

The imperative to offer additional post graduate training is clear when consideration is given the extensive use of procedures required of CSOs. The key to effectively using departmental tools and processes (such as risk assessment tools) is understanding why they are used, what these mean, and what the implications/repercussions are of utilising them to assist assessments of complex and uncertain situations. This involves having a clear practice framework for working with children, families and communities. Having a workforce of staff who do not start with a shared practice framework creates a situation for many staff where their decisions are based

more on “ticking and flicking” and a mechanical adherence to the Child Safety Practice Manual. Anecdotal evidence shows this is currently occurring, which has had adverse implications for the quality of service delivery. The danger for the department is that it will be further promoting this approach if it actively seeks staff without appropriate training.

We draw the Review’s attention to the Victorian Department of Human Services which operates with a risk assessment framework based on a guided professional judgement approach which acknowledges the significance of professional knowledge, skills and values to quality child protection (Department of Human Services, 1999). The very important work of departmental officers requires not only gathering information but also using professional judgement to critically analyse this and make decisions about whether significant harm has occurred or there is a significant risk of future harm. Therefore, staff need to have the necessary foundations in terms of relevant knowledge and skills.

Lack of evidence base for generic social science qualifications

There is a lack of an evidence base for recruiting staff who do not have professional human science qualifications. An important finding from Healy and Meagher’s key workforce study, (2007), was that those with professional human science qualifications remained in front-line practice longer (approximately 30% longer) than those with general social science degrees (eg: anthropology, education). This is similar to US research that found graduates who had received specialist education in child and family welfare were more satisfied with their work and less likely to leave than those with generic social science degrees [3].

The Association appreciates the important role that the police play in child protection, particularly in relation to the less than 10% of cases that go before a children’s court [1], or in situations that are volatile and dangerous where police are acting in their roles as police officers. However, the qualifications and training of police are often at significant odds with those required for the role of child safety officer; the recruitment of police as child safety officers would send entirely the wrong message about the nature of child safety work to the community and the broader service system, namely that protecting children is simply a matter of investigation and identification of the guilty party. It is the very different background and expertise of police that makes them important to a multidisciplinary approach at the forensic front end, ie: where tertiary interventions are necessary through the Children’s Court. To expect them to work in more sustained supportive practice necessary in ongoing work with families and in the out of home care area is unrealistic and detrimental to the department’s reputation as a human services agency concerned about the wellbeing of children and families.

Could other disciplines fulfil all of part of the CSO role?

As stated above and in the response to Proposal 4, whilst we think it possible for people with professional human science qualifications to fulfil this role, on the proviso that they receive additional post graduate training from external providers, we do not think there is a viable role for other groups such as police, people with qualifications in law or criminology playing any other role than the ones they have been trained for (that is: as police, lawyers, criminologists or anthropologists). Taking on 'part' of a statutory child protection role is confusing and potentially dangerous to all those staff and agencies involved in child protection as well as service users.

Attracting, training and retaining the right staff

Anecdotal evidence clearly indicates that many staff have not undertaken CSO training prior to taking on CSO responsibilities, even though this is a departmental requirement. The pressures of workload, staff turnover, the need to quickly fill vacancies, distance for rural service centres and a myriad of other factors have all impacted on this. The danger then arises that reliance on prior CSO training as the only training/transition program will result in ill equipped staff taking on a highly complex and demanding role. This will feed into and perpetuate the staff turnover/staff dissatisfaction cycle currently experienced.

Multidisciplinary teams in child and family related settings tend to work well because the staff complement each other in terms of the skills they bring in working with the one child or family. The department does not always have the luxury of this. It is also important to note that for an OT or Nurse, for example, to engage in quality professional counselling with a child in a mental health setting, that person is required to undertake rigorous additional specific training to qualify them to do so, just as a social worker or psychologist would need to complete further training to undertake the role of the clinical nurse.

The department currently uses the post graduate qualification provided by UQ and JCU for people with non related qualifications. The department should continue to follow this pathway, expanding it as appropriate to create a skilled workforce. It is suggested that the department partners with these and other tertiary institutions to develop flexible programs which enable staff to transition quickly so that they can commence working for the department properly trained to do the job and tasks required.

Notwithstanding our concerns about the broad directions which the Department has taken in recent years, including the comments we make in the introduction to this submission, we believe other strategies that could be implemented to encourage and attract appropriate staff including:

- the development of strong partnerships with universities (such as the existing partnerships with JCU and UQ) to encourage undergraduate students of professional courses such as social welfare, psychology, social work and other human service courses to undertake specialist pathways in child protection. This can occur by including specific child welfare input and opportunities for a child protection field placement which can often lead to employment on graduation [6]
- the provision of financial support to students whilst studying,
- the provision of supported employment during academic breaks
- the provision of practice placements in Child Protection during undergraduate degrees – (Healy and Meagher found that students undertaking placements in child protection as part of undergraduate degree were more substantially satisfied with their role as a child protection worker than those who had not[5])
- developing supported internships.

These incentives could be followed up by the recognition that these workers have enhanced child protection experience by paying them more when they start full time work.

Proposal 2:

That the Training and Specialist Support Branch develop partnerships with relevant tertiary education providers to move CSO training in to the AQF to issue Vocational Graduate Certificate Qualifications at the completion of CSO training.

Accredited courses at the post graduate level

We agree that the Training Branch should develop partnerships with tertiary education providers. However we understand that the Vocational Graduate Certificate Qualification does not meet the industry standard as defined by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations to be regarded as a professional qualification. The work of protecting children involves a complex and wide set of skills, abilities, experience and knowledge in order to be effective in a challenging and changing work environment and as such should be carried out by professionally trained workers.

It is therefore essential to have accredited courses at the post-graduate level which assist practitioners to develop the particular skills and knowledge required for child protection practice after undergoing industry training (understanding of the day to day practice associated with the implementation of statutory law and casework practice). The development of respected and accredited courses would also be attractive to graduates from other human science disciplines who wished to move into child protection. This would underscore the value that the department places on these roles and acknowledges the complexity and importance of the role.

Existing post graduate courses

To date there have been few specialised post graduate qualifications in child welfare offered by Australian tertiary institutions to meet this need. The exceptions are Australian Catholic University (ACU National), University of Western Australia, University of Queensland and James Cook University. ACU National has recently introduced a Masters in Human Services with a child protection major reflecting a broader approach to child protection practice. Units include Working with Children and Young People, Families with High and Complex Needs, Ethics of Human Services Practice, and Leadership in Human Services. It builds on the Postgraduate Certificate in Human Services (Child Protection) providing a staged, professional development pathway. There is evidence from the ACT that retention of staff who are engaged and supported to complete postgraduate study has increased[7].

Development of Standards

The AASW is strongly committed to the development of standards in child protection practice and is currently identifying specific practice standards for the profession. The Association requires members to participate in ongoing professional education to achieve accredited membership status, and state branches provide a range of professional development opportunities. The AASW and the Australian Centre for Child Protection (Professor Dorothy Scott) in conjunction with the Heads of Schools of Social Work have recently undertaken a curriculum mapping project on child protection in social work education, with the aim of identifying best practice and developing specific and increased curriculum relevant to child protection practice. These initiatives are critical to increasing the skills and knowledge of undergraduates in key areas relevant to working with vulnerable children and their families. The AASW is also currently developing and documenting appropriate practice standards in child protection and would encourage departmental input to this initiative.

Proposal 3

That people with three years work experience and accepted diplomas in related fields such as nursing, policing and teaching be accepted in Child Safety Officer training as a pathway to becoming a Child Safety Officer. (This part of the proposal also included reference to the inclusion of a broad range of diplomas as acceptable foundation for CSO work).

Because this proposal contradicts the clear trends to professionalise that are in evidence internationally and in other Australian jurisdictions, we believe it is counterproductive and therefore oppose it [8]. Over the past two decades, substantial effort and investment has been made to increase the educational levels of the child protection and other community service workforces. In our view the de-professionalising of the workforce may well lead to poorer recruitment and retention outcomes with those who have attained degree

qualifications assuming a lack of valuing by the Department of Child Safety of particular educational backgrounds. The proposal sends a message that professional qualifications are not essential in an area of practice now recognised as among the most complex in the world.

The proposal to include a wider variety of backgrounds as possible recruits to child protection has been commented on with regard to Proposal 1. We oppose the specifics of this proposal because it denies the need for particular knowledge, values and skills to work in child protection. For example new social work graduates may not have specific child protection input but they have the core knowledge areas essential to child protection practice (for example child and family interventions, the impact of mental health issues and drug and alcohol misuse on parenting, the impact of disadvantage on family and community connectedness).

Furthermore we remind the Review that Child Protection as it is currently cast, is highly adversarial, with professionals often pitted against each other in different roles (for example in legal and medical settings). It is critical that the level of professionalism among Child Safety Officers is not compromised so that they stand among 'equals' with other stakeholders who sometimes seek to undermine their credentials. To achieve this child safety officers must have training that is accredited and independently reviewed.

We are unclear why the Department states in the consultation paper that it is in an 'ideal position to be able to train frontline staff on and off the job and to provide a robust competency framework to support this' (p. 6). We know of no existing independent and authoritative evaluation of the activities and real outcomes of the training branch that would support this claim. Our information from members is that a reliance on the internal training branch to deliver training which 'upgrades' qualifications will in fact be counterproductive all round. It will impact on the transferability of so called qualifications to other settings and this in turn will result in a failure to attract high quality staff in the future. Furthermore the argument for external accredited providers is strengthened by the fact that the internal training branch is already having difficulty delivering training to existing CSOs and team leaders before they take on these roles. This situation does not lead to any realistic confidence in the ability to address the identified problems in the training branch.

Proposal 4

CSSOs who have completed the Certificate IV in Protective Care and are undertaking a Diploma in Community Services (Protective Care) be allocated some restricted non-statutory tasks that align with their skills and knowledge. This may include casework tasks, co-ordination of meetings, supportive record keeping associated with statutory tasks and assisted decision-making which may serve to facilitate their transition to CSO work

We recognise that there are a great many tasks of varying complexity that have become an essential part of daily work in child protection. Whilst there are clear cut roles such as those mentioned above, where there are advantages in CSSOs working to assist CSOs as they undertake statutory tasks, there are nevertheless strong arguments against this proposal. It is unlikely that these roles can be sufficiently clearly defined to avoid role conflict amongst staff; in a crisis driven culture it is easy to blur the boundaries and to give CSSOs duties that are outside their area of expertise and their comfort level. If the Department does go ahead with the above proposal we think an important principle to adhere to is that CSSOs should undertake tasks that free up CSOs to do more face to face work with children and families. It is this face to face, relationship based work that human science professionals are particularly well trained to carry out.

We support the idea that CSSOs should be supported to upgrade their qualifications to degree level and to be eligible for the role of CSO.

Proposal 5

That the Department promote pathways for CSSOs by ensuring:

- **The current Certificate IV Community Services (Protective Care) articulates to a Diploma;**
- **Upon completion of this Diploma, CSSOs be eligible to seek employment as a CSO and complete CSO training**
- **Completion of a Vocational Graduate Certificate.**

Supporting CSSOs by assisting them to upgrade their qualifications to be eligible for professional officer positions is to be recommended. However as stated above we have argued for professional qualifications for CSOs rather than the diploma and certificate level qualifications described in the proposal which have para-professional, not professional occupational status (see ASCO). The proposal, if implemented, exposes the Department to criticisms that it is offering a lower quality service to highly vulnerable children and families. This would be at odds with the thrust of recent reform directions.

Proposal 6

- **That the Department explores mapping the Team Leader Training Program against a Vocational Graduate Certificate (Management) and designate this qualification as mandatory for completion in the staff member's first 12 months as team leader.**

We agree that team leaders and other senior staff require further knowledge and skills to effectively lead child protection teams and to enable them to contribute to leadership in an effective child protection organisation. However we disagree that a proposed Vocational Graduate Certificate is the best solution and once again reiterate that this would be taking the Department in directions that are inconsistent with contemporary Australian and International evidence based practice.

Team leaders and other senior staff are integral to sound case decision making as well as staff support and development. However the generic 'management' qualifications offered in the above Graduate Certificate is, in our view too narrowly based to develop current and future leaders. We have already made the point that professional qualifications are preferable to vocational qualifications if the Department of Child Safety wishes to keep abreast of human service management reform in other states and internationally.

The stressful nature of child protection practice points to the need to provide adequate staff support through the regular use of quality professional supervision. There is strong evidence that the lack and quality of professional supervision is a key reason for staff attrition and the reported low levels of job satisfaction [9, 10]. Some authors [11] believe the experience of supervision of front line child protection workers parallels that of the system where crisis driven practice is common and attention to the detail of practice and skill development is neglected. We recognise that the Department has taken many steps to address this but that it remains an area requiring ongoing attention and improvement.

There are currently a range of quality management and leadership post graduate courses that include units of study such as Supervision, Leadership and Management of Human Services Organisations currently offered by universities that would have much greater credibility with staff and the broader human services industry than the vocational certificate. The AASW is keen to consult with the states and territories and universities about how such courses can be more expeditiously offered so that they meet the urgent ongoing needs of Child Protection Services.

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