


## ARTICLES

# More Than Just Counselling: Australian Counsellor Job Advertisement Trends

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Research on counsellors in Australia has tended towards workforce surveys that profile association members, and thus, tend to reflect the interests and priorities of counsellors and the counselling profession. However, little is known about what the employment context offers and expects of counsellor positions. This exploratory point-in-time study undertook a content analysis of counsellor job advertisements and categorised the findings into three main areas: conditions, description of the role, and selection criteria. The findings suggest that for counselling roles, employers are less concerned about whether applicants have had specialised counselling training, but that they have tertiary qualifications in cognate disciplines and can undertake a wider range of tasks in addition to providing counselling. Several role requirements specified by employers are not mentioned in contemporary Australian counselling training standards, though most are mentioned in the profession's scope of practice documents. This research provides counselling educators, counselling students, and counsellor jobseekers data on possible trends of contemporary employment patterns appearing in advertised counsellor positions.

COVID-19 seismically shifted counselling from its tendency to identify almost exclusively with face-to-face formats of practice, to one where anyone practising during lockdowns was forced to take their practice only online for a period (Beel, 2021). Although societies have largely removed social distancing restrictions, counselling practice in the digital space is believed to be here to stay (Hanley, 2021). While this is a significant historical moment for counselling delivery in Australia, it also underscores a reality that counselling practice continues to evolve (albeit generally slowly), brought about by social, technological, theoretical, and research contributions (Soares et al., 2020). This evolution needs to be identified, and where appropriate, reflected in counselling educational programs, professional training standards (Beel, 2021; Lewis, 2015), and scope of practice documents. Internationally, various trends in counselling observed over time include increased use of technology; integration of knowledge of brain science, the common factors, mindfulness, trauma-informed practice, and climate change considerations; and the importance of adapting counselling for diverse populations (Drcar & Ingersoll, 2021; Gelso, 2011; Neukrug, 2017; Schofield, 2015; Silverman, 2013).

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While changes and trends in counselling will be identifiable in various sources such as scholarly articles, discourses in professional bodies, and professional development offerings, they may also be recognised in counselling job advertisements. Job advertisements for counselling provide insights into employers' needs, expectations, and incentives. While individual advertisements are not generalisable, numerous advertisements may collectively enable the recognition of patterns that might signify the priorities of employers at the time of collection. These patterns will enable insights that can inform and help calibrate counsellor training, and career planning and guidance, to ensure students, educators, and practitioners alike can maximise employability preparedness.

### **The Counselling Profession**

The counselling profession is a relatively new helping profession in Australia. It was nationalised in the late 1990s with the formation of the Australian Counselling Association (ACA; Armstrong, 2006), and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA; Schofield et al., 2006). In 2011, ACA and PACFA formed the Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (ARCAP, 2011) whereby members from both associations are listed on a single Australian register.

The Australian counselling profession, represented by PACFA and ACA, has developed its own professional identity distinct from other professions, such as psychology and social work, which also provide counselling as part of their functions. Both ACA and PACFA have direct membership and ethical codes (ACA, 2022; PACFA, 2017), offer professional development, insurance discounts, and more (Beel et al., 2022). Both have defined their membership rules to ensure that only applicants who have had sufficient counselling training and preparation will be eligible for entry.

### **Counselling Terminology**

The role of counsellor is officially recognised as an occupation by the Australian Government (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2021, 2022b). As of 2023, there were 30,700 people employed as counsellors (Australian Government, 2023). In Australia, the designation of counsellor and its related terminology is not legally protected or linked with one profession (ACA 2020; O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015; Platt & Pelling, 2021). The word "counsellor" is often used to designate a specific occupational role that may deliver counselling as one of its functions, irrespective of the professional identity of the person undertaking the role (Beel, 2017). It also identifies a practising member of the counselling profession, though the more specific term "registered counsellor" (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018) more clearly delineates this usage from others.

### **Counselling as an Occupation**

In 2022, Jobs and Skills Australia was established to identify and forecast current and emerging needs and trends in the Australian workforce (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2022a). As part of this undertaking, it attempted to define and rank core generic competencies that counsellors should hold. Using a 10-point

scale (where 1 = lowest and 10 = highest), counsellors are to be knowledgeable and skilled in numeracy (4), digital engagement (5), learning (6), problem-solving (6), writing (7), reading (7), oral communication (7), planning and organising (8), initiative and innovation (8), and teamwork (9). The Labour market insights website lists specific tasks that counsellors perform including counselling, collecting client information, assessing, referring, evaluating client and service performance, record keeping, understanding diversity, interprofessional collaboration, stakeholder education, maintaining referral knowledge, and advocacy (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2021). These categories present a broad analysis of the skills and competencies required for the modern counsellor. However, given these skills categories are high level, they provide no insight into significant changes that might inform counsellor education or training standards updates.

### **Surveys Related to Counselling Employment**

There have been several workforce surveys conducted that are relevant for counsellor employment in Australia. These have primarily been counsellor profiling surveys. Data has been collected from advertising within counselling associations (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021; Lewis, 2016; Pelling, 2005; Schofield, 2008; Schofield & Roedel, 2012) and listings of counsellors identified through business directories (Pelling et al., 2006; Pelling & Butler, 2015). These surveys covered areas such as counsellor demographics, training, experience, employment contexts and hours, annual income, professional identity and membership, professional development, preferred therapeutic modalities, clients, and issues addressed. Less common was collecting data on work roles or activities, except for two studies (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021; Schofield, 2008). Overall, there is more emphasis on describing counsellors (Lack et al., 2017) and relatively little on what they can do outside of direct counselling practice. Likewise, the focus in these studies appears to be on helping counsellors understand their profile and asking questions that counsellors are particularly interested in, such as maintaining a tight focus on counselling-related activities (e.g., supervision, preferred modalities). They appear to have relatively little information about what might interest external stakeholders such as employers.

While previous workforce surveys have identified that most counsellors and psychotherapists work in private practice, almost half (44.6%) work for an employer, including within the social services, health, and education sectors (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021). Training providers need to ensure that the training is not only preparing counselling students for private practice, but also for work in employed contexts. Where possible and professionally developmentally appropriate, training providers need to ensure that students' skills and knowledge will meet employer needs. While training providers may have industry advisory groups who play a valuable role in identifying current trends of skills, knowledge, and gaps recognised by employers, their composition and representation may not always sufficiently identify and address the requirements of counselling across diverse contexts and populations.

An alternative to workforce surveys is to identify what employers' expectations are from staff employed to do counselling-related work. Job advertisements provide a means to identify what qualities and characteristics are desired and required by employers. They communicate directly with potential applicants and future employees. The data is easily accessible, organic, and naturalistic (Harper, 2012).

The first study of counselling demand in the labour market in Australia was published in 1994 by Franklin and colleagues. This study was conducted over a 6-year period in New South Wales from 1984 to 1990. Its sample of 6,298 advertisements was not limited to counsellors, but included psychologists, social workers, and a range of other human services-related positions. Over the timespan, positions for counsellors rose from 6.2% to 9.9% of the professional groups identified. The study examined job titles, educational levels, job levels, areas of employment, main duties, and job requirements in counselling advertisements. The authors noted employers expected counsellors to have a wide range of responsibilities rather than be limited to the more traditional counselling roles. Versatility was prioritised over specialisation. This research found that employers highly valued counsellors who had skills associated with prevention, such as community education program development, promotion, and evaluation. It also recognised increasing trends with some client groups, including ethnic minorities and Indigenous people. The authors recommended that education providers pay attention to employer and political trends and ensure graduates are prepared for expectations of the modern marketplace (Franklin et al., 1994).

A core reason for studying job advertisements is to recognise the changing nature of employer expectations over time (Harper, 2012). Given the last known study on employer requirements for counsellors was conducted on a sample collected in 1990, it is timely to revisit the voice of counsellor recruiters. This research reviewed job advertisements to determine what employers are communicating to prospective candidates. It aimed to identify employers' priorities so that these may better inform education providers, the counselling profession, and jobseekers.

## Method

This research used a content analysis design to study online job advertisements for counsellor positions. Its aims were to gain a snapshot sample of advertisements at one point in time. Single point-in-time research is a common method for conducting advertisement-based research (Davies & Butler, 2022; Sinclair et al., 2022). This approach did not require ethical approval as the information was publicly available, and there was no foreseeable human risk.

The content analysis of job advertisements enables the collection of raw, accessible, and convenient data without the influence or interference of the researcher in its production (McArthur et al., 2017). It is useful in examining employer attitudes, perceptions, and priorities, and can identify qualitative and quantitative patterns in the data (Ahsan et al., 2013). Content analysis has also

Table 1. Search Criteria

Criteria	Input
Job search site	<a href="http://www.seek.com.au">www.seek.com.au</a>
Date of search	28 July 2022
Search term	"counsellor"
Listing time	7 days
Classification	Psychology, Counselling & social work; All community services & development; All education & training
Place	None set
Other	All work types, paying \$0 to \$350k+

been used as a methodology in counselling research (Woo et al., 2020) and, while not specifically labelled as such, it has been used in earlier research into counsellor advertisements (Carr, 1991; Franklin et al., 1994).

SEEK (<https://www.seek.com.au/>) was chosen as the source of data, partly due to its ability to customise the search criteria to the research requirements. SEEK is the most popular and well-established online employment marketplace search engine in Australia and has been used as a data source in several employment-related studies (Davies & Butler, 2022; McArthur et al., 2017; Sinclair et al., 2022). Similarly designed research studies into vacancy advertisements have relied solely on SEEK given its market dominance and advanced search features (McArthur et al., 2017; Sinclair et al., 2022).

The search criteria were focused on locating jobs for counsellors. The search term used was "counsellor". This single term was selected due to its specific and direct relevance to jobseekers wanting a counselling position. This term captures the primary focus of the research and as a search term, captures a wide range of roles and job titles that involve counselling-related activities. Conducting the search without quotation marks gave substantially more results, but many were unrelated to the counsellor role (such as pharmacist or psychologist). Using the more specific Boolean quotation marks ensured that only those advertisements with the exact phrase were included in the search results. There were several other parameters that were programmed by selecting the "more options" link directly under the search button. These parameters are shown in [Table 1](#).

The search was conducted on 28 July 2022. A total of 124 advertisements were listed and copied into NVivo (<https://lumivero.com/>). On reading the advertisements, it was apparent that not all of them related to counselling. For this research, the focus was on counselling related to the professional activity represented by PACFA and ACA. Roles such as rehabilitation counselling, financial counselling, and genetic counselling, which have specialised distinct training pathways from counselling, and those which were clearly not therapeutic, were excluded. Some advertisements had titles that included the word counsellor, but the role and its description did not indicate that counselling was part of the requirements (e.g., employment consultant). Twenty advertisements were identified as out of scope for counsellors.

Table 2. Categories and Subcategories

Categories	Subcategories
Conditions	Employment category Place of employment Contracts Employee benefits
Description of the role	Job titles Primary duties Key philosophies and practice frameworks Service specialisation Issues named in advertisements Client descriptions
Selection criteria	Professional registration requirements Level of qualifications Qualifications mentioned Skills, knowledge, and experience criteria Other criteria

A further 34 were excluded as the position requirements disqualified registered counsellors. For instance, some positions were only open to social workers, psychologists, or those registered with the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency. People who had only trained as counsellors were ineligible to apply for these positions. Of the 124 position descriptions downloaded, 70 were included for content analysis. Out of this 70, there were no duplicates.

This is a small sample size for a quantitative study and thus less generalisable. The decision was made to conduct a smaller but more complete and comprehensive coding of each advertisement, rather than the alternative of aiming for a larger quantity of advertisements but narrowing the attention to more specific criteria to code. A smaller sample size examined more comprehensively ensured the study's feasibility given the available resources, while providing readers a more comprehensive picture of what employers seeking to fill counselling positions are communicating.

The researcher completed two full passes of reading and open coding into NVivo conducted over several weeks. Initially, coding was developed as the researcher read the text, and throughout the initial reading, subcategories and categories were iteratively configured and reconfigured until the data could be meaningfully organised. The categories were finalised by the end of the first reading. During the second reading, the researcher coded the full text again using the full range of codes to ensure all relevant text had been coded. He then read the text in each code separately, enabling another layer of error checking and corrections. The final categories were: conditions, description of the role, and selection criteria. Under these categories were 15 subcategories, as listed in [Table 2](#). NVivo automatically provided total counts of how many files were coded to each subcategory.

## Results

The data from the 70 advertisements were organised into the three categories. The conditions category related to the employer, contract parameters, and benefits. The position description category described the job

Table 3. Employment Categories

Context/setting	Number of advertisements (%)
Community service/NGO	45 (64.3%)
Health service	8 (11.4%)
Labour hire	8 (11.4%)
Educational institution	6 (8.6%)
Private practice/group practice/for profit	2 (2.8%)
Other	1 (1.4%)

requirements, and finally, the selection criteria category described the qualities and requirements applicants needed for the position. The findings within each category (and its subcategories) are described below.

### **Conditions**

The first category, conditions, includes the type of employment, place of employment, the contract, and employee benefits.

#### ***Employment Category***

Advertisements were coded into six employment types (see [Table 3](#)). Community services/nongovernment organisations (NGOs) represented the largest number of advertisements for counsellors, with five times as many advertisements as the employment types in second place: health services and labour hire. Educational institutes were primarily interested in school counsellors. Under “other”, there was just one advertisement for a position at the Department of Justice’s Victims of Crime Service.

#### ***Place of Employment***

Advertisements were scanned for the place of employment. This was either the location advertised, the region covered, or the locations that one might choose to work. Some positions allowed more than one location, and therefore there were 72 locations from the 70 advertisements (see [Table 4](#)). Newcastle and Wollongong are recognised as metropolitan areas and counted accordingly (New South Wales [NSW] Government, 2022). In this sample of advertisements, there were five times as many opportunities for working in NSW compared to the states with the lowest number of opportunities. Regional areas made up 43% of the available employer locations. Ten advertisements specifically mentioned the ability (or requirement) to work from home.

#### ***Contracts***

Full-time work was the most frequently occurring opportunity, followed by part-time (see [Table 5](#)). For some positions, applicants could choose either full-time or part-time work, and hence these were counted twice. Temporary positions were almost double that of permanent positions. Some positions were fixed-term positions dependent on funding renewals, while others were

Table 4. Locations of Workplaces by Count

State	Number of advertisements
<b>New South Wales</b>	<b>28</b>
Metropolitan areas (Sydney, Newcastle, and Wollongong)	16
Regional areas (includes Australian Capital Territory)	12
<b>Queensland</b>	<b>16</b>
Metropolitan areas (Brisbane)	9
Regional areas	7
<b>Victoria</b>	<b>11</b>
Metropolitan areas (Melbourne)	7
Regional areas	4
<b>Tasmania</b>	<b>7</b>
Metropolitan areas (Hobart)	2
Regional areas	5
<b>Western Australia</b>	<b>5</b>
Metropolitan areas (Perth)	3
Regional areas	2
<b>Northern Territory</b>	<b>3</b>
Metropolitan areas (Darwin)	2
Regional areas	1
<b>South Australia</b>	<b>3</b>
Metropolitan areas (Adelaide)	3
Regional areas	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>

Table 5. Employment Contracts Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Contract type	Number of advertisements (%)
Full-time	43 (61.4%)
Part-time	30 (42.8%)
Temporary/fixed term/contract	22 (31.4%)
Permanent	13 (18.5%)

intended to backfill staff who were on extended leave. A small number of advertisements were for temporary positions that may convert into permanent work.

### *Employee Benefits*

This section presents strategies of how employers appealed to potential applicants. Often the benefits were listed in a section towards the end of the advertisement, though they were not limited to this area. The financial benefits included the salary range, sometimes expressed in an hourly rate and other times annualised. Advertisements also typically mentioned salary packaging, and sometimes highlighted that employees received above-award entitlements. The second most frequent mention was about the organisation's own values (see [Table 6](#)), and this often included a summary of its mission statement. Diversity emphasis was counted when the organisation explicitly stated that it valued inclusivity and diversity, or when it welcomed applications from various specified groups. The work environment, particularly flagged as supportive, safe, or within a competent and collaborative team, was also regularly mentioned. Professional development, whether provided in-house or funded by the organisation, was also a regularly mentioned benefit. Leave benefits



Table 6. Types of Employee Benefits Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Benefits	Number of advertisements (%)
Financial benefits	54 (77.1%)
Organisational values	41 (58.5%)
Diversity emphasis	40 (57.1%)
Work environment	40 (57.1%)
Professional development	37 (52.8%)
Organisation reputation	33 (47.1%)
Leave benefits	31 (44.2%)
Flexibility	30 (42.8%)
Health and wellbeing for staff	23 (32.8%)
Aspirational values	20 (28.5%)
Career opportunities	12 (17.1%)
Location benefits	6 (8.5%)

mostly included additional annual leave, but also paid parental or maternity leave. The organisation reputation primarily indicated when organisations implicitly promoted themselves as being significant whether it was their size, age, impact, or whether they considered themselves leaders. Advertisements often mentioned flexibility of hours, employee assistance programs, and other health-promoting services and strategies. On the lower end of counts was alluding to meeting the employees' aspirational values, such as being able to help a specific client group and making a difference. A small number of advertisements mentioned career pathways and the lowest number, typically from small regional centres, highlighted the benefits of the regional location where the service was located.

### Description of the Role

Readers of job advertisements need to know the role for which they are applying. This typically begins with the job title, then an advertisement may describe what services the organisation provides, and what is expected of the position being recruited for.

### Job Titles

The most common title in the job advertisements was counsellor (see [Table 7](#)). This is understandable given it was the search term used. Specialist titles were those indicating a specific focus, such as an alcohol or other drugs (AOD) counsellor, child and family counsellor, or mental health clinician, among others. Titles were counted twice if they met the criteria for more than one title, e.g., AOD counsellor met the criteria for specialist title and counsellor, and so did roles with dual names, such as counsellor/community educator. Even though counsellor was the most common job advertisement title, in 39 out of 58 mentions, the title contained additional words, normally indicating a more specialist role, such as integrated family support counsellor.

This section highlights that while the term counsellor is dominant in the title of job roles, the majority of the positions are more specialist in nature, as per the 62.8% of advertisements that had a specialist job title. Even when

Table 7. Main Titles and Title Groupings Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Job title	Number of advertisements (%)
Counsellor	58 (82.8%)
Specialist title	44 (62.8%)
Clinician	6 (8.5%)
Case manager	5 (7.1%)
Team leader or senior [staff]	5 (7.1%)
Social worker	2 (2.8%)
Manager	2 (2.8%)
Worker	1 (.4%)
Clinical supervisor	1 (1.4%)
Educator	1 (1.4%)
Practitioner	1 (1.4%)
Support worker	1 (1.4%)

Table 8. Categories of Duties Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Main categories of duties	Number of advertisements (%)
Counselling and clinical services	67 (95.7%)
External and internal collaboration	46 (65.7%)
Administration	21 (30%)
Interpersonal skills	18 (25.7%)
Leadership	11 (15.7%)
Advocacy	7 (10%)
Outreach	7 (10%)
Court support	2 (2.8%)

the term counsellor was used by itself in the title of some advertisements, the specific job title may have been indicated in the advertisement body itself, such as school counsellor. There was only one position that was specifically identified as generalist counsellor. Most positions had a more specialist focus.

### *Primary Duties*

Most of the advertisements required counselling and clinical duties (see [Table 8](#)). This is unsurprising given the search term was counsellor. These clinical duties are explained in the following section. Counsellors were expected to collaborate with the organisation's own multidisciplinary team, external stakeholders, and other organisations. Interagency collaboration and networking were required to develop referral pathways and coordinate client services. Collaboration duties were mentioned in 46 advertisements. Administration duties were mentioned in 21 advertisements, which included writing and maintaining appropriate client and service documentation, writing reports, data management, computer skills, time management, and other organisational skills.

Interpersonal skills and verbal communication were mentioned in 18 advertisements, often stated when emphasising written skills. These skills were mentioned at times in relation to teamwork, client engagement, and engagement with key external stakeholders.

Table 9. Counselling-Related Formats and Tasks Listed in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Counselling-related formats and tasks of practice	Number of advertisements (%)
Counselling	62 (88.5%)
Individual	38 (54.2%)
Group work	34 (48.5%)
Case management	31 (44.2%)
Psychoeducation	28 (40%)
Assessment and case planning	26 (37.1%)
Family therapy/work	23 (32.8%)
Referral	13 (18.5%)
Telehealth	13 (18.5%)
Relationship counselling	11 (15.7%)
In person	10 (14.2%)

Table 10. Philosophical and Value Requirements Listed in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Main philosophies/values	Number of advertisements (%)
Trauma-informed	25 (35.7%)
Evidence-based practice	20 (28.5%)
Person-centred	13 (18.5%)
Culturally sensitive	12 (17.1%)
Integrated approach (integrated therapy or treatment providers)	9 (12.8%)
Recovery-oriented	7 (10%)
Strengths-based	6 (8.5%)
Feminist-informed	2 (2.8%)

Overall, there were 67 advertisements coded under counselling and clinical services (see [Table 8](#)). [Table 9](#) specifies sub-categories identified. In-person counselling was mentioned only in 10 advertisements, but it should be noted that in-person work is probably regarded as the norm and hence does not need to be specified. This is probably also the case for individual counselling. Counselling as a duty was explicitly stated in most advertisements, but seven advertisements used alternative language such as providing therapy, evidence-based interventions or “working with”.

### ***Key Philosophies and Practice Frameworks***

Thirty-four advertisements indicated core values and practice frameworks that employers expected counsellors to operate within (see [Table 10](#)). Trauma-informed practice was required for positions associated with clients with higher risk of trauma, but extended to practice with more general populations, such as child and family counsellors. Evidence-based practice was also regularly mentioned. However, it was rare for specific evidence-based treatments to be named, or if they were, examples were given as an option, rather than a requirement. For example, one advertisement indicated “training and knowledge of evidence-based treatment such as CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy]”.

Table 11. Number of Advertisements Listing Specialist Focus Areas

Specialised service areas	Number of advertisements	Specialised service areas	Number of advertisements
Family violence	9	Industry specific	2
Children	8	Education	2
Sexual violence	8	Refugees	2
Substance misuse	7	Disability	2
Youth	4	Relationships	2
Family	4	Gambling	2
Indigenous	4	Women	1
Legal	3	Mental health	1
Men	3	Crisis	1

### *Service Specialisation*

From a total of 70 advertisements, 43 identified an area or population of specialised focus (see [Table 11](#)). While the positions may have required knowledge of other specialist areas (such as knowledge of trauma when working in a domestic violence service role), only the prominent area or population of focus was included here. Advertisements that had more than one focus without a clear preference for one or the other were coded to both areas. Some services catered for more than one area, such as The Sexual Assault & Family Violence Centre, which addresses both sexual assault and family violence.

Domestic violence, sexual violence, working with children, and substance abuse accounted for almost half of the advertisements, with 18 of the 43 identifying these areas of specialisation. Advertisements recruiting staff to facilitate men's behaviour change groups were counted as focused on both domestic violence (as the issue) and men (as the population being treated). All three advertisements that mentioned working with men were related to men's family violence behaviour change groups. Of the industry-specific advertisements, one was for the Australian Defence Force, and the other for an ambulance service. The legal areas included victims of crime ( $n = 2$ ) and institutional sexual abuse redress support ( $n = 1$ ).

### *Issues Named in Advertisements*

The data in [Table 12](#) differs from the data in the [Table 11](#) in that it is not about identifying the primary focus of a service but about the specific areas of expertise that advertisements mentioned. For example, an advertisement might seek a gambling counsellor, but also require knowledge in working with trauma. This would be coded as both trauma and gambling. There were 150 mentions of specific expertise, and the issues of trauma, family violence, mental health, and alcohol and drugs accounted for almost half of these (72 of 150). Trauma was coded when services used notions of trauma-informed care, on the assumption that trauma-informed practitioners understand the nature and impacts of trauma.

Table 12. Issues Specifically Named in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Issues mentioned	Number of advertisements (%)
Trauma	29 (41.4%)
Family violence	25 (35.7%)
Mental health	23 (32.8%)
Alcohol and drugs	15 (21.4%)
Sexual violence	14 (20%)
Complex issues	13 (18.5%)
Crisis	13 (18.5%)
Child abuse, neglect, protection	11 (15.7%)
Disability	6 (8.5%)
Gambling	5 (7.1%)
Separation (couple and family)	5 (7.1%)
Homelessness	4 (5.7%)
Grief and loss	3 (4.2%)
Legal	3 (4.2%)
Medical	2 (2.8%)
Forensic	2 (2.8%)
Unemployment	2 (2.8%)
Generalist	1 (1.4%)
Dementia	1 (1.4%)
Sexualised behaviours	1 (1.4%)
Suicide	1 (1.4%)

Table 13. Client Groups Named in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Specialised service areas	Number of advertisements (%)
Family	28 (40%)
Children	23 (32.8%)
Other	19 (27.1%)
Youth/young people	18 (25.7%)
Indigenous people	8 (11.4%)
Adults	6 (8.5%)
Women	6 (8.5%)
Parents	5 (7.1%)
Men	4 (5.7%)
Culturally and linguistically diverse groups	2 (2.8%)
Refugees	1 (1.4%)
LGBTQI+ groups	1 (1.4%)

### *Client Descriptions*

Family, children, and youth were the three most specified populations (see [Table 13](#)). Often advertisements named more than one target audience, such as mothers and children, or youth and families. Older adults were not mentioned specifically in any of the advertisements. Other populations included carers ( $n = 8$ ), victims of crime ( $n = 1$ ), and occupations (students ( $n = 4$ ), defence force ( $n = 1$ ), ambulance ( $n = 1$ ), staff ( $n = 1$ )).

Table 14. Categories of Professional Registrations Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Professional membership	Number of advertisements (%)
Counselling professional membership	25 (35.7%)
Psychology or Australian Psychological Society membership	18 (25.7%)
Australian Association of Social Workers Association	17 (24.2%)
Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency	7 (10%)
Unspecified equivalent appropriate professional body	5 (7.1%)
Mental health occupational therapist	1 (1.4%)
Mental health nurse	1 (1.4%)
Occupational therapist	1 (1.4%)
Registered nurse	1 (1.4%)

## Selection Criteria

The selection criteria describe what requirements and preferences employers take into consideration when determining the successful applicant. Employer requirements included registration (or eligibility to register) with select professional bodies, minimum qualification levels, specialised qualifications, and other related criteria.

### *Professional Registration Requirements*

Less than half ( $n = 29$ ) of the 70 advertisements required any form of professional membership or eligibility for membership (see [Table 14](#)). Requirements for some type of counselling professional membership were mentioned in 25 advertisements. PACFA was mentioned in 14 advertisements, and ACA in 13. Some advertisements mentioned both ACA and PACFA ( $n = 8$ ), some only PACFA ( $n = 6$ ), some only the ACA ( $n = 5$ ), and some just required registration with a counselling body without specifying any ( $n = 8$ ). Registration with ARCAP was not mentioned in any of the advertisements.

### *Level of Qualifications*

Fifty-one of the 70 advertisements specified that they required formal qualifications. As shown in [Table 15](#), the most common requirement was degree-level training or higher ( $n = 40$ ). The five advertisements that required a diploma specifically mentioned a diploma of counselling. Two advertisements required a certificate for alcohol and other drugs counselling. This was the minimum qualification required across all the advertisements. Within the “other” category, most of the descriptions were vague. They required qualifications in counselling, psychology, or social work, but without specifying the minimum level. There were two advertisements that allowed for equivalent qualifications or experience equivalent to a tertiary degree.

### *Qualifications Mentioned*

The job advertisements treated counselling as a role rather than a profession, hence the qualifications that employers recognised were varied, but typically within the human services and social sciences areas. Counselling qualifications

Table 15. Minimum Academic Qualifications Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Level of qualification	Number of advertisements (%)
Degree and above	40 (57.1%)
Diploma and above	5 (7.1%)
Certificate	2 (2.8%)
Other	11 (15.7%)

Table 16. Qualification Focus Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Qualification focus	Number of advertisements (%)
Counselling	37 (52.8%)
Psychology	33 (47.1%)
Social work	32 (45.7%)
Equivalent or other (i.e., non-specified)	16 (22.8%)
Social sciences	16 (22.8%)
Mental health	3 (4.2%)
Family therapy	3 (4.2%)
Human/community services	3 (4.2%)
Behavioural sciences	3 (4.2%)
Occupational therapy	2 (2.8%)
Welfare	2 (2.8%)
Allied health	1 (1.4%)
Health sciences	1 (1.4%)

Table 17. Skills, Knowledge, and Experience Mentioned in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Skills, knowledge, and experience	Number of advertisements (%)
Experience (general 32, specialist 31)	48 (68.5%)
Interpersonal competence	41 (58.5%)
Knowledge and skills related to the specifics of the job	40 (57.1%)
Self-management skills	25 (35.7%)
Values and ethical attributes	18 (25.7%)
Written and administrative skills	17 (24.2%)
Motivational attributes	16 (22.8%)
Technology skills	11 (15.7%)
Management skills	6 (8.5%)
Professional development commitment	4 (5.7%)

were mentioned most often (see [Table 16](#)), but typically the advertisements used the trio of counselling, psychology, and social work qualifications, enabling a wider pool of applicants.

### *Skills, Knowledge, and Experience Criteria*

Prior general and/or specialised experience was required in 48 advertisements (see [Table 17](#)). Only one position indicated that experience was not required and that the position could be filled by a student who had not yet completed their degree. Interpersonal competence, required in 41 advertisements, was to be “excellent” or applicants needed well-developed relationship-building skills, and an ability to work with a diversity of people.



Table 18. Miscellaneous Selection Criteria in Advertisements by Count and Percentage

Selection Criteria	Number of advertisements (%)
Criminal background checks	42 (60%)
Travel related (own car, licence)	31 (44.2%)
Vaccination status	29 (41.4%)
Permission to work in Australia	14 (20%)
Identity characteristics	7 (10%)
Flexibility (location, hours)	6 (8.5%)
Additional certification (e.g., First Aid Certificate)	5 (7.1%)
Other	3 (4.2%)

### *Other Criteria*

The final selection criteria related to factors or characteristics that were not directly related to a candidate's education, experience, or registration. More than half of the positions ( $n = 42$ ) stated that they conducted criminal background checks (see [Table 18](#)). These included working with children or vulnerable people and national police checks. Twenty-nine advertisements required COVID-19 vaccination, and in some instances, other vaccination checks. Identity characteristics were those which specified the role was limited to a specific type of applicant. Three positions limited applications to Indigenous people, three to women, and one to men. The "other" category included requiring a health and drug and alcohol evaluation ( $n = 1$ ), and ensuring one's home office was set up appropriately and safely to perform telehealth ( $n = 2$ ).

## **Discussion**

This examination of job advertisements has enabled a window into the priorities, opportunities, and requirements of employers who are seeking staff for counselling-related roles. The data have been categorised relating to the contextual and contractual conditions of the positions, the descriptions of the advertised roles, and the criteria used for selecting suitable candidates. Given the scope of the data in this research, only selected areas will be discussed and commented on.

### **Conditions**

The types of employment categories identified from these advertisements have largely been identified in previous research. These include NGOs/ community services, health, education, and private practice (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021; Franklin et al., 1994; Pelling, 2005; Schofield, 2008; Schofield & Roedel, 2012). While most counsellors surveyed by Bloch-Atefi et al. (2021) indicated they operate in private practice, counselling is becoming increasingly integrated into the domains of health and human services (Vostanis & Bell, 2020). One point of difference from prior research is that this study identified advertisements from recruitment and labour hire agencies. The employment contracts had a sizeable number of temporary and part-time positions. This is surprising given that near the time of data collection, Australia had hit



full employment (Hutchens, 2022). Some of the temporary positions were due to the fixed-term contracts that are associated with time-limited funding. The high levels of part-time work align with previous research that registered counsellors often have part-time and casual positions (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021).

### ***Recruitment Tactics***

The employee benefits offered appeared to reflect the limitations of helping organisations that were not-for-profit and likely had limited ability to directly increase wages or provide performance bonuses. Rather, employers highlighted salary packaging, additional leave benefits, and the promise to provide personal, cultural, and professional support to enhance employee wellbeing and expertise. Most advertisements that described benefits listed between five and seven different benefits.

### **Description of Role**

#### ***Changes Over Time***

This content analysis of job advertisements in counselling in Australia is the only known study to have been conducted after Franklin et al. (1994). That study was conducted on job advertisements that were published between 9 and 15 years before ACA and PACFA were established. Although the study methodologies differ (the Franklin et al. study was conducted over time, whereas the current study was a point-in-time study), there are meaningful opportunities to compare what has changed. In this time, the counselling profession has formed a distinct national profession, the internet has emerged and become intimately integrated with both home and work, and more recently, the world, including Australia, has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are several areas identified in this study that are not mentioned in the comprehensive Franklin et al. (1994) study of 6,298 advertisements. In comparing the much larger earlier study with this relatively small contemporary study, we can identify what kinds of counselling are needed today compared to the much larger and more comprehensive study. In the Franklin study, there were positions such as AIDS/HIV/STD counsellor ( $n = 24$ ), court counsellor ( $n = 2$ ), and weight loss counsellor ( $n = 2$ ), but none of these were specifically mentioned in the current study. The Franklin study did not mention gambling, domestic violence, or trauma counselling, though it mentioned sexual assault counsellors ( $n = 88$ ). In the current study, domestic violence had the most specialist positions available for any specialisation. Its level of demand may relate to the funding and emphasis provided by the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children 2010–2022* (Council of Australian Governments, 2010).

Trauma was the most frequently cited issue for counsellors to be aware of, particularly in the trauma-informed practice requirements, which have steadily grown in popularity and priority from the late 1990s (Becker-Blease, 2017; Wilson et al., 2013). Alcohol and drug counselling was the most frequently advertised counselling role in the Franklin study yet is the fourth most

common specialisation in this current study, showing a persistent need, but not with the highest employment needs at the time of this updated study. In terms of client groups, the Franklin study mentioned advertisements for working with children, adolescents, and older people. In contrast, there were no advertisements in the current study that mentioned older people, but they did include ethnicity, gender and sexuality, victims of crime, and carers. The earlier study predicted that there would need to be increased support for older people and ethnic minorities, and while the latter has shown some increase in demand for counsellors, the former was not represented.

Telehealth was mentioned by relatively few advertisements ( $n = 13$ ) in the current study. This may mean that services are largely being delivered in person once again, and/or that post-pandemic, telehealth is recognised as normal practice and therefore not in need of mention. Similarly, in-person counselling was also rarely mentioned ( $n = 11$ ). Now, both may be assumed as usual formats of delivery. Bloch-Atefi et al. (2021) found that 47.4% of counsellors utilised online platforms such as Zoom during the pandemic. One study found that school psychologists were inclined to maintain a higher use of technology post-pandemic than pre-pandemic, because it improved efficiency (e.g., working from home) and stakeholder accessibility (Hyde et al., 2022). Clinicians from a range of health professions are likely to continue using telehealth in the future (Smyth et al., 2022). However, for agencies and practitioners who provide counselling, more research is needed.

### *The Counsellor Role is More than Just Counselling*

The counselling profession has typically focused on that which directly supports the counselling activity. The discourse revolves around the counsellor (and/or psychotherapist) and the specific counselling activity (including modality) and activities supporting it (i.e., training, professional development, clinical supervision). Previous research has identified that counsellors often conduct supervision, education, administration, management, and interagency engagement (Schofield, 2008). The discourse from the job advertisements provided a more diverse and holistic emphasis. While advertisements primarily required counselling activities as part of most roles, they often also included case management, psychoeducation, community education, assessment and case planning, outreach, networking, interdisciplinary and collaborative teamwork, advocacy, administration and paperwork, program evaluation, prevention, referrals, and leadership. This expanded list based on counselling job advertisements aligns closely to the Australian Government Skills Classification list of tasks that counsellors undertake (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2022b). These requirements, while largely represented in the profession's scope of practice documents (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018), may also enhance graduate employability if embedded in the profession's training standards, and taught and assessed in counsellor education. This will ensure that registered counsellors can perform the activity of counselling and the broader range of tasks associated with counsellor job descriptions. As noted earlier, many of the positions were focused on helping specific targeted groups or issues. The

job descriptions appeared tailored to provide services to meet the needs of the client groups within the context and values of an organisation. Counselling was one component among many other components that support this service delivery. It begs the question of whether or not counsellor skill sets and training (as expressed in the training standards) are sufficiently balanced for modern employed counsellor roles, most of which require more than just counselling.

### ***Applied Value-based Counselling Prioritised over Specific Modalities***

The advertisements rarely mentioned specific therapeutic approaches that they expected practitioners to use, but tended to emphasise person-centred and evidence-based client work. Counsellors typically emphasise a person-centred relational approach (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018), while the psychology profession in Australia tends to emphasise the treatments that have an empirical base and are recognised as evidence-based treatments (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2019). The former is aligned more with the humanist, common factors approach, while the latter is the medical model or specific factors approach. While there has been significant debate in the literature about which framework is more relevant when working with client issues (Wampold & Imel, 2015), more recent literature has suggested that therapists should prioritise both (Norcross & Lambert, 2019). Employers of counsellors are often government funded and require accountability, and the evidence-based discourse is a language of legitimacy to justify treatment approaches to funding providers. Counsellors aiming to enhance their employability should ensure they are proficient in key evidence-based treatments, which is a position supported by the scope of practice documents for both PACFA and ACA (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018). Most positions do not specify which evidence-based practice applicants are expected to use, but simply require that they utilise evidence-based practice.

### **Selection Criteria**

#### ***The “Shadow” Side of More than Just Counselling***

This study has highlighted that counselling is still a multidisciplinary activity. It is not restricted to counsellors but open to professionals of other social and health identities, and those who do not have a formal identity but meet educational and/or experience requirements (Franklin et al., 1994). While the counsellor role requires more diverse knowledge and skills than needed for specific counselling-related duties, a shadow side is the undervaluing of the importance of employing people who have had sufficient counselling training. Most of the positions requested counselling qualifications but commonly accepted alternative qualifications. These included various social science undergraduate qualifications, such as psychology, social work, human services, and welfare qualifications. Many of these, particularly the undergraduate and some honours degrees, may have little to no theoretical or practical training in counselling. General or specific experience was valued, but experience without prior training does not mean that social science graduates are equipped to deliver therapy competently.

One advertisement from an employer claiming to have over 500 staff asked for a child and family counsellor to work with 5- to 12-year-old children and families with trauma using individual and family therapy, and required related tertiary qualifications (including psychology, social work, or welfare) or equivalent experience and training. Such qualifications may not have prepared the applicants for basic counselling, let alone specialised counselling. If counselling qualifications are overly specialist for today's counselling positions, the opposite problem is employing staff with overly generalist qualifications to provide highly specialised and advanced therapy to vulnerable clients with complex issues.

### ***Professional Registration***

Registration with ARCAP was not mentioned in any of the advertisements. There was no uniform approach in advertisements, with some mentioning one counselling peak body and not the other (ACA:  $n = 5$ , PACFA:  $n = 6$ ), some mentioning both ( $n = 8$ ), and some mentioning neither ( $n = 8$ ). While ARCAP was to be a central registry intended to represent one counselling profession (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015), this lack of mention of ARCAP possibly reflects a perception that each peak body has historically promoted themselves and their own association's credibility more so than promoting the profession as a whole. An example of this can be seen in ACA and PACFA providing separate submissions to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (2021), each emphasising their respective association and membership. A promising signal was a recent lobbying submission to the government (ARCAP, 2022), whereby both peak bodies used ARCAP branding to demonstrate a united position representing the entire profession of counselling. If the peak bodies applied this same approach of centralising ARCAP as a basis of awareness raising for employers and the public (Platt & Pelling, 2021), this may produce a more consistent awareness that ARCAP represents all registered counsellors in Australia.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This exploratory study cannot be generalised too widely, given its relatively small sample size, its single source of data collection which did not cover all online job posts, its single search term, and its point-in-time data collection. The collection period was soon after the COVID-19 pandemic, when Australia was at almost 100% employment, thus this context may create different trends in the advertisements that may not be present at other times. Furthermore, the data was collected and analysed by a single researcher, without triangulation from additional researchers, increasing the possibility of errors at any stage of the data collection, collation, or analysis process. Additional data sources, search terms, coders, and a larger sample size might have shifted the findings in different directions, thus affecting any tentative conclusions drawn. The findings of this study should be considered preliminary and exploratory, rather than exhaustive and authoritative.

Given the paucity of recruitment research for counselling positions and the changing trends within counselling employment over time (c.f., Franklin et al., 1994), research into industry needs and trends should be conducted periodically to ensure that training standards, scope of practice documents, and counsellor training are kept up to date with the needs of contemporary practice. This study, while small, has identified meaningful categories and subcategories that might be used in larger scale and more exhaustive counselling employment advertisement research.

### Conclusion

This research examined recruitment advertisements for counselling positions for trained counsellors that had no explicit barriers (such as a mandatory requirement to be registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency). Although counselling as a profession in Australia is relatively young, 35.7% of advertisements indicated requirements for applicants to be eligible for counsellor association membership, indicating advertisers had a level of awareness and recognition. The advertised counselling positions were found to be diverse across settings, issues, and populations, and more than half were specialist (e.g., family violence). This research underscored the importance of counsellors having broader skills and knowledge (e.g., case management) suited to the health and human services sector while being able to adapt these skillsets for specialised roles. Almost 30 years ago, Franklin et al. (1994) noted that there was “a clear trend away from professions [such as psychologists, social workers, etc] towards more generic occupational groups . . .” and that “employers appear to be looking for workers who will undertake a wider range of responsibilities, and this is reflected in the increased number of duties specified in job advertisements” (p. 47). From an employment perspective, counselling positions appear to require more than just counselling skills. This knowledge is important for the profession, counselling educators, graduates, and counsellors seeking employment in the contemporary labour market.

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