

VIEWPOINTS

The Australian Counselling Profession in 2030: An Educator's Perspective

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This paper explores the current and future status of the counselling profession in Australia. It reviews the progress and challenges of the profession in terms of recognition, regulation, training, and research. Envisioning a successful future, it attempts to describe that future and how the profession succeeded in accomplishing its goal of full recognition. The paper aims to stimulate ideas and discussions among counsellors and stakeholders to achieve a unified, consistent, and recognised profession that can meet the contemporary needs of Australian society.

Imagine the profession of counselling has come of age. The date is 2030. Counselling in Australia has acquired social and governmental recognition as a profession within the health and social wellbeing landscapes. Counsellors have access to Medicare's Better Access initiative, are recognised within the government mental health departments across Australia, and are, by default, listed alongside psychologists and social workers in advertisements for counselling positions. Employers who hire a registered counsellor have a broad expectation of what skills, knowledge, and values will be demonstrated, just as they do when hiring psychologists or social workers. Counsellors are recognised by other allied health professions and have increased membership on interdisciplinary teams. They have a protected title—"Registered Counsellor"—that helps safeguard the profession's reputation and identity. The profession has ensured that the leadership, training, and socialisation of counselling trainees is primarily conducted by qualified counsellor educators who were prepared, inducted, and registered in the same profession for which they are preparing their students. Newer counsellors no longer feel inferior and uncertain in the presence of other helping professionals but are proud and confident in their training and professional identity. Greater clarity now

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exists inside and outside the profession regarding how counsellors differ from other professionals who counsel. It is clear who we are and how we are unique.

Before exploring in more depth my speculation of one potential future, it is useful to identify our position now. The counselling profession has made tremendous progress since nationalising more than 20 years ago. There are approximately 40 institutions in Australia that offer training courses in counselling, many with professional accreditation, thereby flagging that they meet the minimum training standards. There are two peak bodies, the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) and the Australian Counselling Association (ACA), both of which have growing memberships with thousands of members, codes of ethics (Australian Counselling Association, 2022; Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia, 2017), training standards (Australian Counselling Association, 2012; Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia, 2022), scopes of practice (Australian Counselling Association, 2021; Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia, 2018), private health insurance recognition by several providers, and National Disability Insurance Scheme access. The uptake of counselling education is offered in a range of variously sized training providers, colleges, and most universities. Many job advertisements for counselling-related roles recognise those trained in counselling and/or registered with the counselling profession. While counselling has some way to go to catch up with more established professions, it is on the professional map as never before.

However, at the time of writing, there still are some goals to achieve. Although the social need for, and availability of, counsellors is evident (Bloch-Atefi et al., 2021), counsellors are still discriminated against. They are unable to access Medicare's Better Access initiative and continue to be excluded from consideration for roles that are essentially counselling positions (Beel, 2023).

At this point, we have not yet reached full professionalisation. One article discussing national counselling association professionalisation noted several steps that may strengthen national and institutional recognition (Montgomery et al., 2018). These included a strong sense of shared identity that is well known and understood, standardisation, a commitment to the good of clients as a primary motivation for decisions, research engagement and support, viability, and strategic engagement with key stakeholders (Montgomery et al., 2018). The Australian counselling profession is already well on the way to what might be full recognition. It has two peak bodies to develop regulated communities of practitioners, has brought together a diversity of practitioners and associations into the two main bodies, defined rules regarding training and entry into the professional peak bodies, engaged with allied professions, advocated to industry and government, and sought vocational opportunities for counsellors and psychotherapists, among other advances. However, inconsistent recognition within mental health services and systems, schools, and other contexts signals that there is more to be done.

This article aims to stimulate consideration of how we might press forward, help us take stock, and introduce some fresh ideas. It does this by working backwards from a future vision in which the profession is fully recognised. What follows hints at a formula that may partly contribute towards full acceptance and recognition socially and professionally (besides the other strategic efforts currently being undertaken by the existing professional bodies and members). I hold no formal committee or leadership positions within PACFA or ACA so I acknowledge my limitations regarding the historical and contemporary strategies these bodies have undertaken or are undertaking. Parts of my vision may be provocative for some, and I apologise for this in advance. I offer merely one registered counsellor/counselling educator's vision of what the counselling profession might look like if we were to be successful in gaining broad acceptance at all levels of society. Embedded in such an exercise are implied roadmaps of how we arrived. So, in my vision of future success, how did we achieve complete recognition and what does the profession look like in 2030?

Strategic Planning for Recognition

The counselling profession carefully developed a well-researched, literature-informed, strategic 5-year plan for gaining social and governmental recognition, while it continued to take advantage of ad hoc opportunities. It compared the evolutionary recognition of international counselling associations and similar Australian professions that had gained recognition and determined the key components that appeared to contribute the most. Planning was undertaken collaboratively with both peak bodies (PACFA and ACA). Both bodies consciously addressed their own conflicts of interests (i.e., desire for profession recognition compared to desire for their own association's recognition) and discourses that promoted them when advocating for the profession to avoid undermining the larger goal of profession recognition. Both bodies committed to prioritising decisions that were in the best interests of the profession, and this decision pervaded their communication, operations, and strategies. They determinedly sought to identify and strategically address internal and external barriers and leveraged the strengths of each association.

One Profession, One Identity

The counselling profession in Australia historically had struggled to find a cohesive, unified identity (Moir-Bussey et al., 2016) and the existence of two peak bodies had been recognised as problematic (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015). As part of its own internal reviews, including careful consultation and research with internal and external stakeholders, several issues and solutions were discovered. The profession's leadership recognised that although it had endeavoured to present a united front through the Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists, it was still operating in practice and

discourse as a divided profession. As a result of a meticulous review, both peak bodies decided to clearly demarcate the profession from the peak bodies, including their key functions.

The formerly known Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists was supported by—and granted special autonomy from—ACA and PACFA; it changed its name to the Australian Board of Counsellors (ABC) and expanded its scope and purpose. The ABC is now responsible for registering counsellors, accrediting training courses, managing complaints, and advocating for the profession in a non-partisan way. There is one code of ethics, scope of practice, and training standard for all registered counsellors. Membership of the profession through the ABC is clearly demarcated from membership in professional associations. The ABC removed membership-level descriptors that were meaningless to the public (e.g., numbers¹) or that were misleading (i.e., Clinical²), and now uses recognised levels such as Student Member, Affiliate Member (i.e., financial-only member), Associate Member (i.e., practising members who do not meet contemporary training standards, such as sub-degree holders, and provisional members), Academic Members (i.e., counselling educators), Members (i.e., full practising members), and Fellows (i.e. senior members).

The two peak bodies and other associations continue to exist as associations that registered counsellors and affiliates can join. They are complementary and supportive of the ABC and have redefined their scope and function to maintain their operations as mainstream professional counselling and psychotherapy bodies, but have their own distinctive membership requirements and processes in their respective associations. They continue to play an important supportive role for members of the profession within their scope.

Titles such as Psychotherapist no longer form primary alternative identities to counsellors but are recognised as specialist identities, like clinical psychologists who are specialist psychologists. Additional specialist identities also include Counselling Supervisor, Counselling Educator, Indigenous Healing Practitioner, and Mental Health Practitioner. However, all these specialist identities are secondary to the primary identity, that being a Registered Counsellor. This decision was made to simplify recognition of one profession, one identity, while allowing for select specialisations within the identity. Additionally, this reduced the previous infighting and territory marking between the (previously) two distinct identities of counsellors and psychotherapists. It follows that PACFA is now the Counselling Federation of Australia, or CFA.

1 The Australian Counselling Association labels practising counsellors according to numbered levels, with the least experienced and qualified counsellors categorised as Level 1, and the most experienced and more qualified counsellors categorised as Level 4.

2 Labelling counsellors as Clinical Members based on additional time and specific experience alone is misleading to the public. The word “clinical” has connotations of working within the medical model and treating diagnosed mental disorders, implying additional endorsement in specialist clinical training. Many counsellors are not aligned, or only partially aligned, with the medical model, so the terminology does not accurately represent senior members of the counselling profession.

Registered Counsellors have a small number of essential values distilled through lengthy consultations with registered members. This has enabled the ability to identify and articulate the profession's core values, which mirrors a similar approach in social work (with its emphasis on social justice) and psychology (with its scientist-practitioner commitment). Counselling has developed and articulated its core driving values across the profession and successfully communicates and reinforces these within training and the profession, and externally to society and other key stakeholders. Counsellors can clearly and positively differentiate themselves in relation to similar professionals who counsel and do so consistently. These values can be summarised as client-centred practice: a concept that privileges clients' voices and preferences; implies egalitarian, collaborative, and relational practice; and can be adapted to a wide range of modalities, contexts, and settings.

Credible Training

The counselling profession recognises and values its own distinct identity and values, and thus no longer treats other similar professionals who counsel as automatically qualified to teach counselling students. Qualified counsellor educators are no longer treated as optional in the preparation and socialisation of counselling students but are now recognised as essential to maintaining the distinctiveness of counselling student socialisation. Counsellor training standards now require a minimum of 50% of educators who teach and lead counselling courses to be counsellor-qualified. This has led to an increase in the consolidation of the counsellor identity, and a reduction in the perception that non-counsellor outsiders can determine who is qualified to teach counsellors.

The ABC listened to stakeholders, including industry, governments, counsellor educators, and private practitioners; consulted with international standards (e.g., the United States-based Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs); and reviewed contemporary counselling education and broader education research to determine its training standards that form the basis for registration as a counsellor. The training standards provide specific and detailed expectations and explanations to enhance the consistency of graduate knowledge and skills across institutions, hence the consistency of foundation knowledge and skills across registered counsellors. The ABC guards against being influenced by the sectarianism of individual counselling and psychotherapy modalities, and viewpoints that contradict contemporary research and the realities of contemporary practice. Rather, its training standards focus on how best to prepare counsellors to work in the contemporary world—ensuring their practice is effective, ethical, and adaptable—and enabling the acquisition of transferable skills and knowledge that may apply to other related roles (e.g., case manager). While it maintains respect for the diversity of both mainstream and lesser-known therapies, its counselling graduates all possess predictable core skills and knowledge to ensure employers and funders have confidence in counsellors' training. As an element of membership

application, the ABC has an entry test, which includes standardised assessments and hurdles as a further mechanism for ensuring quality across training providers.

Counsellors have developed a clear, informed, and cooperative commitment to evidence-informed practice³ and integrate neatly within the medical model, recognising it as a culturally dominant and meaningful framework from which many clients receive mental health treatment, and to which many industry and government stakeholders ascribe. Counsellors recognise the medical model as one model among many other explanatory models for understanding human distress and wellbeing, and they have knowledge of alternative forms of cultural and professional explanations. Counsellors are socialised to learn and respectfully engage with and operate in (and appropriately critique) the dominant and non-dominant cultural health discourses and practices. They have become increasingly competent and comfortable to participate cooperatively in interprofessional groups and no longer experience professional exclusion from roles or teams in which they are qualified to engage. They are mindful that their credibility as a recognised and legitimate helping profession partially arises from being able to work constructively, knowledgeably, and effectively within a range of systems and paradigms, including dominant contemporary international paradigms such as the medical model, without compromising their core values as counsellors.

As an aspect of recognition that counsellors can effectively operate within the medical model context, which emphasises the use of specific evidence-based treatments (EBTs), all counsellors are trained in at least one of the mainstream EBTs, as required by Medicare's Better Access initiative. Governments, insurance companies, and employers are confident that all registered counsellors can competently deliver at least one of the widely recognised and utilised EBTs. While many training providers also offer specialist training in non-widely used approaches, these exceed the competencies required for the mainstream approach learned.

Counsellors Provide Value to Contemporary Need

Counsellors' training provides them with the foundations for diverse practice across client groups, issues, and formats of delivery. Training for entry into the profession is not primarily designed to teach students to be specialists but to prepare them as well-rounded counselling professionals. In addition, the registered counsellor has been trained and assessed in competencies that are expected of many counsellors in the modern workforce, including case management, risk management, telehealth, group work, psychoeducation, administration, record keeping, prevention and early intervention, interprofessional collaboration, referrals, and research skills (Beel, 2023). The training standards incorporate knowledge from regular

³ Evidence-informed practice as distinguished from evidence-based practice. For more information, see Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (2019).

consultation and targeted research into employer needs, social trends, government requirements, and national and international trends in counsellor education and education more broadly to ensure that graduates are sufficiently prepared for the roles contemporary counsellors undertake. The processes of updating and proposing standards are conducted in a transparent manner enabling debate and challenge by all key stakeholders before becoming finalised and introduced.

Research Competency

Counselling, like other practice-based professions, previously struggled to gain a research identity. Consequently, academics in public universities were often compelled to publish in journals external to the field of counselling to ensure their research contributed to their performance measures, thus diverting their contributions away from building the counselling profession's own research credibility. The profession of counselling recognised the importance of strategically developing a comprehensive research strategy as a means of using research to gain and maintain professional credibility with the public and other professions. It also recognised the importance of a comprehensive research strategy for establishing, socialising, and equipping the profession's students and members with greater research skills and knowledge, and ensuring there are sufficient numbers of counsellor-trained academics.

In 2030, meaningful research training is not an optional extra in counsellor training but viewed as essential. Counsellors can read, interpret, and critically evaluate research, and recognise its value in helping to further their knowledge. The proportion of counsellors progressing to undertake doctorates has significantly increased because of the ABC training standards requiring a minimum of 50% of academic staff to be registered counsellors. This has incentivised the university sector to proactively encourage academically driven students towards higher research degrees to prepare a pipeline of future counselling-trained academics. There now exist doctorates in counsellor education, which are specifically designed to prepare the next generations of counselling academics. Universities are no longer limited to choosing between hiring published doctorate-holding psychologists and master's-qualified registered counsellors without a meaningful publication track record. Counsellor doctorate holders, with research publications, are prepared to succeed in the university system and be equal-status peers among academic staff in other disciplines. This equality of status in higher education has helped enhance the reputation of the counselling profession from lesser qualified to equally qualified professionals.

The counselling profession's research committees developed a strategy to increase the profile of its journals and ensured they were indexed by reputable databases in which they may be found and thereby have their impact factor improved. Consequently, publication in such journals can contribute to fulfilling university academic publication requirements. As a result of enhancing the emphasis of research in the training standards and

developing its own strategic research agenda, the counselling profession now has at least one well-ranked counselling journal in Australia that is indexed by the major research databases and attracts Australian and international contributions.

Summary

In the future, I envision a unified structure for the Australian counselling profession that is socially and governmentally endorsed. The profession's skill sets and knowledge will be predictable; it will be complementary to and offer what is valued by mainstream services and related professions; and it will maintain its diversity of additional specialisations without compromising its core. Counsellors will have a clear sense of their own identity, be agile and adaptable to a wide range of contexts, and have a contemporary skill, knowledge, and attitude base that will set them up to succeed in whatever contexts they work in. The counselling profession will give higher priority to research and its value, and while not all counsellors will become or aspire to be researchers, they will be able to interpret and utilise research intelligently to remain current. Counselling educators will increase in numbers and be as highly educated and high performing as their colleagues from other disciplines with extensive research histories. Counselling will be regarded as an equally credible profession at all levels. Beyond this, its future recognition will require that counsellors have been trained and operate at the level that warrants the level of recognition sought. In my vision, our profession has shifted from viewing diversity as strength to recognising that diversity can lead to confusion and diffusion if it undermines the development of a clearly formed singular identity. Counselling needs indivisible unity and consistency, and to meet the metrics that other professions have achieved to gain wide credibility. I recognise this document overly simplifies the complexity and issues we face as a profession. If anything, I hope this article will stimulate ideas and enhance efforts towards a common goal and a single shared identity.

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