Independent Review of Accreditation Systems within the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for health professions: Submission by the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW)

Background
ACHSSW represents Schools of Social Work across Australia. The Council is dedicated to achieving excellence and innovation in social work education, and promoting leading edge social work research.

Through our work we are committed to the development of a fair and just society that supports the achievement of human aspiration and the empowerment of those affected by inequality. Our aim is to create a dynamic and vibrant social work profession through innovative teaching, rigorous research, and transformative engagement with communities. The breadth and quality of our social work programs provides a firm foundation for future leadership.

The Council provides a national forum for Heads of accredited social work programs in Australia, and works in partnership with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Australia & New Zealand Association for Social Work and Welfare Education & Research (ANZSWWER).

Our mission is to:

- Promote social work education across the wider community, locally, nationally and internationally;
- Spearhead exchanges of information and ideas and promoting collaboration within the discipline and across allied professions;
- Support the interests of social work Faculties within the Academy;
- Maintain strong links with regulating bodies within the discipline nationally and internationally;
• Advance the profile of Australian social work education and social work educators;
• Promoting social work as an important area of study of critical importance to society;
• Address national and international issues in social policy and social work that impact upon social work education;
• Strengthen the evidence base for social work education through the promotion of quality research;
• Collate data on social work education across Australia to inform and monitor the delivery of social work programs;
• Promote innovation in the delivery of quality social work education;
• Provide ‘thought leadership’ that promotes an innovative and sustainable academic workforce that will shape the future of the social work discipline.

Currently, social work is not registered with AHPRA, however social workers are employed in a range of allied health positions and they can be accredited providers of mental health care services through Medicare. This overlap has prompted our response as a Council to the review of NRAS for health professions.

Response
The AASW is the national accrediting body for social work education in Australia. Also, the AASW is the delegated assessing authority for Mental Health Social Workers that provide services through Medicare Australia. The AASW has pursued registration with AHPRA however attempts to date have been unsuccessful. Although social work is an unregistered profession, there are issues of accreditation that Council would like to raise given the position of social work in the health sector in state and national settings.

1. Accreditation standards that enable interprofessional collaboration
Social workers contribute to state and federal health-focused goals across all areas of the health system. They are employed in hospitals, community-health centres, mental health services and in a diverse range of community-managed organisations that deliver health-related services (for example, housing services for people with mental illness, drug and alcohol rehabilitation services). Social workers also operate in community care services, where they often work with people who have complex health and other needs impacting their wellbeing (for example, lack of access to income, affordable housing, safety and education). Social workers operate in health and community care service systems and organisations using a wide range of skills that include clinical and non-clinical practices (such as advocacy, research and community development). A common accreditation framework for health professions would need to promote knowledge and skills that facilitate strong interprofessional collaboration. It would also need to articulate in someway with unregistered professions; the review doesn’t appear to address how it will engage with unregistered professions that are part of the health care system. Specifically, Council would be interested to know the intended strategic relationship between NRAS and the AASW.
2. Fostering critical awareness in accreditation standards to address health inequalities
Social work is a profession committed to advancing socially just societies that protect and promote human rights. Health inequalities are stark in Australia and addressing these inequalities will require common commitments from all health professions: addressing discrimination in all its forms, valuing all people, actively advancing the interests of marginalised groups, and promoting the dignity of individuals and communities. There is also a need to embed a critical perspective in health accreditation standards as there is a risk that a common framework for interdisciplinary health education could replicate existing systems that have contributed to maintaining – and in some areas deepening – health inequalities. Australian social work education addresses this issue by focusing on how to decolonise pedagogy and in turn the profession.

3. Including consumers
Social work highly values lived experience as a source of knowledge and supports peer-led service delivery. As a profession, we have promoted consumer involvement across many areas, including in university course consultative/advisory boards and as educators in social work courses. We recommend that assessment teams for accreditation of health professions include peers/consumers, including carers.

4. Providing sustainable student placements
Council welcomes opportunities to work with the NRAS to address the challenge of managing student placements. Australian social work education accreditation standards require social work students to complete 1000 hours of field education prior to graduating (usually over 2 practicums of 500 hours) and these placements require professional supervision by an experienced practitioner who is eligible for membership with the AASW. As student numbers increase, and as the care sector diversifies (and experiences significant funding pressures), social work higher education providers struggle to find appropriate and sustainable placements. Greater flexibility around field education requirements is necessary, and Council welcomes opportunities to work with the NRAS to address this issue that is common across health-related disciplines. Some form of ‘service-learning’ could be undertaken (outside of placement) to meet generic learning outcomes relating to basic professional behavior and engagement with communities: this could be used to count towards placement hours. Additionally, we see the potential to run interprofessional student units that could be used to develop and trial digital interventions/‘e-Practices’. Such developments are crucial for meeting workforce demands in terms of the changing nature of practice, while also having direct benefits in the community.

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