

Frequently Asked Questions

The AASW campaign to achieve registration of Social Workers in Australia

Why is the AASW pursuing statutory regulation (registration and accreditation) of Social workers in Australia?

The current Board of the AASW has a commitment to the pursuit of registration as a means of enforcing safe and competent practice and to further protection of the public from practitioners who breach ethical standards. A good self regulatory system currently exists within the AASW for managing ethics complaints. This system has severe limitations; only members who remain members can be investigated through this process and the most severe penalty provided under this system is exclusion from eligibility for membership of the AASW.

What are the possible benefits of registration?

Statutory regulation - Registration and Accreditation through a scheme such as the National registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) is primarily about providing protection for clients and greater certainty for employers. A statutory model of regulation will provide a legally enforceable set of probity, qualification and practice standards for entry into the profession and maintenance of continuing professional development as a requirement for maintaining registration and accreditation. It will therefore provide members of the public with greater confidence that a person stating they are a social worker is qualified and conforms to ethical practice.

Statutory registration and accreditation also provide a registration board with powers to investigate complaints and legally enforceable penalties for practitioners who breach competency and ethical standards, including removal from the register of practitioners. This makes it less likely that a person engaging in incompetent or unethical practice will move to another position without detection.

Will registration improve the professional standing of Social Work and lead to better pay and conditions?

Registration may have a secondary benefit in increasing the confidence of employers and the public in the profession because of the knowledge that there are legally enforceable standards in place. It is highly unlikely that registration will have any impact on pay rates. For example, in NSW a single allied health award applies to most allied health professions employed in the public health system. There is no difference in pay rates or conditions between those that are registered such as Physiotherapy and those that are not.

It is also extremely important to recognise that politicians will **not** support registration of Social Work if they receive messages indicating that self interest rather than protection of clients is a major motivation in a representation to them on this matter.

What is the process of registration currently being pursued by the AASW?

The current AASW Board has approved the pursuit of registration through the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS), a scheme commenced following a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreement in 2008. The NRAS involves a national registration and accreditation scheme for health professionals introduced in July 2010. Health professionals (including Nurses, Physiotherapists and Psychologists) already fully registered in Australia at the time of the COAG agreement were registered at that time and professions which were partially registered (such as Occupational Therapy) will be joining the scheme on 1 July 2012. The national body administering the scheme is AHPRA – the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, which is partnered with national Boards of registration for specific disciplines.

The AASW will be making a submission to have Social Work included in a third tranche of registration and accreditation through this scheme. Since 2008 other options including a community services model have been pursued by the National Registration Committee with the approval of the AASW Board but pursuit of registration through NRAS offers the best and most likely means of gaining registration.

Why is the process of gaining registration taking so long?

Statutory regulation (registration and accreditation) is a process that requires political support and which will involve a monetary cost. The past 20 years has also seen a general trend towards self regulation as a lower-cost, less restrictive form of regulation in many areas, including workforce regulation. Up to this point politicians have not been convinced that the profession of Social Work poses sufficient possible danger to the public to warrant the costs and restrictions imposed by statutory regulation. A submission with information about risk sourced from within Australia and overseas has been developed and provided to the state and territory health ministers to bolster the case for inclusion in NRAS.

Social Work has also been considered to be a public sector profession predominantly and to be more diverse than health. The AASW argues that social workers are increasingly working in private practice and in the non-government sector and its diversity adds to the risks posed to consumers as social workers can often get positions in the health sector coming from a non-specific health area, without the relevant currency of practice and skills. More importantly social workers work with quality of life issues in most sectors in which they practice so the world health definition of health clearly places social work in a health portfolio.

What is the relationship between registration and accreditation?

If social workers are registered through the NRAS resulting in a registration board associated with AHPRA, the board will establish accreditation standards for entry level qualifications, practice requirements including standards, currency of practice, a code of conduct and participation in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities to be eligible to re-register as a social worker. Maintenance of probity,

practice competence and CPD would be mandatory for all Social Workers, not just those choosing to be AASW members.

Will the AASW control registration of social workers?

No. If Social Work is registered the AASW will almost certainly have an advisory role in many aspects related to registration. Ultimate control would be vested in the registration board which would comprise members from other professions as well as Social Work.

Will registration be included in the cost of my membership of the AASW?

No. The cost of registration will be completely separate from that of membership of the AASW or any other organisation. Registration would be expected to cost approximately the same amount or slightly less than the current cost of full AASW membership.

How might registration impact on the AASW?

Registration of Social Work would have a significant impact on the AASW. The current Board and convener of the NRC have been examining some of the risks to the AASW of registration. Risks include a significant reduction in membership as a result of Social Workers choosing to discontinue membership of the AASW because of the cost of registration. Opportunities for the AASW may exist in expanding education activities to assist Social Workers in main CPD requirements for registration.

How can I assist in the process of gaining registration?

The AASW has submitted a request for inclusion through NRAS and will be requesting that members show their support for registration by contacting members of parliament in writing or in person to present the case for registration of the profession. A kit containing briefing material and letter templates will be available on the AASW website to assist members in this process. The campaign will formally commence in early July and will be announced with both a media release and e-bulletin to members. Please encourage all social workers members and non-members to get involved in the campaign.