



AASW

.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers: Education and Training

© Australian Association of Social Workers
National Office – Melbourne
Level 7, 14-20 Blackwood Street
North Melbourne 3051
PO Box 2008
Royal Melbourne Hospital Vic 3050
T 1800 630 124
F 02 6199 5099
E social.policy@asw.asn.au
www.aasw.asn.au

Enquiries regarding this submission can be directed to:

Debra Parnell
Manager, Social Policy & Advocacy
debra.parnell@asw.asn.au

Dr Sebastian Cordoba
Social Policy Officer – RMIT Industry Fellow
sebastian.cordoba@asw.asn.au

Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 11,000 social workers throughout Australia. We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) are one of the few designated allied health professional groups eligible to provide private mental health services to people with diagnosable mental health conditions or people 'at risk' of developing mental health conditions under the Commonwealth Medicare Initiatives. There are currently more than 2200 AMHSWs working across major cities, regional, rural and remote regions. As a group of providers, AMHSWs are the second largest after the combined group of Clinical Psychologists and Registered Psychologists.

AMHSWs work from a bio-psycho-social, whole of person perspective and their training provides an appreciation of the impact that social, environmental and political factors have on total health and wellbeing. Their person-in-environment approach (that is the bedrock of all social work education) provides an appreciation of the impact existential or personal meaning has on the development and severity of psychological concerns and they also have the skills and knowledge to assess and intervene around the impact physical illness, specifically chronic and advanced chronic or terminal illness has on a person's psychological well-being. AMHSWs work with people across the lifespan (including children, adults and older persons) and provide a unique contribution to the mental health space in their holistic approach to working with a person. The advanced training that is expected of AMHSW prepares and provides them with the skills for working with people with very complex presentations and co-morbidities.

AMHSWs have a breadth of experience in assessing and treating people who have mental health disorders, for example people with:

Depression and other mood disorders	Suicidal thoughts and self harm behaviours
Anxiety disorders	Relationship problems
Personality disorders	Life crises
Psychosis	Adjustment issues
Chronic illness/palliative care	Trauma, abuse
Issues related to ageing	Grief and loss, including complicated grief
Family conflicts	Bereavement, including complex bereavement

Visit our website for more information about the full [scope of social work practice](#).

AMHSWs are highly trained and educated professionals, meeting some of the highest standards of professional regulation in Australia. The AASW is responsible for the accreditation of AMHSWs and is committed to maintaining the high standard of practice of the profession in this sector.

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. Social work undergraduate and postgraduate education provides graduates with a focus on holistic, whole of person and life course approach and as such, social workers are skilled at providing assessments

and interventions for people with very complex presentations. Built on these foundations is the further credentialing of AMHSWs, equipping highly skilled mental health clinicians in assessment, diagnosis and treatment planning and the delivery of evidence based therapeutic interventions across formative and life stages.

This document provides a summary of the education and training of Accredited Mental Health Social Workers.

Contents

1. Qualifying Degree in Social Work

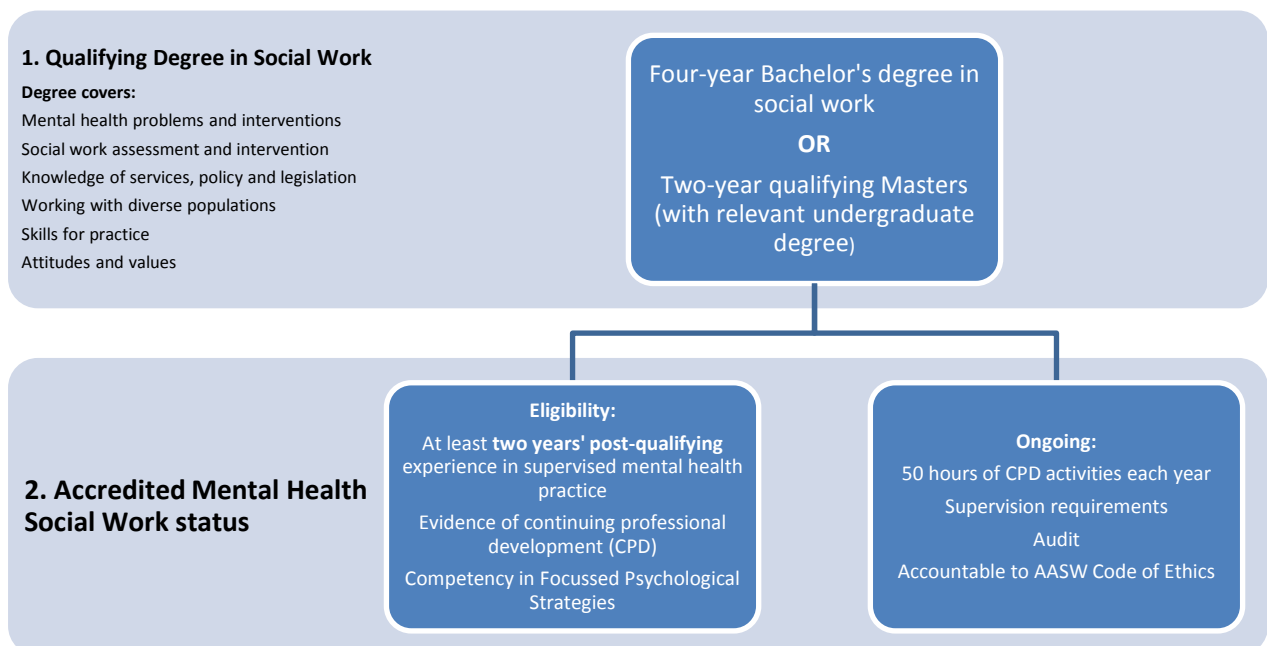
- Knowledge for social work practice in mental health
- Skills for social work practice in mental health
- Attitudes and values

2. Accredited Mental Health Social Workers

- Receiving Mental Health Accreditation
- Maintaining Mental Health Accreditation
- Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers 2014
- Quality assurance and complaints process for misconduct

3. Attachment 1: Example of Criteria 5 - Demonstrated clinical social work practice

Diagram 1: Education and Training of AMHSWs



1. Qualifying Degree in Social Work

Capabilities and competency in mental health of graduating social workers

All AMHSWs have a qualifying degree in professional social work practice. Mental health is essential core curriculum in accredited higher education social work programs. This means that all social workers are required to demonstrate an understanding of mental health issues and practice interventions before they graduate from their social work training at university.

The [Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards \(ASWEAS\)](#) are applied by the AASW in reviewing and accrediting higher education programs. The AASW is an Accrediting Authority recognised by the Federal Government.

The essential core mental health curriculum for social work students covers:

- 1 Knowledge for practice in mental health**
- 2 Practice and intervention skills in mental health**
- 3 Attitudes and values**

Throughout the degree essential learning is gained on mental health problems and interventions, social work assessments and interventions, and relevant services, policy and legislation.

The contextual aspects of mental health are always part of social work learning. Cross-cultural practice and practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, including an appreciation of intergenerational trauma, form part of every social worker's understanding and knowledge base.

The inclusion of specific mental health curriculum content in the education and accreditation standards is required by the AASW given that the AASW acknowledges that social workers in any practice setting will have at least some clients affected by mental health problems of varying severity and duration.

This reflects the prevalence of mental health problems in the Australian population, and also the complex situations that clients are likely to be facing. In turn, clients can expect that social workers can recognise the nature of their difficulties, including mental health problems, and work collaboratively with them to resolve or improve their situation.

A full outline of the mental health curriculum content and guidance on the inclusion of core curriculum can be found in the [ASWEAS Guideline 1.1: Guidance on essential core curriculum](#)

The following section provides an overview of the essential areas of mental health curriculum content that are covered in social work qualifying degrees.

1. Knowledge for social work practice in mental health

Mental health problems and interventions

- a) An appreciation of the potential risks as well as developmental opportunities associated with major life stage transitions, such as attachment difficulties in early childhood, child behavioural problems, adolescent body image problems, mental health problems following childbirth.
- b) An beginning understanding of patterns of thinking, feeling and action which might indicate

that a client is experiencing mental health problems, and of relevant contextual factors e.g. current or recent stressful life events.

- c) A beginning appreciation of how the different health disciplines interpret mental health problems, and their approach to resolving these problems, and how to use this in establishing collaborative working relationships.
- d) A basic grasp of a psychiatric diagnostic framework, including differentiating between psychotic and non-psychotic conditions, and knowledge of how a client might present with behaviours characteristic of common mental health problems such as anxiety or depression, and also the less common, including bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, personality disorders, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- e) An appreciation of the possible co-occurrence and influence of problematic use of alcohol and/or drugs.
- f) An introductory understanding of the purpose of psychiatric diagnosis and specifically, the nature of a mental status examination, and of the implications for social work practice.
- g) A beginning understanding of contemporary approaches to mental health care, including early intervention and relapse prevention, rehabilitation and recovery approaches, and of the implications for social work practice.
- h) An introductory knowledge of contemporary treatment modalities, including the use of psychotropic medication, individual therapies such as cognitive behaviour and interpersonal therapy, group work and family therapy.

Social work assessment and intervention

- a) Knowledge of what should be covered in a social work assessment, particularly understanding the relevance for a client's mental health problems of social and environmental factors, such as social isolation, family stress, unemployment, low income and inadequate housing.
- b) An appreciation of how the emergence of mental health problems and their ramifications are influenced by age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographical location.
- c) Understanding the importance of taking account of the impact of parental mental health problems on children, and of a child or adolescent's emotional and psychological problems on parents and siblings.
- d) An appreciation of the possible range of consumer experiences, including social stigma and self-stigmatisation, and how this should influence social work practice.
- e) An understanding of the likely experiences of families and other carers, including the impact of social stigma, and how this should be taken into account in social work practice.
- f) A basic grasp of social work interventions at the individual, family, group and community level and how these might be applicable to clients with mental health problems.

Relevant services, policy and legislation

- a) Knowledge of services and resources relevant to a better quality of life and recovery for clients with mental health problems, and their availability and accessibility in the local area.
- b) Knowledge of the basic structure of local mental health services, public and private and including disability support as well as clinical services, and referral pathways. Understanding when a referral for mental health care might be appropriate for a client with mental health problems, and to whom referral should be made and how.
- c) A basic knowledge of sections of state mental health legislation relevant to social work practice, particularly confidentiality, involuntary treatment (whether in hospital or the

community), and guardianship. Understanding when a referral for assessment for involuntary treatment might be necessary, and how to do this respectfully with a client.

- d) An introductory grasp of national and local state mental health policy.
- e) A beginning appreciation of how research and evaluation applies to social work practice with people with mental health problems, especially in relation to evidence-based practice and program evaluation.

Important areas of knowledge

- a) An understanding of the influence of age, gender, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status and geographical location on mental health problems.
- b) An understanding of the history and current state of national and local state mental health policy development.
- c) An understanding of historical and contemporary conceptions of mental health problems and societal responses.

2. Skills for social work practice in mental health

The focus here is on the development of knowledge and skills for working in a range of practice settings with clients with mental health problems. It is acknowledged that the client may well have been referred for matters other than mental health problems.

These skills are the capacity to:

- a) Engage with clients with mental health problems, paying attention to their experience of stigma, discrimination and powerlessness.
- b) Build a trusting relationship with clients with mental health problems, including with those whose need for service might not be recognised or accepted by other workers or services due to difficulty in communicating and relating to others.
- c) Explore the experience of the client's family and friends, establish a relationship and work collaboratively with them as well as the client. This may include negotiating and resolving potentially complex confidentiality issues.
- d) Take account of the possible influence of mental health problems on a client's situation when undertaking a comprehensive, collaborative mental health and social work assessment
- e) Assess the likelihood of client self-harm, including suicidal risk, and identify appropriate responses.
- f) Assess the possibility of harm to others, such as children's emotional or physical needs not being met, and of harm from others, such as through an abusive relationship, and identify appropriate interventions.
- g) Develop an individual service plan based on the maximum level of collaboration possible with the client and their family.
- h) Undertake social work interventions at the individual, group, family and community level, such as problem solving, developing relapse prevention strategies, providing family education and support.
- i) Advocate for client and/or family access to relevant resources.
- j) Work collaboratively with other practitioners involved with the client, including GPs and disability support workers.
- k) Make effective referrals and respond appropriately to referrals.

- l) Obtain and provide consultation where necessary.
- m) Seek out relevant research and evaluation on a regular basis to inform practice.

3. Attitudes and values

The attitudes and values identified here draw on the practice principles specific to mental health which are identified in the AASW [Competency Standards for Mental Health Social Workers](#). The mental health curriculum content would cover the following:

- a) Recognition and valuing of the person.
- b) Respect for the client as a person, irrespective of their mental health problems.
- c) A commitment to the importance of partnership and mutuality, especially with clients and their family and friends, through active collaboration and a readiness to engage in respectful partnerships.
- d) Sensitivity to the impact of powerlessness, marginality, stigma and disadvantage, and the experiences of the client and family members, especially of social stigma and self-stigmatisation.
- e) Empathy, compassion, and the importance of conveying hope and confidence.
- f) Sensitivity to process, and adherence to mutuality, respect, honesty and integrity in professional practice.
- g) A commitment to social justice for people with mental health problems, based on their human rights, and to advocacy at the individual and system level.
- h) A commitment to the key tenets of professional confidentiality, recognising that confidentiality for clients with mental health problems may be subject to legislative caveats.
- i) Understanding and respect for the ethic of care in relation to people with mental health problems, including the right of access to treatment, as well as the right to refuse treatment, except in certain circumstances defined in state mental health legislation.

2. Accredited Mental Health Social Workers

Social workers who are members of the AASW and who have gone on to develop their learning and experience in mental health can seek Accredited status as Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSW). The AASW is an Accrediting Authority recognised by the Federal Government.

The following section provides an overview of the criteria and ongoing requirements of AMHSWs.

1. Receiving Mental Health Accreditation

To become an AMHSW there are 6 criteria to the accreditation process.

A social worker must:

Criteria 1: Hold current membership of the AASW

Criteria 2: Have at least 2 years' full time equivalent (FTE) post qualifying social work experience in a mental health setting. An applicant must be able to articulate how their experience meets the [AASW Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers 2014](#)

Criteria 3: Have received at least 2 years' full time equivalent (FTE) post qualifying supervision in a mental health field

Criteria 4: Have met the Continuing Professional Development requirements

Criteria 5: Demonstrate ability and knowledge of Clinical Social Work Practice

Criteria 6: Arrange an employer or supervisor to provide a referee statement.

Criteria 1: Membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers

To apply for accreditation as a Mental Health Social Worker, an applicant must be a current member of the AASW and therefore have an accredited qualifying degree and is accountable to the AASW's [Code of Ethics](#).

Criteria 2: Post qualifying social work experience in a mental health setting

Applicants are required to demonstrate that social workers have a minimum of 2 years' full time equivalent (FTE) social work practice experience in a mental health or demonstrably related field.

These roles must have occurred after having received official verification of successful completion of an AASW accredited social work course. Where social work practice experience has been accumulated over an extended period of time, recency/currency of practice needs to be demonstrated, applicants therefore must show that they have the equivalent of 2 years' full time in a mental health or demonstrably related role, within the last 5 years.

This means 3360 hour in formally supervised and appraised and assessable relevant clinical work in relation to practice in a mental health field in one or more roles in the last 5 years or less.

Applicants are also required to explain the link between their practice experience and the [AASW Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers 2014](#).

Criteria 3: Supervision

Applicants should be able to demonstrate that they have at least 2 years full time equivalent (FTE) supervised practice in a mental health, or a demonstrably related field. This practice must occur after qualifying from your social work degree. Applicants should be able to show that they have been formally supervised, in line with the AASW Supervision Standards 2014.

Criteria 4: Continuing Professional Development

Applicants need to demonstrate they meet the AMHSW Continuing Professional Development requirements. The AASW recognises various activities as contributing to a social worker's ongoing professional development.

Overall an applicant must demonstrate they have engaged in at least 50 hours' worth of CPD, 20 hours of which must be relevant to mental health and 10 hours must be relevant to the current list of evidenced based Focussed Psychological Strategies as described by Medicare.

Criteria 5: Demonstrated clinical social work practice

Even though social workers may use a variety of interventions, for the purposes of registering with Medicare Australia, a suite of Psychological Therapies and Focussed Psychological Strategies has been prescribed for working with people who have mental disorders.

Evidence based assessment and the delivery of contemporary evidenced based Psychological Therapies are a crucial part of demonstrated clinical social work practice for

AMHSWs.

Criteria 6: Referee statement

All applicants are required to submit a referee statement from an employer or supervisor either past or present. It is necessary for the referee to confirm the claims made by the applicant. The primary purposes of the referee statement are to seek information about the applicant's skills and competencies in practice. The referee statement also needs to verify that you have had 2 years' full time equivalent, post qualifying, practice experience within the past 5 years in a mental health or demonstrably related position.

2. Maintaining Mental Health Accreditation

To remain eligible to provide mental health services as a Medicare provider, social workers must maintain their AMHSW status, including maintaining CPD and supervision requirements.

AMHSWs are required to complete 50 hours of CPD activities each year, including: 20 hours relevant to Mental Health practice, and 10 hours relevant to the current list of Focussed Psychological Strategies. These Strategies are a requirement set by Medicare for all Allied Health professionals to ensure ongoing eligibility for providing services under the 'Better Access to Mental Health' program.

3. Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers 2014

The AASW has outlined the required standards for mental health practice in the [AASW Practice Standards for Mental Health Social Workers 2014](#). This document sits alongside the AASW Practice Standards as a clear statement by the professional association of the expectations of Mental Health Social Workers regarding the knowledge, skills and values utilised in their roles and functions, as well as the requirements of ethically sound and accountable practice.

The Mental Health Standards are an important practical guide for Mental Health Social Workers, those who use their services, and the broad community about the ways in which social work services are to be delivered.

4. Quality assurance and complaints process for misconduct

AMHSWs are subject to audit by the Mental Health Unit of the AASW to ensure these competency standards and ongoing learning are maintained. AMHSW's also agree to abide by the AASW Code of Ethics, to ensure high standards of ethics are maintained in the service provision

Members of the community can use our [Ethics Complaints Management](#) process to make allegations of serious ethical misconduct by AASW members.

The AASW's Ethics Complaints Management process:

- Protects the public (users of social work services) from harm by determining the minimum acceptable ethical practice standards of social workers (AASW members)
- Addresses allegations of serious ethical misconduct
- Educates and supports social workers to ensure that their practice meets, and where possible exceeds, the minimum standard.

Serious ethical misconduct may result in a social worker being made ineligible for AASW membership. The AASW Board may suspend or expel a member from the AASW in accord with the

procedures contained in the *AASW By-Laws on Ethics*, and other relevant clauses set out in the AASW Constitution.

A public list of social workers who are currently ineligible for AASW membership and therefore unable to maintain their AMHSW status is available on our website.

For further queries please contact:

Debra Parnell
AASW Manager, Social Policy & Advocacy
debra.Parnell@asw.asn.au



AASW
.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

T 02 6199 5000
F 02 6199 5009
E social.policy@asw.asn.au

National Office – Melbourne
Level 7, 14-20 Blackwood Street,
North Melbourne, 3051

Postal Address
PO Box 2008, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Vic, 3050

Incorporated in the ACT
ACN 008 576 010 / ABN 93 008 576 010