



Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) 2012

**Guideline 1.1:
Guidance on essential
core curriculum content**

Guideline 1.1: Guidance on essential core curriculum content (Ref ASWEAS 3.3)

This document is to be read in conjunction with the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (ASWEAS 2012). ASWEAS 2012 spells out the principles, standards and broad requirements for accreditation by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) of professional social work education programs run by higher education providers (HEPs) and delivered by social work academic organisational units (SWAOUs).

This document provides guidance to educators on essential core curriculum content program requirements (ASWEAS 3.3) for programs seeking accreditation by AASW under the following headings:

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1. Mental health curriculum content

This statement provides detail on the specific mental health curriculum content expected as part of the ASWEAS. The content covers attitudes and values, knowledge for social work practice and social work practice skills. Distribution of this statement to higher education providers will be accompanied by a list of resources that identifies key references and other educational material.

By including specific mental health curriculum content in the education and accreditation standards, the AASW acknowledges that social workers in any practice setting will have at least some clients affected by mental health problems of varying severity. 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 should be able to 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.

In this statement, the term ‘mental health problems’ is used to encompass the broad spectrum of conditions. This term has been chosen for its inclusiveness and currency. Although it does not differentiate between levels of distress and disability, this can be achieved in other ways, such as by referring to minor or major mental health problems. The content outlined in this statement also refers to positive mental health. There are two further terminological issues. The first concerns the terms ‘client’ and ‘consumer’ for those with a mental health problem who make use of services. The two terms are used interchangeably in this document. The second issue is what term to use for ‘significant others’. This statement uses ‘family and friends’ and ‘carer’ interchangeably.

It is important to note that the mental health curriculum content covered in this statement is introductory. It builds on other important bodies of knowledge, such as human development across the life span and sociological perspectives on stigma, which students would be expected to have covered elsewhere. The focus here is on mental health content directly relevant to social work practice and to beginning practitioners.

This statement identifies the basic attitudes and values, knowledge and skills aimed at preparing social work graduates to respond to clients’ mental health problems in a range of practice settings. The intended outcome is an entry-level social worker who can identify when mental health problems may be affecting a client, respond appropriately and act accordingly. This might include continuing to assist clients while referring them for specialist mental health care, or in the event that such a referral is refused. Social work interventions would be guided by the profession’s primary concern to build the capacity of individuals, families, groups and communities, and to promote mental health and wellbeing.

The statement draws on the AASW *Code of Ethics* (1999) and the AASW *Practice Standards for Social Workers* (2003). It is also influenced by the AASW *Competency Standards for Mental Health Social Workers* (2004) and the *National Practice Standards for the Mental Health Workforce* (2002). However, neither of the latter documents is directly applicable as they both focus on standards to be reached after two years of practice in the mental health field, rather than by entry-level practitioners.

Given that the statement focuses on mental health content at an introductory level, higher education providers may choose to provide additional mental health input such as electives and/or fieldwork placements for students intending to work in the mental health field after graduation. It would also be expected that social work graduates taking positions in mental health services would have in-service training, and access to post-qualifying courses in mental health practice.

The curriculum content described here encompasses the basic attitudes and values, knowledge and practice skills which would enable an entry-level social worker in any practice setting to identify and respond appropriately to clients with mental health problems.

1.1. Attitudes and values

It is assumed that the values, principles and ethical behaviour for social work practice as outlined in the *AASW Code of Ethics (2010)* would be covered fully in other parts of the qualifying social work course curriculum. This section concentrates only on attitudes and values which are particularly important to people with mental health problems, due to their experience of disadvantage, stigma and discrimination, including from mental health professionals.

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*. In this statement, they are taken to underpin basic mental health knowledge and skills. The mental health curriculum content would therefore be expected to cover the following:

- 1) Recognition and valuing of the person.
- 2) Respect for the client as a person, irrespective of their mental health problems.
- 3) 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.
- 4) 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.
- 5) Empathy, compassion, and the importance of conveying hope and confidence.
- 6) Sensitivity to process, and adherence to mutuality, respect, honesty and integrity in professional practice.
- 7) 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.
- 8) A commitment to the key tenets of professional confidentiality, recognising that confidentiality for clients with mental health problems may be subject to legislative caveats.
- 9) 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.

1.2. Knowledge for social work practice

The range of knowledge potentially relevant to social work practice with clients affected by mental health problems is considerable, yet arguably not all is necessary for the beginning practitioner. Furthermore, there are obvious limits to how much can be encompassed in a social work course qualifying students for practice.

For these reasons, the areas of knowledge identified below are separated into those designated essential to the mental health curriculum, and those considered desirable.

1.2.1. Essential areas of knowledge

- 1) 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, and mental health problems following childbirth.
 - b) A 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 an introductory 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.
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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.

1.2.2. Desirable areas of knowledge

- 1) An understanding of the influence of age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographical location on mental health problems, and specifically:
 - a) Mental health problems characteristic of different age groups across the life span.
 - b) Different presentations by women and men, and related life stresses.
 - c) Indigenous experience and understanding of mental health problems.
 - d) Mental health problems associated with migration, especially the experience of being a refugee.
 - e) Mental health problems associated with poverty and disadvantage.
 - f) Mental problems in rural and regional areas.

- 2) An understanding of the history and current state of national and local state mental health policy development.
- 3) An understanding of historical and contemporary conceptions of mental health problems and societal responses.

1.3. Skills for social work practice

The focus here is on basic 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. The skills are the capacity to:

- 1) Engage with clients with mental health problems, paying attention to their experience of stigma, discrimination and powerlessness.
- 2) 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.
- 3) 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.
- 4) Take account of the possible influence of mental health problems on a client's situation when undertaking a comprehensive, collaborative social work assessment.
- 5) Assess the likelihood of client self-harm, including suicidal risk, and identify appropriate responses.
- 6) 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.
- 7) Develop an individual service plan based on the maximum level of collaboration possible with the client and their family.
- 8) 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.
- 9) Advocate for client and/or family access to relevant resources.
- 10) Work collaboratively with other practitioners involved with the client, including GPs and disability support workers.
- 11) Make effective referrals and respond appropriately to referrals.
- 12) Obtain and provide consultation where necessary.
- 13) Seek out relevant research and evaluation on a regular basis to inform practice.

References

- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (1999). *Code of Ethics*. Canberra: AASW.
- (2003). *Practice Standards for Social Workers: Achieving Outcomes*. Canberra: AASW.
- (2004). *Competency Standards for Mental Health Social Workers: Final Report*. Canberra: AASW
- (2008). *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards*. Canberra: AASW.
- (2010). *Code of Ethics*. Canberra: AASW.
- Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing (2002). *National Practice Standards for the Mental Health Workforce*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

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The AASW acknowledges the high-quality work of Dr Valerie Gerrand in developing this statement. This project is an exemplar of collaboration within the sector. All Australian social work programs were consulted in the development of this statement. It is the first of specific core curriculum statements being developed to be read in conjunction with the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards.

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2. Child wellbeing and protection curriculum content

The purpose of this statement is to outline the specific child wellbeing and protection curriculum content required by these standards. The statement covers the attitudes and values, knowledge and skills required of beginning social workers to promote the wellbeing of children, young people, families and caregivers, and to prevent or respond to child abuse and neglect.

By including specific content relating to children in its standards for social work education, the AASW acknowledges the vital importance of the wellbeing of all children and young people. The AASW recognises the significant role of social workers in every practice setting in promoting this and in ensuring the safety and protection of all children. These practice settings include adult as well as children's services, government, nongovernment and private practice and practice settings as diverse as health, corrections, education, income security, drug and alcohol and mental health.

The intended outcome of including the child wellbeing and protection curriculum content is that all entry-level social workers will be alert to the needs of children. They will be able to communicate with them, act to promote their wellbeing, identify when their wellbeing may be compromised, and use a range of social work practice methods to respond to the need that is assessed. All such social work interventions will be guided by the profession's commitment to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society.

Concern for the wellbeing of children and young people has been a core element of social work practice internationally since the development of social work as a distinct profession. The AASW acknowledges that in Australia social workers played a role in the history of child protection, including the removal of Indigenous and other children from their families and communities and that this has led to intergenerational trauma and the tragic legacies of the 'Stolen Generations' and the 'Forgotten Australians'. Social workers have also been among those who have advocated for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other vulnerable children and families. The AASW acknowledges the need for social workers to be alert to, and to advocate against, unjust practices and policies, and to analyse the potential for professional practices to perpetuate abusive practices.

The AASW recognises the constructed nature of the terms 'child wellbeing' and 'child protection'. In this statement the term 'child wellbeing and protection' is used to refer to the responsibility of everyone, including social workers, for the wellbeing, development and safety of the children and young people in our community. The term encompasses a full range of strategies to enable children to develop their potential, from those which promote and support child wellbeing, to those which prevent and address harm.

This statement rests on assumptions that the family, in all of its diverse forms, is the basic unit of care for children and young people and that all families need supportive connections to enable them to grow and develop securely and happily. It acknowledges that many families and communities have to face situations and conditions that challenge their capacity to provide optimal care for children and young people and that in these situations most families and children need additional, personalised supports. Social workers, in a variety of practice contexts, need to be able to promote

child wellbeing and to assess and respond to the needs of children and families through direct practice and through working for structural changes.

This statement is based on the generic content of social work education outlined in the AASW *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (2008). It is structured so that the content areas correspond to Section 3 of that document. It identifies particular instances where the generic education program needs application to children and families. Distribution of this statement to higher education providers will be accompanied by a list of resources that identifies key references and other relevant educational materials which social work educators may use to support the inclusion of the child wellbeing and protection content. Some higher education providers may choose to provide additional child protection content such as electives and/or fieldwork placements in child protection. It is anticipated that social work graduates who work in statutory child protection services will participate in in-service training provided by their organisations and will have the opportunity to study child protection at postgraduate level.

The curriculum content described here encompasses the basic attitudes and values, knowledge and practice skills needed by an entry-level social worker in any practice setting to promote the wellbeing of children, young people, families, caregivers and to prevent or respond to child abuse and neglect.

2.1. Attitudes, values and principles

It is assumed that the values, principles and ethical behaviour for social work practice as outlined in the AASW *Code of Ethics* (1999) and in the revised AASW *Code of Ethics* (2010) would be covered fully in other parts of the qualifying social work course curriculum. The principles and attitudes identified here relate to the key social work values for situations involving children. These attitudes and values provide the ethical foundation for the knowledge and skills described further on in this statement. The overall goal is that entry-level social workers can understand and apply the core social work values and principles laid out in the 2010 Code of Ethics when encountering children, their mothers, fathers and carers in their family and social contexts regardless of agency setting.

1) Human dignity and worth

- a) Respect for the rights of children and young people as citizens, including the right to be informed about and to participate in decisions affecting them, and the right to protection from harm.
- b) Respect for the rights and responsibilities of mothers, fathers, family and community members to make informed decisions and to participate in decision-making processes about their own lives and those of children and young people in their care.
- c) Respect for families as the foundation of the social, cultural, and emotional wellbeing for children and for the needs of children and families for supportive and stable relationships with each other and with informal and formal supports in their communities.
- d) Commitment to ensure the maximum autonomy possible for children, mothers, fathers and families, to provide information to children, mothers, fathers and families and to ensure that principles of natural justice apply, including where there is a concern for a child's safety.

- e) Respect for the knowledge of all involved in partnerships that provide care to children, including foster carers, residential carers, birth and extended family members and statutory workers.
 - f) Respect for the cultural and spiritual needs of children.
- 2) Social justice
- a) Respect for cultural diversity, including respect for Indigenous kinship and family values and child-rearing practices, and those of other cultural groups.
 - b) Commitment to empowering children, mothers, fathers, families, individuals, groups and communities to access resources, choices and opportunities and to participate in the development of relevant policies and programs.
 - c) Awareness of power imbalances where issues of child abuse and neglect are raised, including an awareness of the social worker's own power practices.
 - d) Commitment to oppose discriminatory practices with children and families.
 - e) Commitment to child-sensitive practice, recognising that unless there is sensitivity to children's needs, children and parenting responsibilities can be invisible in adult services.
 - f) Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principles.
- 3) Service to humanity
- a) Promotion of the wellbeing of children and families takes precedence over the social worker's personal positions about family life or child rearing.
- 4) Integrity, honesty, reliability and impartiality
- a) When recording information about children, mothers, fathers, families and other significant adults, demonstrate impartiality, accuracy, inclusivity, cultural sensitivity and show a capacity to distinguish what is observed and described from opinion.
- 5) Competence
- a) A commitment to practitioner's life-long learning in the areas of child wellbeing and cultural knowledge, regardless of field of practice.
 - b) A commitment to practitioner's active participation in reflective supervision and reflective practice.
- 6) Ethical decision making
- a) Application of AASW Code of Ethics (2010) guidelines for ethical decision making in situations involving children. This encompasses principled decision making and actions that are transparent, research- and evidence-informed and which place the needs and wellbeing of children at the centre in the light of their developmental level and capacity for decision making.
 - b) Ability to articulate a decision-making process that takes account of the tensions between ethical principles when the interests of children, young people, their families and the broader community may conflict.

- c) Reflective and reflexive practice that allows heightened awareness of personal and professional values and assumptions that influence assessment and intervention in the lives of children and families.

2.2. Knowledge for social work practice

Application of the social work practice knowledge areas outlined in the ASWEAS to children and families involves the development of beginning knowledge and capacity for critical appraisal of knowledge in the following areas: children in the context of their families and communities; the policy, legislative and service contexts of social work with children and families; and social work practice with children and families.

1) Children in the context of their families and communities

Beginning knowledge of:

- a) Child development, including ecological models of human development, children's developmental needs, transitional milestones and life cycle phases, definitions and indicators of the wellbeing of children and young people within a sociological framework that encompasses the social construction of childhood and family life and ethnocentric understandings.
- b) Parent-child attachment and significant other attachments, the protective effects of secure attachment relationships and the effects of disruptions to primary carer-child attachment and of multiple changes of primary carers.
- c) The diversity of family structures, dynamics, systems and community networks with particular attention to cultural variations in family and community relationships and child care practices, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-rearing practices.
- d) Different types of child neglect and abuse, the way in which definitions of child neglect and abuse are shaped by culture and history, their interactions, manifestations, prevalence, incidence, causality, and effects including the effects on children's brain development of long-term neglect or traumatic injury, and the signs of maltreatment which may present in a range of practice settings.
- e) Current evidence about protective and risk factors relating to child wellbeing and child maltreatment at individual, family and community levels. This includes the impact of parental alcohol and other drugs misuse and parental mental health problems on children's wellbeing, a critical understanding of domestic and family violence, and the protective factors associated with children's resilience including enduring relationships and positive community connections.
- f) The process of colonisation and intergenerational trauma experienced by families, children and young people due to colonisation and/or past child welfare practices, in particular, the Stolen Generations, adults who grew up in alternative care, and children who have experienced detention.

2) Legislative, policy and service contexts of social work practice with children and families

Beginning knowledge of:

- a) The history and contemporary debates in social philosophy and policy relating to the wellbeing of children and families, including the history of child protection policy in Australia, with particular mention of the history of child protection interventions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and social work's role in the implementation of these policies.
- b) Structural and multiple disadvantages in Australia, including poverty and its impacts on children, families and communities.
- c) Contemporary service frameworks for children and families such as the continuum of services from promotion of wellbeing to prevention of abuse and neglect to treatment services and the ways in which services along this continuum match the multiple needs of children and families.
- d) The range of services and organisations which are relevant to the wellbeing of children and families (e.g. health, education, including schools, housing, alcohol and other drug, income support, refugee), Commonwealth and state responsibilities, the role of statutory child protection services and the Family Court, the relationships between services, the likely existence of protocols between services, and the local services and networks available to support mothers, fathers and families.
- e) The legal context for social work practice in child protection in Australia, and the legal and ethical responsibilities of a social worker under the legislative frameworks that protect children, including the reporting responsibilities of social workers under the relevant legislation in the state or territory in which the social work educational program is located or in the case of distance education programs, in the state or territory in which the student is located.
- f) Contemporary frameworks that enshrine the rights of children including the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

3) Social work practice with children and families

Beginning knowledge of:

- a) Critical practice frameworks that enable the application of a range of theories of social work practice to situations where the social worker encounters children, regardless of agency context, and which may include child-centred and family-focused practice, strengths-based and solution-focused approaches, anti-oppressive practice, group work, community development, research and policy responses.
- b) Assessment frameworks for assessing the psychosocial needs of children and families, including contemporary evidence about the use and relevance of risk and protective factors in assessment frameworks.
- c) Practice with involuntary clients, including power imbalances and strategies to respectfully promote engagement with children, young people and adults who do not wish to be clients.
- d) Culturally appropriate and respectful ways of working with children and families from diverse cultures, including Indigenous families and the application of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principles.

- e) Strategies that reduce risk factors to children at a family level and strategies that support mothers, fathers and families within the context of the promotion of wellbeing, prevention and tertiary continuum of services.
- f) The role of social workers in building and disseminating evidence about what works in practice and policy to promote the wellbeing of children and families and strategies to access specific information about children, families and communities as required, for example, cultural knowledge.

2.3. Skills for social work practice

This section outlines the skills that involve the capacity to implement the values and knowledge described earlier in this statement. Newly graduated social workers in all practice contexts need beginning skills to:

- 1) Appropriately transfer generic social work skills and apply social work practice theory when encountering children within their families and communities.
- 2) Identify the roles of the specific organisations in which they work and the relationships of those organisations to other parts of the service system that encounter children, young people and families, including protocols and referral pathways.
- 3) Engage with, listen to and build respectful trusting relationships with mothers and fathers, maintaining awareness that English may be a second language for many Australians, including some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- 4) Conduct a purposeful conversation with a child or young person, respecting their rights as a citizen and using developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies in order to understand the child or young person's perspective on their life.
- 5) Work ethically with professional authority while acknowledging and mediating the inevitable power disparity between worker and clients.
- 6) Undertake a holistic family assessment, in collaboration with the family, child and kinship networks where possible, which includes attention to the wellbeing of children and which builds on a critical understanding of the family's ecological and socioeconomic contexts.
- 7) Develop a respectful working partnership with children, young people, mothers, fathers, families, caregivers and other significant adults, to form a shared plan to address identified issues.
- 8) Undertake advocacy, conflict resolution, problem solving, planning, meeting facilitation and crisis intervention as required to promote the wellbeing and safety of children.
- 9) Collaborate effectively and respectfully with other professions and services/organisations, recognising that families may have multiple needs requiring the involvement of multiple organisations.
- 10) Make effective referrals/connections of families and children and caregivers with other services and community resources.
- 11) Write clearly and keep accurate records that distinguish what is observed and described from opinion.

- 12) Seek and utilise current evidence about good practice with children and families, and collect and use practice data to inform policy that promotes the wellbeing of children.
- 13) Work in a culturally safe way with children, families and communities and seek training to enable culturally safe practices. This will include implementing knowledge of culturally respectful ways of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and adhering to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principles.
- 14) Think critically and critically reflect on practice, identifying the knowledge used, the worker's own feelings and values about child wellbeing and families, and utilising supervision to explore how these may influence practice.
- 15) Practise self-protection and self-care. This involves being sufficiently self-aware to manage one's own wellbeing in the work context and to make appropriate use of supervision and other available supports.

References

- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) (1999). *Code of Ethics*. Canberra: AASW.
- (2008). *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards*. Canberra: AASW.
- (2010). *Code of Ethics*. Canberra: AASW.

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3. Cross-cultural curriculum content

The purpose of this statement is to outline the specific cross-cultural curriculum content required by ASWEAS 2012. The statement covers the attitudes and values, knowledge and skills required of beginning social workers to promote effective cross-cultural social work practice.

The standards outlined in this statement promote the development of a critical awareness as to how both social workers and clients understand and experience their cultural identities that emerge from their unique cultural and social contexts. Along with the necessary skills, this ensures 'social workers promote respect for traditions, cultures, ideologies, beliefs and religions among different ethnic groups and societies, insofar as they do not conflict with the fundamental human rights of people' (AASW 2008, p. 5).

The standards have been developed in recognition of the importance of ensuring that all graduates of social work programs are able to work cross-culturally.

'Culture' refers to a constantly changing phenomenon of individuals and societies. As such, it is a socially-constructed and a highly-contested phenomenon within social work discourses.

Cross-cultural practice refers to practice where there is a diversity of traditions and intergenerational issues; ideologies, beliefs and religions; and race and ethnicities.

Cross-cultural practice can refer also to work acknowledging other diverse identities, such as sexual, political, professional and organisational. Where appropriate, these standards therefore address these broader dimensions of cross-cultural practice. All of these dimensions impact on us as culturally diverse social workers and clients alike, and therefore should be acknowledged as core to good practice in whatever context.

Throughout these standards the term 'client/s' is used referring to the people with whom we work. The term can be referring to individuals, families, groups and/or communities.

These standards do not specifically address the values and attitudes, skills and knowledge required for practice with Indigenous clients, recognising that there are many significant differences in Aboriginal Australian experiences. The Indigenous Curriculum Standards have been developed alongside these standards and seek to complement the focus of this document.

All social work programs are required to deliver this introductory material within their social work curriculum. Each higher education provider may implement these standards in different ways. Some higher education providers may choose to provide additional cross-cultural curriculum through electives and/or fieldwork placements.

The curriculum content described here encompasses the basic attitudes and values, knowledge and practice skills needed by an entry-level social worker in any practice setting to promote competence in cross-cultural practice.

3.1. Attitudes and values

It is assumed that the values, principles and ethical behaviour for social work practice as outlined in the AASW *Code of Ethics* (1999) and in the revised AASW *Code of Ethics* (2010) will be covered fully

in other parts of the qualifying social work course curriculum. The cross-cultural curriculum content of the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards is expected to address the following specific attitudes and values underpinning practice:

- 1) Respect for the person and his or her unique cultural identities.
- 2) Respect and empathy for the diversity of cultural experiences.
- 3) Valuing cultural diversity and the complexity of that diversity.
- 4) An understanding of, and a critical engagement with, notions of universal human rights.
- 5) Acknowledgement of the need for continual critical reflection on our personal and professional cultural contexts.
- 6) Acknowledgement of the complexities of cultural identities and experiences.
- 7) Recognition of the richness of knowledge and skills within different cultural groups.
- 8) Recognition of the differential power positions of various cultural groups in society and a preparedness to challenge racism and oppression.
- 9) Recognition of the strengths and tensions of diverse worldviews, and how they are culturally derived.
- 10) Recognition of the importance of dialogue in building cultural understanding.
- 11) Recognition of the Australian practice context and the interface with cultural diversity.
- 12) Recognition of the changing nature of cultural contexts and experiences.

3.2. Knowledge for social work practice

Application of the social work practice knowledge areas outlined in the ASWEAS to cross-cultural practice involves the development of beginning knowledge and capacity for critical appraisal of knowledge in the following areas: cultural and race theories; culturally safe and sensitive practice; specific historical and contemporary cross-cultural issues in Australia, international cross-cultural issues.

- 1) A critical understanding of culture as a socially-constructed and contested concept.
- 2) Knowledge of theories of ethnicity, race and whiteness, diversity, racism and power.
- 3) Knowledge of global and historical foundations of oppression.
- 4) Knowledge of theories for understanding identity and migration.
- 5) Recognition of the intergenerational impacts of cultural experiences.
- 6) Knowledge of the impact of conflict, trauma and torture on many migrant individuals and communities.
- 7) Knowledge of culturally safe and sensitive practice.
- 8) Knowledge of key organisations that support cross-cultural groups.
- 9) Knowledge of the importance of language barriers and the need to work with interpreters and/or bicultural workers.

- 10) Understanding of historical and contemporary perceptions of social work services among cross-cultural groups.
- 11) Knowledge of Australia's migration history and its importance in shaping the nation.
- 12) Knowledge of Australia's history of cultural diversity and racism.
- 13) Knowledge of settlement and support services for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.
- 14) Knowledge of international protection regimes for refugees and asylum seekers.
- 15) Recognition of international politics and current affairs and their impact on migration and refugee policies and trends.
- 16) Recognition of the language and worldview barriers experienced by many people in the Australian community that inhibit wellbeing.

3.3. Skills for social work practice

This section outlines the skills which involve the capacity to implement the values and knowledge described earlier in this statement. The focus is on working with all clients in culturally sensitive and safe ways. Newly graduated social workers in all practice contexts need beginning skills to:

- 1) Critically reflect on their personal and professional cultural identities and the influence they have in social work practice.
- 2) Critically reflect on the organisational and social factors influencing the capacity for practice to be culturally sensitive and safe.
- 3) Engage in continual learning about culturally respectful, empowering practice.
- 4) Draw on their own cultural identities in effective social work practice.
- 5) Engage critically, and with flexibility and curiosity, in cross-cultural encounters.
- 6) Establish rapport and empathy with people from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- 7) Assess the language barriers that may impact negatively on client outcomes and access appropriate support processes and/or services.
- 8) Work effectively with interpreters and bicultural workers.
- 9) Communicate effectively through culturally respectful, clear dialogue.
- 10) Assess and address the barriers to effective communication.
- 11) Assess the cultural context and experiences of clients as part of an overall assessment to understand the ways these are influencing current wellbeing and/or difficulties.
- 12) Advocate with and on behalf of their clients in culturally respectful and socially just ways.
- 13) Use the full range of social work methods to work for change and social justice for culturally diverse people and communities.
- 14) Use supervision to critically reflect upon cross-cultural issues emerging in practice.

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4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum content

The preamble to the AASW *Code of Ethics* (2010, p. 5) states:

- Social workers acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the First Australians, whose lands, winds and waters we all now share, and pay respect to their unique values, and their continuing and enduring cultures which deepen and enrich the life of our nation and communities.
- Social workers commit to acknowledge and understand the historical and contemporary disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the implication of this for social work practice.
- Social workers are responsible for ensuring that their practice is culturally competent, safe and sensitive.

These statements set a clear mandate for the educational preparation of social workers. They shape the ways in which the three core values of professional social work practice—respect, social justice and professional integrity—must be practised, addressing Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ experience as a priority in social work practice.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up approximately 2% of the overall Australian population. Yet on most national indicators of disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to be over-represented. These standards recognise the commitment that social workers must have to addressing this ongoing disadvantage and to engaging in non-racist practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The legacy of the historical disadvantage and trauma affects all Australians. Despite this historical and contemporary disadvantage, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities are resilient, and a strengths approach is critical.

Throughout these curriculum standards, the Aboriginal lens of Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing (Martin 2003) is used. This lens provides a way of thinking holistically about experience, which becomes profoundly relevant for social work practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and indeed, all people with whom social workers engage.

Ways of Knowing:

Ways of Knowing is specific to ontology and Entities of Land, Animals, Plants, Waterways, Skies, Climate and Spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups. Knowledge about ontology and Entities is learned and reproduced through processes of: listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, assessing, modelling, engaging, applying. Ways of Knowing also entails processes that allow it to expand and contract according to social, political, historical and spatial dimensions of individuals, the group and interactions with outsiders. So this incorporates the contexts as well as the processes. It is more than just information or facts, but is taught and learned in certain contexts, in certain ways at certain times (Martin 2003, p. 9).

Ways of Being:

We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal and occur in certain contexts. This determines and defines for us rights to be earned and bestowed as we carry out rites to country, self and others – our Ways of Being. These are indelibly driven by our ontology through our Ways of Knowing and serve as guides for establishing relations amongst the Entities. Our Ways of Being are about the rights we earn by fulfilling relations to Entities of country and self (Martin 2003, p. 10).

Ways of Doing:

Our Ways of Doing are a synthesis and an articulation of our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being. These are seen in our: languages, art, imagery, technology, traditions and ceremonies, land management practices, social organisation and social control. Again these are life stage, gender and role specific. For example, women have responsibilities and rites to fulfil as nurturers and men have responsibilities and rites to fulfil as protectors. Our Ways of Doing express our individual and group identities, and our individual and group roles. Our behaviour and actions are a matter of subsequent evolvment and growth in our individual Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being (Martin 2003, p. 11).

Throughout these standards, the term ‘identity’ is deliberately not used. This is because part of the legacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has been both the trauma of identity that led to Stolen Generations experiences, and the ongoing trauma when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘identity’ must be ‘proven’. It is also because within social work theory, a notion of a single or fixed ‘identity’ is not consistent with understandings of people as complex, fluid beings.

These curriculum standards outline what all accredited Australian social work programs must incorporate into the learning experiences of their students. By necessity, they engage educators in these learning experiences, so that teaching environments are culturally safe places for all. Therefore, these curriculum standards are about layers of learning.

The curriculum content described here encompasses the basic attitudes and values, knowledge and practice skills needed by an entry-level social worker in any practice setting to promote safe, reflective practice. It is based upon the foundations for social work practice outlined in the AASW *Code of Ethics* (2010).

4.1. Knowing and Being: attitudes and values

To ensure safe practice, the social work curriculum content is expected to embed the following specific attitudes and values underpinning practice:

- 1) Respect for, and acknowledgment of, the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences.
- 2) Respect for the person and who they are in their unique cultural context.
- 3) A preparedness to challenge racism and oppression.

- 4) An understanding of, and a critical engagement with, notions of universal human rights, social justice and non-racist practice.
- 5) Acknowledgement of the need for continual critical reflection on our personal and professional cultural contexts.
- 6) Recognition of the richness of knowledge and skills within different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups.
- 7) Recognition of the strengths and tensions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews.
- 8) Recognition of the importance of dialogue, accountability, mutual respect and responsibility in building understanding and relationship.
- 9) Acknowledgement of the complexities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences.
- 10) Recognition of the constantly changing nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts and experiences.
- 11) Recognition of the Australian practice context and the interface with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences.

4.2. Knowing: knowledge for social work practice

The social work curriculum is expected to address the following specific knowledge areas underpinning practice:

- 1) Knowledge of the resilience, strengths and survivorship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities.
- 2) Knowledge of the intergenerational impacts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of racism and oppression, in particular, the traumatic legacy of the Stolen Generations.
- 3) Knowledge of the continuing health and social inequalities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians.
- 4) Awareness and understanding of historical and contemporary perceptions of social work services among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and the legacy arising from experiences of colonisation, dispossession and the Stolen Generations experiences.
- 5) Knowledge of the three core values of professional social work, outlined in the *AASW Code of Ethics* (2010).
- 6) Knowledge of Australia's history of colonisation and its devastating impact on the wellbeing and ways of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 7) Knowledge of legislative and policy practices that both enhance and inhibit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing at individual, family and community levels.
- 8) Knowledge of the central notions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and family life, including country, language, kinship and moiety.
- 9) Knowledge of some of the worldview differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Western perspectives in relation to time, 'identity' and individuality.

- 10) Knowledge of the structure and governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.
- 11) Knowledge of the importance of Aboriginal worldviews, terms of reference and meaning.
- 12) Knowledge of communication differences with the Aboriginal emphasis on yarning and storytelling.
- 13) Knowledge of theories of race, diversity, and power.
- 14) Knowledge of Australia's history of colonisation and its importance in shaping the nation.
- 15) Knowledge of key organisations that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 16) Knowledge of who to engage with and how when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, mindful of the resourcing issues that they face.

4.3. Doing: skills for social work practice

The social work curriculum is expected to address the following specific knowledge areas underpinning practice:

- 1) Critically reflect on their own personal and professional assumptions and worldviews, and the influence they have in social work practice.
- 2) Critically reflect on the organisational and social factors influencing the capacity for practice to be culturally sensitive and safe.
- 3) Engage in continual learning about culturally respectful, empowering practice.
- 4) Use supervision to critically reflect upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues emerging in practice.
- 5) Work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues within organisational contexts.
- 6) Communicate effectively through respectful, clear dialogue.
- 7) Assess and address any barriers to effective communication.
- 8) Assess the cultural context and experiences of clients as part of an overall assessment to understand the ways these are influencing current wellbeing and/or difficulties.
- 9) Advocate with and on behalf of clients in culturally respectful and socially just ways.
- 10) Use the full range of social work methods to work for change and social justice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.
- 11) Establish rapport and empathy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples particularly through the use of listening rather than questioning.
- 12) Relate using skills of yarning and storytelling and other skills based on narrative approaches.

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