# The challenges of inclusivity for students with a criminal history

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## ABSTRACT

Criminal history checks in Australian social work education are a recent development consistent with international higher education practices and local employment practices. There has been little exploration of the impact other human service educators prior to placing students on field work is a relatively recent development in Australia that reflects the increased use of such checks by human service employers. The use of these checks has the potential to prevent some individuals from undertaking the study program. As such it is an important practice with significant ethical implications for educators. However, despite the debates about the use of criminal record checks in a broad range of contexts (Naylor 2005; Naylor, Paterson et al. 2008) there has been little scrutiny of Australian university practices in this area and indeed the research on which this paper draws demonstrates that there is diversity of practice around Australia with the potential for people with similar criminal histories to have different experiences in different states of Australia.

This paper draws on a review of the practices of social work educators in Australian universities involving qualitative research with 16 Australian Schools of Social Work (or equivalent). Utilising the insights of university staff involved in field education, this paper explores the principles that would guide good practice in the management of criminal history checks in social work education.

## BACKGROUND

The gatekeeping role of universities, focussed on assessing suitable for future professional practice, as a part of their delivery of professional education has long been acknowledged (Ryan, Habibis et al. 1997; Crisp 2006 ; Brear, Dorrian et al. 2008 ; Currer 2009).

In considering the question of suitability for professional practice, some authors have focussed on the full range of academic and social assessments made about a student. Tam's argument that the evaluation of suitability for professional practice has many elements, including the evaluation of 'knowledge, skills, values and performance of appropriate behaviours in given practice situations'(2009 p.47) is an exemplar of this broad approach. However, most analysts (e.g. Magen and Emerman 2000 ; Scott and Zeiger 2000 ; Crisp 2006; Kean 2007 ; Crisp and Gillingham 2008) take as a given a level of academic assessment, and focus on the more contentious areas such as suitability of the person and their values.

International practices have varied and there have been significant changes over time but Australian practices in relation to gate-keeping for the profession itself have differed from those in other countries (Crisp 2006), principally because the social work profession is not registered. In the United Kingdom there is a vetting and barring scheme in relation to people working with children or vulnerable adults that covers the whole of the United Kingdom (Health and Care Professions Council 2012 ) and then different social work regulations in each of the constituent countries. In England in August 2012, responsibility for regulating social work passed from the General Social Care Council to the Health and Care Professions Council (General Social Care Council 2012) which advises applicants that they must report a wide range of convictions (Health and Care Professions Council 2012 ). In New Zealand the Social Workers Registration Board is responsible for ensuring that a person registered is a 'fit and proper person' within the meaning of the Social Workers Registration Act (2003), which requires that certain criminal offences be taken into account(Apaitia-Vague, Pitt et al. 2011 ; Social Workers Registration Board 2012). The United States and Canada have various forms of licensing across states (Kennedy & Richards 2007 p.55). In each of these countries, the practice of universities in relation to students with a criminal history is guided to some extent by expectations of the regulating body (McLaughlin 2010 ; Apaitia-Vague, Pitt et al. 2011) The introduction of criminal history checks in Australian higher education is a recent development in gatekeeping that is consistent with these international practices. In Australia the new national arrangements for the regulation of health professionals (which does not include social work) determined by the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act (2009) has created the possibility that an individual may be ineligible for registration on the grounds of a criminal record. For most professions covered by this legislation students will need to be registered with their Board from year one of their study and this will involve reporting if they have been found guilty of an offence punishable by imprisonment for 12 months or more.

The introduction of criminal history checks can also be seen to be consistent with practice in the human services employment sector for which students are being prepared. Criminal history checks as one element of vetting of future employees or indeed volunteers are now accepted as routine procedure in many countries (Naylor 2005) and widespread in

Australia. Whilst the evidence to support the usefulness of both the goals and the outcomes of this process has been questioned (Naylor 2005), legislative measures in many jurisdictions make it a requirement in a range of human services (Kennedy and Richards 2007 p.58; Stevens, Manthorpe et al. 2010).

Social work education programmes are expected by the accrediting body (AASW) to teach more than a body of knowledge. They are expected to develop graduates who are prepared to abide by standards of professional conduct (AASW 2012) and indeed who will identify with the profession and uphold its image in the eyes of the community. However the guidelines are silent on the non-academic standards that should apply to the selection of students and their progress through social work qualifications.

As with other gate-keeping activities, the vetting of students based on criminal histories poses an ethical challenge, which Cowburn and Nelson (2007) identify as lying in the conflict between two or more principles or 'goods' – one relating to the protection of the client and the community and one relating to the rights of the individual student (Cowburn and Nelson 2007 p.7). There is, then, an ethical imperative that social work educators be clear about the basis for their decisions and the processes through which they implement them.

The research that informs this paper sought to contribute to transparency in this area. The research investigated the use of criminal history checks in social work education processes. It represents a snapshot of practices at a particular point in time and practice in individual university departments of social work in relation to student criminal history checks. This involved research interviews; and ethics approval was obtained from the University of South Australia, Human Research Ethics Committee. Every university in Australia which offered an AASW accredited social work program (24 universities in 2008) was contacted via a letter to the head of School or Department and invited to nominate staff with relevant knowledge of criminal history check procedures to participate in a telephone interview. It was left to the discretion of the head of school whether one or more staff was nominated to participate in this research and what role they played within the School. Those nominated were then approached directly and invited to participate in the research by telephone interview with either the author or a social worker who acted as a research assistant. Ultimately the research was informed by interviews with staff from 16 universities (some of whom had two interviewees) representing each state and territory in Australia. Interviewees were involved in social work field education either as a specialist area of work (11 liaison officers, managers or directors of field education) or as one part of their academic activity (8 academic staff). A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore how criminal history checks were managed pre and post enrolment and practices in managing students with criminal histories. Each of the stages of data collection captured practices in Australian universities at a point in time. Although the practices may have changed since that time, the findings reported below demonstrate the complexity resulting from the intersection of university administration, state legislation and individual's values. Whilst the specifics of their intersection may change the questions about social inclusivity and good practice generated by a review of practice at a point in time remain relevant.

## FINDINGS

### Diverse practices

Universities throughout Australia are using a variety of practices in relation to background checks on students entering social work programmes. The legal context created by the jurisdiction within which the university is operating made an important contribution to this diversity. Four states (Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia) had legislation that required a check for people who are going to work with children. In these states the universities required students to have a Working with Children clearance (signified by the issuing of either a Working with Children Card (WWC) or a Blue card). These students may also require a police record check for some placements. In the other states different practices were apparent with one university having no engagement with the criminal history check process at all, as shown below in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

| POLICE CHECK REQUIRED | NO. OF UNIVERSITIES |
| --- | --- |
| Working with Children Clearance only | 0 |
| Working with Children Clearance AND Police record check as requested | 9 |
| Police Record Check | 6 |
| Agency responsibility – no university involvement | 1 |

Information about criminal history checks was provided by some universities to potential students from the point at which they start to investigate the possibility of studying social work but the availability of information at this point varies widely. Three crucial points of information communication were identified:

• Tertiary Admission Centre (TAC) information,

• university website information and

• information provided at university Information sessions (Open Days and other events hosted by the university).

At the time of the research only five universities directly stated the need for criminal history checks in TAC publications with another four making an indirect reference to checks.

University websites provide information to the public and to current students. Our research identified that relevant information may be either specifically within the site used for social work (11 universities), within documents most likely to be accessed after enrolment (4 universities) or elsewhere in the university site (4).

A limitation of this research is that resources did not allow the identification of information provided at university information sessions and Open Days. However it might be noted that this form of communication is very ad hoc, requiring a potential student to be present to hear it and be able to understand its significance.

## POST ENROLMENT

Criminal history checks were also handled in diverse ways by universities once students have enrolled. The research identified significant variation in relation to the timing, frequency and costs of the required check.

Many universities provide information about criminal history checks at the point of enrolment and indeed in some universities students completed the forms required for Working with Children or Blue cards at this point. However students who obtained a Working with Children or Blue Card at this point could also be required, due to a particular agency policy, to get a fuller police record clearance later in their degree when the specific agency for placement was identified. A smaller number of universities, identified that they did not begin to talk with students about criminal history checks until immediate preparation for placements were underway, and whilst graduate entry programs often had field education scheduled in the first year of a program for undergraduates the conversation might not commence until second or third year.

Who bears the cost of the criminal history check was largely determined by the nature of the check and dependent upon specific arrangements at a point in time. Working with Children cards (Victoria) and Blue Cards (Queensland) are provided at no cost. However in all states some students will require a police clearance. Agencies commonly meet the cost of the check if it is additional to the primary check or in the one case where no primary check was required. Two universities paid the cost of the required check and two universities reported that although the student most commonly met the cost, their students delayed getting a police check until they were able to ascertain whether the agency would meet the cost. Although this research did not involve data collection directly from students, no interviewee reported that the cost of these checks was a barrier to students undertaking placement.

In most cases students only required one criminal history check during their degree. Interviewees reported that WWC and Blue cards were valid for two years. However where a police record check was required, either as agency policy or by the university, it was sometimes possible for a second check to be required for a second placement. This was particularly identified in relation to agencies which chose to undertake their own police check.

## UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION OF CRIMINAL HISTORY CHECKS

Universities in which the need for a police clearance is predominantly managed through the WWC card or a Blue card adopted an administrative approach to the management of information. Students produce a card rather than a personal report and the sighting of this card

by the authorized person was recorded on the student file. The processes and management of situations in which a student is refused a card is discussed below.

The management of police record reports is more sensitive as these reports potentially describe significant details of a student's history. Where a criminal history report had been sought either by the student or on their behalf by the university it was argued by those interviewed that this report was owned by the student. On the other hand, if the report had been paid for by an agency the report was seen to belong to them. Only one university identified that information about criminal history check outcomes was stored in a locked cupboard and kept for seven years (similar to provisions for sensitive research data). Two other universities identified that records of conversations about offences identified on a criminal history check were stored in confidential files. A number of universities reported that they did not record the information at the university at all – working on the assumption that if the clearance was required the agency would request the information from the student.

## CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE RETURNS OR FAILURE TO OBTAIN A CARD

A student's failure to obtain a working with children clearance or the identification of criminal offences from the past raises for the university the question of whether a student is permitted to undertake a placement. Four interviewees noted that they had not seen such a situation including one who reported that these issues were resolved at the time of enrolment and students facilitated to enrol in alternative programmes.

The first question faced by the university when this situation arises is what position they will adopt on the appropriateness or otherwise of the student undertaking a placement. The most serious consequence – inability to complete the programme of study – was identified as being at least theoretically possible by nine of those interviewed. Three interviewees believed that a student would not be prevented from completing the pro-gramme by this situation arising. One university reported successfully supporting a student to appeal the non-issue of a Working with Children Card.

Decision-making about proceeding with placement was complex. The majority of processes were designed in recognition of the importance of protecting the student's privacy and restricting the number of people involved in the process and decision-making. The financial and social cost of the process for students was acknowledged. Academics and field education staff talked of their commitment to work with students to ensure that this process does not create an unnecessary barrier and to creating placement options wherever possible. Two interviewees described processes for which there was a formal school protocol and clearly identified staff to manage the process. The majority of universities described a flexible and exploratory approach in which conversation with the student, assessment of the nature of the offence and the student's attitude were made and often an alternative placement in which the record was not deemed to be an issue was explored. Factors influencing the outcome of these flexible approaches were

- Length of time since the offence

- Point of life that offence occurs eg whether the student was a juvenile at the time of the offence

- Nature of offence eg driving offences vs assault

- Post offence history

- Extensiveness of the criminal history

- Whether the student had been in jail

- Current risk

- Availability of alternative placements where record not relevant

All universities identified that students had a right of appeal on a decision relating to their eligibility to undertake placement as a result of a criminal history check. These appeal rights were seen to be embedded in university management of students in courses. No interviewee reported knowledge of an appeal being exercised.

The Code of Ethics ( AASW 1999)[2] was an important resource for interviewees. Some used the Code of Ethics to emphasise social work academics obligations to vulnerable clients of the future. The Code of Ethics was suggested as a useful framework for discussions with students about these issues – establishing a rationale for university decision-making. Other interviewees emphasised the rights of the student through reference to the Code of Ethics and the importance of recognising that a police record is a statement of a person's past not their future and that the Code of Ethics requires that we recognise the potential of people to change.

**Communication with the field**

Once eligibility for placement has been established, the university faces the question of what information should be conveyed to the placement agency. The majority of universities took the position that the agency knows that checks are undertaken and it is up to them to ask the student if they wish to sight it whilst a smaller group reported that in the case of certain offences the agency will need to be advised. In jurisdictions where the working with children check occurs agencies are advised that all students have these cards. Only one university identified that it took responsibility for transferring this information, others require that the student deal directly with the agency and that the university be advised that this has been done. Few interviewees expressed concern about dilemmas in this area although one interviewee questioned the ethics of allowing a student who is known to have a criminal history to go to a placement where this will not be raised. This interviewee also raised a concern about possible future consequences for the university.

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[2] This research was undertaken prior to the revision of the Code of Ethics

Good practice was seen to involve having clarity (and indeed explicit agreements) about agency expectations of the university and the student and at the same time being a critical friend to the agencies and engaging in constructive conversations about their expectations and practices.

Many interviewees saw themselves as an advocate for a student to the agency. Some university staff argued that the discussion with the student about their criminal history, whilst possibly being an intrusion into a student's privacy creates an important teaching and professional development opportunity. The student, who will graduate to become a potential employee, will be faced with the possibility of criminal history checks on a number of occasions in their employment history. The student criminal history check provides an opportunity to learn how to manage this in an ethical and appropriate manner, with supportive coaching from university staff.

## DISCUSSION

The diversity of practice in responding to students with criminal histories identified in this research reflected both the different legal contexts in which they operate and the different values and perspectives of professional and academic staff. This diversity is not unique to Australia. The advisability or otherwise of accepting students with a criminal record has been discussed within the social work profession in many jurisdictions(Magen and Emerman 2000 ; Scott and Zeiger 2000 ; Crisp 2006 ; Madoc-Jones, Bates et al. 2007). However, despite this recognition of the contentious nature of the decisions to be made, only a few universities reported structures for decision-making that were formally recorded, most reported understandings of the way that practices had evolved over time that were not recorded and did not seem to have explicit university mandate. Not only is it apparent that a student with a criminal history will receive different responses depending upon the state in which the student applies to study social work, this research demonstrated that at least in some states a student with a criminal history could receive a different response depending upon the university to which they applied.

There was an apparent gap between the ideals of staff within the departments of social work about the management of criminal history checks and the practice of the university. A number of interviewees talked about the importance of being open with students about the need for criminal history checks up front, and in the discussions of best practice many interviewees emphasized the importance of working through issues with the student. However very few of those interviewed knew what their university practice was in relation to inform-ation provided through the Tertiary Admission Centre or even through their own website. The ideal of working through issues together does not take account of the possible gate-keeping effect before the potential student even enrols. The extent to which knowledge of the requirement of a criminal history check influences student choice of study program cannot be quantified as potential student decision-making is hidden from universities (and even researchers!).

## PRE-ENROLMENT

The research identified a variety of positions amongst academics and field education staff about the desirability of gatekeeping entry into social work. Some interviewees did not see gatekeeping as a problem, emphasizing the importance of the profession having a good reputation. However, most expressed a more socially inclusive view arguing that it may be perfectly appropriate for a person with a criminal record from their past to study social work and be graduated as a contributing member of the profession. Interviewees did suggest however that this would require an exercise of discretion.

Whilst this diversity of views can be expected in a pluralist society, it is inconsistent with understandings of accountability for the value positions of individuals to be determining access to resources such as the opportunity to study a particular course at university. As Cowburn and Nelson argue:

being clear about the ethical thinking that (may) inform decisions to admit (or not) ex-offenders to social work training is an essential pre-requisite to accountable admissions practice (Cowburn and Nelson 2007 p.13)

Whether these issues should be addressed solely within the university is also a point of concern. There is no process in Australia through which these decisions can be discussed by the university with the broader human services field including employers and service user representatives. Madoc-Jones et al (2007) argue in the UK context that a broader range of perspectives should be brought to bear on the consideration of whether an individual is suitable to become a social worker. In Australia consideration might be given to a partnership between the field and the university to consider these issues.

## POST ENROLMENT

Although issues of timing of information giving, duplication of checks and the cost of these checks are administratively messy, the most important issues in relation to post enrolment management of criminal history checks are the questions of who sees and holds the information about individual students and the consequences of negative returns. As Naylor et al identify, criminal history checks elicit "sensitive personal information and information which has the potential to result in both stigmatisation and discrimination" (Naylor, Paterson et al. 2008 p.187).

Although this information is some of the most sensitive that a university might hold about a student, the number of universities that reported tight and accountable management of this information was very small. This is not to suggest that other universities or their staff were loose in their management of this information. However in these universities protection of students' privacy depended upon individuals' discretion and careful management. This is certainly compromising the transparency of decision making and it is possible that as a result of this, inadequate records are being maintained in some universities as the desire to protect student privacy is leaving the onus of record storing with the student.

In relation to the question of the eligibility of placement of students who have a criminal history, while some universities had clearly defined policies and procedures it was clear that those universities who reported a flexible approach to students with a criminal history were depending upon the professional judgment of those engaging with the student. There was little reference to university guidelines or documented policies in relation to the assessment of the issues that were seen as important. Whilst the criteria identified by interviewees corresponds very closely with that derived by Madoc Jones et al (Madoc-Jones, Bates et al. 2007 p.1396) from a review of the criminology literature, there was no indication in their responses that interviewees had accessed this literature prior to reaching their position. Social work academics might be expected, as a result of their professional education, to be able to manage the judgment issues involved here, but the lack of collected case data means that future students are not able to be advised about the range of options that they may face or to make their own comparison of their situation to those of previous students. This must also hamper a student's capacity to appeal as they have limited knowledge of precedents that have been established in this area.

Few universities reported clearly negotiated agreements with agencies about information relating to student criminal records. Agencies are aware that criminal history checks are required but little information is provided to agencies or potential supervisors about how these are managed and what process will be involved if a student with a criminal history is matched to their agency. It would seem that despite the high level of engagement between universities and the agencies and social workers with whom they place their students, the management of criminal records is a hidden process reliant on trust between the parties and open to significant miscommunication

## BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

### Uniformity

Academics and field educators treated the management of students with a criminal history as a serious responsibility. However their behaviours and those of their universities varied as a result of differing legal contexts and variation in values and beliefs. Best practice in higher education would include an equality of opportunity for students in similar situations. Thus a student with a particular criminal history should expect equal opportunity to enter a social work program irrespective of the state or territory in Australia in which they reside.

### Accountability and communication

Communication between student and university staff was emphasised as of great importance in the management of these sensitive issues. Being open and honest with students about the possible consequences of a criminal history as soon as possible was seen as best practice. This included sharing information about why the checks are required and putting this process in the context of broader professional accountabilities.

However, a broader understanding of who constitutes 'the student' should be embedded in best practice. Although university communication to potential students about criminal history checks can be seen to address the need for early communication, the deterrent effect of this university communication needs to be considered and ways of mitigating

this identified. Mitigating actions may include strategies such as the early identification of someone to whom a potential student might speak about a criminal history.

Clarifying expectations of the agency in relation to criminal history checks was identified as good practice, but this was not necessarily a matter of conforming to agency expectations, indeed one interviewee argued that as a university we have a role to engage critically with our partners and that slavish adoption of requests from agencies without reflection did not represent good practice. Clarity in communication between the field and the university in relation to student criminal histories is thus important. There may indeed be a role for the academic or field educator to act as an advocate for the student and be responsible for seeking a way around the problem posed by agency policies. However clarifying roles between the university and the agency is an essential element of good practice.

Beyond the individual student and agency is the question of who should be involved in the establishment of the guidelines in relation to students with a criminal history. Universities in Australia have a range of structures through which the broader community and employers are able to contribute to the development of policy and curriculum offerings. These structures may create a forum in which decision-making in relation to students with a criminal history can be reviewed. Such structures, however, in an environment in which universities struggle to assert their competitive difference from one another, do not provide a forum through which a consistent Australian wide standard might be developed – though that is the best practice principle for which we should be aiming.

**Transparency**

The gatekeeping activities of the university in the management of criminal history checks are, in the main, shrouded in discretion designed to protect the privacy of students. As a result they are invisible to other students concerned about the impact of their past on their access to a future in social work, and these potential graduates may retreat from the profession rather than engage with this issue. This research identified that universities do not know to what extent attrition from social work programs occurs because students become aware of the criminal history checks required prior to placement. The very limited experiences of working with students with a criminal history identified in the research raises important ethical questions about the gatekeeping effect of criminal history checks.

Notwithstanding the importance of the privacy rights of individual students, decisions about matters such as whether a student is enabled to complete placements without a Working with Children card or the range of offences that precluded a student from a placement can be available for public scrutiny. The publication of such information would enable potential students to make informed decisions and it would enable current students to prepare to advocate for themselves more confidently and to be less reliant on the good will of the academic or field education staff. The publication of such information from individual universities would also create a data base that could form the basis for discussion between universities and between universities and the field about the appropriate standards.

## CONCLUSION

The number of students with a criminal history who seek to study social work or other human service professional programmes may be small. However it is important that the processes we have in place give effect to our commitment to social inclusivity. This research has demonstrated that students with a criminal history are positioned differently depending on the state and university to which they apply. In addition in most universities their ability to participate in field education depends upon their capacity to elicit from field education and academic staff sympathetic advocacy.

Greater transparency and accountability in decision-making about the placement of students with a criminal history is required if social work education is not to be a vehicle for additional social exclusion for these potential students. Recognising that our field partners operate in a socio political context in which the risk posed by a criminal history has assumed great importance, this transparency and accountability must be inclusive of our field partners if our relationships are to be respectful and challenging.

An exploration of the principles underpinning good practice in the management of students with a criminal history has raise d the question of the mandate of universities to act as gatekeepers for the social work profession. It would seem that the responsibility for decision-making in relation to the criteria against which students will be assessed should be shared with the profession, the human services field and the broader community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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