

Editorial

As the current Executive of the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (the Council), we are delighted to host this Special Edition of *Advances* focussing on Leadership in social work education. This edition is timely. In the midst of widespread and rapid changes at local, national and international levels, the need for critical leadership in steering a course through uncertainty, and in foregrounding innovations towards sustainable delivery, is singularly important. There has never been a more pressing time for dialogue across national boundaries and for connecting up the dots nationally and internationally.

Many challenges face the delivery of social work education that reflect the impact of the convergence of a number of global processes: the political consensus on neoliberal modernisation, technological transformations forged within a knowledge economy, new social mobilities and, latterly, the spread of populist political ideologies. All of these processes have rippled across the landscape of social work education producing shifts in higher education policies, raising the anxieties and competing expectations amongst various stakeholder groups about graduate capabilities, demanding engagement with new ways of working and new methodologies of teaching, and all within a climate of resource constraint.

In recent times, taking Australian social work education as an example, we have experienced the rapid growth of programs within a demand-led system that challenges the quality of delivery and the quality of student experience. We have experienced a radical change in the profile of the student body placing new demands in terms of support and pastoral care. Continued and deep contestation over curriculum content and incursions into pedagogic practices by a variety of stakeholder groups have become the norm as have the cries of “the field education crisis.” Social work educators are buckling under the demands for research excellence, quality teaching, industry engagement, internationalisation and entrepreneurship. It could be a recipe for disaster but somehow, it is not. The ability of social work education to adapt to, absorb and to drive change is ever present, if in varying degrees of balance. But we nevertheless have to pause and ask – is this enough?

The nature of these pressures have led the Council to debate the concept of leadership itself, to debate sustainable models of social work education and to ruminate on strategic ways of advancing the standing of social work within the academy. What might a flexible and sustainable curriculum look like? What innovative models of Field Education can sustain a growing and diverse student population? How can we best prepare graduates for work readiness? What should be the research priorities for developing the evidence base in social work education? And what can be said about the state of play of the social work education

workforce? These are some of the key questions that have preoccupied the Council. Across the decades, whilst we have seen progressive changes in deepening the value base of social work and in expanding social work theory and the content of the curriculum, there have been relatively few fundamental shifts in *how* we do things. Field Education is a prime example where the professional standards underpinning social work education are based on what has always been the case, rather than being based on sound evidence.

Our premise has been that, in times of adversity, innovation and alternative ways of thinking emerge and new trajectories are forged in how we do things. We consider that paradigmatic shifts in our approach that move beyond adaptation to the status quo are what is needed to seek out new and sustainable directions and to equip future practitioners to work with the dynamics of change.

Over the past two years, the Council has been focussing its activities on a range of ways of advancing leadership, including generating the idea for this Special Edition. Underpinning the Council's strategic agenda has been a focus on leadership in times of change, and two initiatives have been developed in response to this. The first was to host an international colloquium at the Monash Prato Centre where "thought leaders" in social work education came together in September 2016 to consider contemporary challenges and to advance the debate on social work education across global contexts. At least three of the papers in this special edition arise from what has become known as "the Prato moment." The aims of the colloquium were to progress cutting-edge pedagogy, spearhead international research and collaboration, advance social work within the academy, and equip schools of social work for 21st century practice. Along with international speakers, a number of Australian Council members presented at the colloquium, touching on themes of political leadership, research and development, educating global citizens, and capacity building in the academic workforce.

There are few such opportunities to bring together a group of international leaders in social work education, providing them with thinking space to reflect critically and strategically over a two-day lock in. The colloquium brought academics from East to West, in a catalytic moment where they enthusiastically tackled leadership themes across political, research, teaching, and workforce domains. People invested in the spirit of the event to explore ideas with no fixed or predetermined notion of where things might lead. Conversations flowed easily across recognised ground. In our collective reading of the runes we managed to move beyond the usual preoccupations with the impact of neoliberal policy trends, austerity and resource scarcity to try to reach those critical questions about change-making, political strategy, the potentials of international collaboration, succession planning, new directions in research and to question the frontiers of pedagogic practice in an era of rapid technological advances.

The Prato moment also noted the paucity of evidence and the relatively weak research capacity of the discipline, home and away. It was forcefully argued that one of the challenges for research leadership is to engage student enthusiasm and capacity for research, tackling knowledge transfer issues, engage with and shape "impact" measures, create academic environments where people can do their best work, tackling "wicked issues" via multi-

disciplinary collaborations in research and redefining and valorising social work research. One key observation of the Prato group was that, as social work academics, we tended to be *genetically critical towards ourselves*. This has implications, and in some ways illustrates a lack of maturity and disciplinary confidence. Being kinder and more constructive to each other in peer review and research assessment exercises is vitally important to the status of the discipline in the academy and the advancement of the discipline more generally. Failing to recognize this ultimately weakens the profession, and we lose good people with potential who might otherwise have made a difference in social work education.

The second major strategic initiative of the Council relates to workforce stressing the importance of “succession planning” in social work education in Australia. In advancing leadership the Council has been mindful of the need to build future academic leadership. A number of challenges face social work education in relation to its academic workforce, including recruitment to senior-level positions, the profile and sustainability of the discipline within the academy, research capacity and the building of the evidence and knowledge base of the discipline. The career trajectories, of women in particular, have been of concern. There have been few studies in Australia focussing on the nature, experiences and status of social work academics, but much commentary. The Bradley Review (2008) on the shortage of Australian academics and researchers reverberated across social work and the discussion papers underpinning the 2012 ASWEAS noted the need for concerted efforts to build capacity for the future. A broad sweep of issues are attendant on such succession planning, the core elements of which raise questions about the sustainability of the discipline both in research capacity, career progression and leadership. The Council recognises that Australia is not an outlier by comparison with other nations in this respect, but also notes that, to date, there has been little systematic effort to address what are known issues confronting the discipline. Following on from the colloquium, the Council is advancing a major capacity-building project over three years that will consider the state of play within the discipline, exploring with key stakeholders the constraints and enablers that affect them. The project aims to identify mechanisms to strengthen research capacity in the discipline and to build the infrastructure and processes to facilitate new generation leadership. The establishment of a National Field Education Network in Australia and its identification of six key areas for change is one such development.

The papers in this special edition respond to many of these contemporary issues, also demonstrating a range of important new directions that interestingly take us beyond “content” (we need more of this or more of that in the curriculum) to consider processes that advance education. These include collaboration, partnership, building capacity, strategic audit, strengthening the evidence base, and the ratcheting up of influence and advocacy. We begin the special edition with two Council initiatives. First, Amanda Howard and Charlotte Williams focus our attention on workforce leadership. Amanda and Charlotte, the academic leads on the Council’s strategic workforce initiative, raise important questions about Australian succession planning in social work education, the sustainability of programs, and the broader reproduction of the discipline. They explore the key issues in building a strong academic workforce, and challenge us to develop a comprehensive plan for capacity building that will support the future strength of social work and social work education.

Next, Marie Connolly, Charlotte Williams and Lesley Cooper turn our focus to research, and in particular, the strengthening of the knowledge base for social work education. Drawing upon discussions from the Council's strategic workshops, they create a research framework for Australian social work education that begins to identify the gaps in research knowledge and proposes a systematic approach to research planning across service user, academic workforce and institutional system domains.

Continuing the research theme, Lynette Joubert and her colleagues then illustrate the ways in which practice research in health settings can provide opportunities for engaging students and practitioners in "real world" research as a key to building sustainability for the discipline. This article, and Joubert's innovative mentoring of students and practitioners over many years, illustrates the ways in which writing partnerships have the potential to create research that is critically relevant to practice.

Given the pressures inherent in the delivery of field education, we are particularly delighted that a number of authors have contributed to this area of scholarship in the special edition. The establishment of a National Field Education Network in Australia has been an important development under the auspices of ANZSSWER. Wendy Rollins and her colleagues discuss the evolution of this initiative, and its focus on six key areas for change from a national perspective. This kind of leadership is critically important as social work field education across the globe is experiencing significant pressure. Next, Shirley Ledger and her colleagues explore the attribution of signature pedagogy status to field education. Examining the literature, they note an absence of Australian perspectives and contexts, reinforcing the importance of both research and theory development in this area. In the third focusing on field education, Lou Harms and her colleagues illustrate the important ways in which new opportunities can be created for students that extend beyond traditional social work settings. Recognizing the contemporary challenges in securing field education placements, they discuss a fieldwork model that brings together a business, community and academic partnership that create mutual benefits and opportunity.

Turning our attention to teaching and pedagogy, Beth Crisp looks at leadership and social work education in the online environment. Beth persuasively argues that traditional distinctions between distance education and the delivery of on-campus social work education are increasingly questionable in the contemporary environment where online technologies are used more frequently in teaching across modes of delivery. She challenges us to focus on the quality of learning outcomes and to remain open to opportunities that online pedagogical innovation provide. This is followed by a discussion of the integrative use of case studies in research, practice and education. In this article, Monica Short and her colleagues promote the use of case study as a powerful reflexive and reflective tool that engages students, and social workers more broadly, with the ethical realities of field practice.

In this special edition we also have a set of brief articles that explore new and interesting ideas across the various domains of social work education. These also touch on similar themes of workforce, research and social work pedagogy. The first, by Joan Rapaport and Jill Manthorpe, provides a thoughtful exploration of the value in encouraging practitioners

to undertake doctoral studies as a strategy for strengthening the social work workforce, both in relation to benefiting practice systems, and increasing leadership within and beyond social work. Nicole Hill continues the theme of research, and in particular, research innovation in field education. Nicole describes a project that aims to utilize anonymised administrative data to better understand student experiences, pathways, and academic progress of students on placement. She argues that the better utilization of administrative data has the potential to strengthen program and curriculum development.

David McNabb then explores the nature of democratizing and decolonizing practices in social work education. Drawing on elements of democratic theory, David notes the lack of research relating to how issues of equity, service-user participation, and cultural self-determination are given effect to in social work education. He challenges us to operationalize democratizing and decolonizing ideas within practice across our academic programs and systems.

Bringing the special edition to a close, Darla Spence Coffey then provides us with a reflection on political leadership, and in particular, leadership in troubling times. Darla promotes the need to equip students for negotiating the political environment of practice and to the ways in which, within the contemporary challenging political environment, we might maximise “collective impact” to good effect.

When we made the call for articles that might advance cutting-edge pedagogy, signal innovative research and/or generate innovations through strategic collaboration, we looked to leaders, however defined, to show the way. We have not been disappointed. Leaders are good spotters; spotters of key trends, spotters of small ideas that lead to big innovations; spotters of talents and of mobilising the critical combination of ideas and talents towards productive outcomes. It is clear that we cannot afford to be reactive, inert or continue to absorb widespread change without question or resistance. In this era of great political instability we need to Think Big. There is a pressing need to take forward strategic agendas that shape the future of social work education that is sustainable, effective, coherent and carefully benchmarked cross-nationally to allow for portability and transferability of knowledge, skills and values. This will mean taking risks, trialling new initiatives – evaluating and learning from mistakes. It will mean embracing conflict as a critical and creative force for change and it will mean stepping forward confidently as a discipline and exploiting spaces of influence.

**By Marie Connolly,
Charlotte Williams
and Lesley Cooper.**