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Fast forward: 'Australian youth work education: curriculum renewal' towards a model of sustainability for niche professions (0143)

Programme number: F6

Research Domain: Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Background

The *Australian youth work education: curriculum renewal and a model for sustainability for niche professions* project was funded in 2010 under the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's *Priority Projects Program* which responds to priorities determined by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Board. Unlike many other professions, youth work had no national professional association, and formation of state-based professional associations had occurred only in two states.

The research had three strands. The first strand comprises conceptual work in the scholarship of teaching to determine the implications of Barnett and Coate (2005) approach to curriculum for the Australian higher education sector in general and for youth work education in particular. The second strand identified trends and future directions in youth work education. The third strand was concerned with higher education research to determine the sustainability of niche professions in Australian higher education. The poster will illustrate the key findings from each strand.

Curriculum framework and Threshold Concepts

The project began with an analysis of the content of existing programs and to determine the implications of Barnett and Coate (2005) approach for the Australian youth work education curriculum, and especially the balance of different elements within the curriculum. Threshold Concepts (Akerlind et al 2011; Meyer & Land 2006) were added later as a helper methodology. Barnett & Coate's (2005) curriculum approach suggests that higher education curriculum should comprise elements in three domains, 'knowing' 'acting' and 'being' (or 'becoming'). A Threshold Concepts methodology was used to translate the programme-wide approach into disciplinarily relevant curriculum within constituent courses.

Future directions for the university youth work curriculum in Australia

In Australia, there is employer-driven demand for a degree level professional qualification in youth work, a shortage of professional youth work graduates, and a nascent movement towards professionalization and accreditation. Existing programmes emerged from locally determined needs, and a purpose of the project was to determine similarity and variation, and whether core elements could be identified. This project interviewed youth work educators, employers, graduates, professional associations and policy bodies relevant to the discipline to identify different perspectives on present and future requirement of youth

work education. The poster will show how the findings were used for curriculum development.

Sustainability and niche professions

In the Australian context, and for the purposes of this project, a niche profession was defined as one that was offered at less than one in five higher education institutions in Australia, and had average enrolment in the lowest quartile for undergraduate enrolments. Threats to sustainability of niche courses come from unintended consequences of other higher education policies. The project explored the impact of higher education policy changes for niche courses through analysis of the intended and unintended consequences of the Australian higher education policy environment, and through interviews with a sample of university senior managers. This constitutes the environment in which curriculum was developed.

Findings

The main findings were

- ◆ That an explicit curriculum framework was useful for curriculum renewal
- ◆ There was agreement on core curriculum elements and also agreement that implementation of curriculum benefits from local interpretation and adaptation
- ◆ That there was strong employer support for a graduate professional qualification in youth work
- ◆ That various higher education policies had created an environment which was difficult for niche courses, especially those without strong external professional accreditation
- ◆ Collaborative strategies between universities were made more difficult by policies that foster competition between universities.

Conclusions

The project achieved its intended outcomes with respect to strengthening links between institutions and providing a foundation for curriculum renewal. The project identified threats to sustainability for niche professions. Further research is required on unintended systemic effects of university policy on sustainability for university degree programs for niche professions. In particular, research is required on possible means to mitigate unintended and undesirable effects of higher education policy on sustainability of niche programmes and to support cross-institutional collaboration in a competitive environment.

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References

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