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**Title** Specialist courses: social need, employers' expectations, student demand and universities' interests—some conundrums  
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**Specialist courses: social need, employers' expectations, student demand and universities' interests—some conundrums**

Competing visions of higher education variously prioritise the needs of society, student demand or employers expectations. Universities make public claims about their responsiveness. Government makes policies to steer balances of power between competing expectations of higher education. Universities increasingly present themselves in corporate terms and make decisions guided by their financial or reputational interests.

This presentation will first discuss how universities responses to changes in higher education policy have reduced the choice of offerings available to students, reduced capacity for universities courses to meet recognised social needs and employer needs. This has occurred even though policy rhetoric suggests that university graduates should be 'employment ready' and that demand-driven funding models would increase student choice. A problem has arisen because universities' interests are in tension with the expectations and needs of other groups, including employers, students, and society. The second part of this presentation will discuss how policy might be used to improve the alignment between universities' interests and the needs and interests of society, students and employers. This presentation

- 1) Documents how various policy approaches have contributed to the decline in availability of specialist courses in social professions and affected balances between social need, employers' expectations, student demand and university interests
- 2) Examines the consequences of these changes for students, employers, for public good and for universities
- 3) Discusses how a research project attempted to support cross-institutional collaboration to meet social need, increase student choice, to respond to employer expectation, and redress the balance between different interests
- 4) Identify aspects of contemporary policy that hinder or undermine this initiative and suggests possible future policy directions.

**Conclusion:** Through funding mechanisms and other means, government policy can influence universities' responsiveness to expectations of various groups, including students, employers and 'public good', or social need. The research concludes that the current policy mix in Australia incentivises universities to prioritise their own interests at the expense of public good, employer expectation, and even student demand. Although it may be possible to mitigate some of the worst effects, the solution to the underlying problem lie in the policy arena.

**Methods:** This project combined desk research with an action-research project to promote collaboration between universities to retain availability of specialist courses in social professions. The purpose of the funding was to achieve change within the Australian higher education sector to increase the availability of specialist courses. The research therefore used an action research approach. Eight Australian universities have participated so far. The initial work identified possible models for collaboration, how institutions perceive the benefits and barriers of different collaborative approaches, and whether (and how) the benefits of collaboration can be realised in a competitive higher education environment, and whether (and how) barriers to collaboration can be overcome.

**Background:** This presentation reports the findings of an Australian national study of the availability of specialist niche social profession courses in Australian universities, undertaken as part of a nationally funded research project. The project was funded in response to observations that specialist courses had disappeared from the sector over the last 15-20 years, despite social need. The purpose of the project was to mitigate this by investigating the feasibility of cross-institutional collaboration between Australian to increase availability of specialist courses.

Desk research confirmed the decline in availability of degrees in specialist social professions, (disability studies, gerontology, community mental health,) and in some cases to extinction. This decline had occurred despite the unmet social need for graduates in these professions, and unmet employer demand. Specialist graduates in these disciplines are needed in important areas of government social policy innovation, including, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) (National Disability Practitioners, 2016), Domestic and Family Violence, Aging-in-place Age Care Policy, existing policy on Closing the Gap (Higgins, 2010), Youth Justice Reinvestment (Justice and Community Safety Directorate, 2016) and Countering Violent Extremism (Attorney-General's Department, 2016) in Australia. Interviews with staff, professional bodies and peak bodies identified further areas of loss (career development) and other specialities that universities wanted to share (leadership and training, holistic chronic and palliative care).

The decline in diversity of course offerings available to students means a decline in student choice. Policies that contributed included: introduction (and raising) of student fees; decrease in per capita government support for university teaching; low appreciation of teaching compared with research; and, change from a centrally planned funding model to a student demand-driven funding model. The project was funded to try to prevent the loss of specialist courses by promoting inter-university collaboration and joint course delivery. Inter-institutional collaboration has been used successfully elsewhere to extend availability of niche courses in a variety of disciplines (Dow, 2008, Goodrich and McCauley, 2009, Robertson and Shannon, 2009, Schmidt and Molkentin, 2015). By the time of the conference work on this project will be almost complete and available results will be reported.

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