

University - industry partnerships: Keeping child protection workers on the job, challenged and happy

Abstract:

This paper describes one strategy for strengthening the child protection workforce to improve service quality. Its key strategy is to provide to child protection workers with more accessible and flexible post graduate education opportunities to support their professional development.

The paper first briefly explores the current context of child protection work and the factors influencing the attraction and retention of child protection staff. Secondly, it examines how best to support staff in their careers by providing them with opportunities to extend their knowledge and skills through training and postgraduate education. It then outlines a process for establishing and developing the employer-university partnership in the ACT, and an approach to curriculum and assessment of core training.

Increasing the specialised knowledge and skills is an important way of improving services to children and their families. Although not the complete answer to solving work force issues it is a strategy that has generated positive responses from staff and is beginning to have a beneficial effect on the

statutory child protection agency in the ACT.

Key words

Workforce issues; child protection workforce; university industry partnership

Introduction

The problem of attracting and retaining experienced and highly skilled child protection workers has been recognised for some time both nationally and internationally. Statutory child protection authorities experience high staff turnover, in some Australian jurisdictions as high as 30 – 40%, and an average length of service of less than two years. This high turnover impacts adversely on caseloads, produces discontinuity of service to families, and leads to increased administrative costs (Winefield & Barlow, 1994). Not having a full quota of skilled and experienced workers stretches the system and children and their families do not receive the support and protection they need.

This paper describes one strategy for strengthening the attractiveness of careers in child protection, to gain new recruits, to reduce the loss of existing workers, and to improve service quality. The key feature of the strategy is to provide to child protection workers more accessible and flexible post graduate education opportunities to support their professional development. A further feature of the strategy is the development of a close partnership between the educational body and employing authorities, bringing opportunities for the educational program to contribute to increasing organisational functioning and effectiveness.

Working together, the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) and the School of Social Work at Australian Catholic University have developed a postgraduate program to increase child protection workers' knowledge and skills and to reflect upon their values. This paper presents the rationale and main features of this innovative program.

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The paper briefly explores the current context of child protection work and the factors influencing the attraction and retention of child protection staff. Then, it examines how best to support staff in their careers by providing them with opportunities to extend their knowledge and skills through training and postgraduate education. Finally, it outlines the processes for establishing and developing the employer-university partnership in the ACT, and the approach to curriculum and the assessment of core training.

We argue that working together in the ways outlined, we can lead the way to improved staff retention, a more highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce and ultimately to better outcomes for children and families in the community.

The 'problem'

The high turnover of child protection workers is the subject of considerable child protection literature and is often reported in the media (Goddard, et al., 1999 cited in Gibbs, 2001). It is not unreasonable to assume that this is a problem that is detrimental to staff morale and discourages potential workers from joining the field.

The workforce problem is 'chronic, complex and multifaceted' (Gibbs, 2001) and solutions are not easy to find or implement. The complex and contested characteristics of child protection work and their impact on workers are regarded as one source of explanation for the difficult workforce issues. The nature of child protection work produces stress which accumulates over time contributing to decisions to leave the work (Stanley & Goddard, 1993; Markiewicz, 1996; Gibbs, 2001).

In part the problem is a reflection of broader developments in the welfare sector as a whole. Changes to the Australian welfare system including significant restructuring and the impact of the 'new human services marketplace' provide particular challenges to all areas of human services (Healy, 2004). Market reform and a crisis of public confidence in some sections of the industry are two key challenges that face policy makers, workforce planners and reformers.

Healy states this is particularly relevant to institutions engaged in the provision of statutory child welfare. In this sector, ever-increasing

notifications of child abuse and constant scrutiny and pressure to perform in complex and difficult practice contexts all place exceptional pressure on the workforce. In Australia the workforce has experienced pressure to expand due in part to the introduction of mandatory reporting in most States. Reductions in funding to community organisations have also added more strain on the statutory system (Mendes, 1996).

Apart from the nature of the work itself, the sometimes strident and unbalanced media reporting of child protection work has not helped to attract workers into the statutory system. Reports such as the Victorian Child Death Review Committee Report (1996) and the ACT Vardon Inquiry (2004) highlight problematic workforce issues. The Victorian media highlighted the inexperienced nature of the workforce and how this may have contributed to perceived mistakes in the cases under review (Hodgkin, 2002).

Research points to a clear association between high attrition rates and low job satisfaction in child protection staff and high levels of stress experienced particularly by front line workers (Drake et al., 1996 cited in Gibbs, 2001). Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth and Plotnich (1992) identified human resource management as a primary concern for all those in the field of child protection and state that "front line workers represent the organisation's most precious resource". It is recognised also that unless models of support and supervision of staff take into account the emotionally charged nature of child protection and its impact on workers then human resource planning will not be successful (Gibbs, 2001).

There are at least three main workforce issues experienced by child protection organisations. The first is what constitutes the 'best training'/ qualifications of workers – thereby ensuring 'quality services' for children and their families; the second how to recruit appropriate staff; and finally, how to retain workers. We do not explore the question of appropriate qualifications¹ although overseas evidence and our experience points to the

¹ Studies have also shown that graduates of specialised child welfare social work education programs are more likely to remain in child welfare and experience greater job satisfaction (Okamura & Jones, 1998; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991).

appropriateness of a Social Work qualification as an entry level qualification for child protection practice. This paper focuses on a strategy for attracting and retaining staff.

Like other human services areas a skilled, high performing workforce with the appropriate knowledge and expertise to deliver efficient and effective services to children, young people and their families is required. Attracting and retaining staff are not new problems and have been an area of study for researchers from the early 1960's (Russell 1987). There is substantial research into why there is a high turnover of child protection workers and strategies have been developed for changing the organisational culture and the nature of the work.

The literature indicates a range of recurring themes including the impact of constant high workloads and other workload issues (Anderson, 1994) problematic organisational climates (Alown & Reitz, 2000) high levels of emotional exhaustion and stressful work environments and the type of work undertaken (Bernotavicz, 1997). Cournoyer (1988) identifies four categories of stressors that impact on workers. These are: personal factors (eg level of anxiety, personality styles); stressors due to the nature of the work (eg personal abuse and threats, safety risks to workers); the work environment (eg unpredictable and changing policies and procedures, increased amount or pace of work); and finally, the stressors in the surrounding social systems (eg family pressures and life stage crises).

A large US study with a sample of 768 children's services workers in Louisiana (Ellett, 2001), explored three interrelated factors: who comes to work in child welfare and with what credentials (selection); who leaves and why (turnover); and who stays and why (retention). Their findings indicated that the major sources of dissatisfaction were organisational factors: low work morale, paperwork, lack of clerical support, administrative policies, procedures and lack of support of employees. Four key variables differentiated those most likely to leave the agency: perceptions of promotional and career opportunities; self efficacy motivation (energy and persistence in overcoming obstacles to accomplish goals); evaluations of personal job competence needed to work efficiently/effectively; and personal responsiveness to the needs of clients (doing for

others). They make the important point that three out of four of the factors are not organisational in nature.

Apart from the cost to the individual worker, the complex issues of recruitment and retention produce significant costs to organisations when there is a continuous need to recruit and train new staff. The remaining staff may experience low morale in these circumstances and the quality of services offered to service users will be adversely affected (Hodgkin, 2002).

What can help?

A range of strategies can be considered in seeking to respond to workforce problems in the child protection field. The ACT as a small city-state experiences the same issues as other jurisdictions in recruiting and retaining staff in child protection. The Vardon Report (2004), conducted in the ACT identifies a shortage of experienced child protection staff both locally and nationally. This finding is consistent with other child protection reviews across Australia. In 2004 the OCYFS attempted to recruit staff from within Australia and New Zealand, however small applicant pools and a lack of applicants with required qualifications led the OCYFS to explore international recruitment. While this has been successful in addressing immediate needs for more staff, recruitment action alone does not deal with the issues that underpin high rates of staff turnover. Arguably, a key element in that task is to increase staff confidence, competence and job satisfaction.

Supporting practice by improving supervision and, increasing training and flexibility in the workplace is believed to increase workers' satisfaction (Hodgkin, 2002, Gibbs, 2001). Staff, when asked, have identified a range of key determinants of whether or not they will stay, including: commitment to children (Cicero-Reese et al, 1998) reducing stress levels, (Anderson, 2000) hiring and induction practices (Graef et al., 2001) and focusing on strategies that reduce the chance of burnout (Anderson, 1994).

Wagner and Spence (2001) identify multiple factors impacting on satisfaction and morale for staff in child welfare agencies. These are broken down into four levels: individual, group/team, organisational and political.

i) Individual

Within the individual level, a sense of personal achievement, worker/client relationship, and personal coping strategies are factors identified by Wagner and Spence (2001) as important to job satisfaction. This includes personally achieving good outcomes for clients, personal coping strategies and positive relationships with clients.

ii) Group/team

Positive interpersonal relationships between team members as a strong driving force towards job satisfaction and overall staff morale.

iii) Organisational

Organisational factors are mostly identified as restraining forces. Workload, manager/team relationships, supervision, training, organisational cultures, resources, policies and procedures, meetings within the organisation, and working effectively with other agencies are factors that are identified within the study.

iv) Political

The availability of resources, the clarity and workability of policies and procedures, training, manager/staff relations are all considered to be subject at times to the exercise of political will by governments (Wagner and Spence, 2001).

Clearly, comprehensively addressing all of these levels requires the concurrent adoption of a range of strategies. One of the potentially most powerful of these is specialised training for increasing worker's skills and knowledge. This can occur at an undergraduate level with specific child welfare input and opportunities for a child protection field placement which can often lead to employment on graduation (Hodgkin, 2002). Other solutions include accredited courses at the post-graduate level ensuring workers develop the particular skills and knowledge required for child protection practice.

What has also been recognised is that for organisations to be able to deal with the ongoing transformation of their work (types of problems, impact of technology, community expectations), ongoing learning is necessary. The role of learning in organisations is based on the assumption that 'learning is valuable, continuous, and most effective when shared ... and that every experience is an opportunity to learn' (Kerka 1995).

Two important characteristics of a learning

organisation are the provision of continuous learning opportunities for workers and the fostering of an environment where inquiry and dialogue are encouraged (Kerka 1995). It is extrapolated that the benefits of these strategies directly for staff and for the effectiveness of their employing organisations carries through to higher satisfaction levels and hence lower turnover.

Development of Postgraduate Certificates

The ACU School of Social Work has long recognised the need for specialised postgraduate study in child welfare demonstrated by the development of a child protection stream in the Master of Social Work (MSW) since 1998. However, ACU has not attracted large numbers of students: a similar experience to other universities.

As part of the routine five-year review of the MSW the external social work community was surveyed about their interests, study intentions and barriers to the completion of postgraduate study. The reasons they gave for not taking up studying included: family commitments, workload pressures and the lack of support from employers such as study leave or financial support. Survey participants supported the concept of modules of study building towards a postgraduate qualification as a more attractive idea rather than commitment to a full masters program (usually 8 units). The survey results support informal discussions with social workers about why they choose not to carry out postgraduate study in general and social work masters specifically. This knowledge was useful in developing both the content and structure of postgraduate certificates, and in identifying the types of support that staff undertaking the courses may require from their employing organisation.

The convergence of factors: the timing of the Master of Social Work review and the ACT Government's recognition of the role postgraduate education could play in retaining staff and thereby increasing quality services led to the development of a range of Postgraduate Certificates in Human Services. A generic post graduate certificate (any four units provided by the School), a specialised leadership post graduate certificate and - a post graduate certificate specialising in Child Welfare (the subject of this paper).

The partnership

The School of Social Work at ACU started in 1995 and is the only institution providing face-to-face Social Work studies in the ACT. Since the beginning the relationship between the University and the OCYFS has been fostered by a strong commitment to excellence in social work practice. The University has provided social work education to staff and has supplied a pool of graduates. OCYFS staff supply field education opportunities for students and present specialised input into the undergraduate program. The collaborative relationship can also be seen by the development of an OCYFS field education policy, the representation of OCYFS on the School of Social Work Advisory Committee and the provision of training and supervision of OCYFS staff by ACU staff. In 2005 the partnership was extended again with the implementation of the Institute of Child Protection Studies – a joint venture that aims to carry out high quality practice research and training.

This unique and strong relationship was key to the development of postgraduate courses in the School.

The course

The OCYFS and ACU jointly developed the structure and content of the Post Graduate Certificate in Human Services (Child Welfare) (PGCHSCW). In discussions with the OCYFS training unit staff and with reference to the in-house core training the new course was developed. As this initiative charted new ground we framed the development and implementation of the course with an action learning approach. This allowed the participatory and collaborative nature of the program to be explicitly stated and facilitated a critical reflection of what works 'best in practice' for the different stakeholders; the University, the OCYFS and the students.

The post graduate certificate has four units which are completed over two years – one unit per semester. Based on feedback from students we wanted to keep the workload manageable and to minimise the impact on the organisation of staff absence due to study commitments.

It was important that the content of the Post Graduate Certificate was built on student learning, by using their previous education, training and

experience. In the development of the units it became clear that some of what formed the content of the first unit was covered in the new staff core training provided in house.

A pathway into a Masters program was also considered important, both for students and for the creation of a pathway for further educational investment as part of the staffing development strategy. In designing the course two options for further coursework study were developed. At the end of the certificate students could choose to extend their qualification to either a MSW, for those students with an undergraduate social work degree, or a Master of Social Science (Human Services), for those students with an undergraduate degree other than social work.

A fourth significant element in the development of this course was the commitment by the OCYFS to provide fellowships (financial support) and some time release to staff willing to undertake this study.

The four units of the certificate program are now outlined and their contribution to the overall learning goals of the course explained.

Unit 1

Child welfare: Theory and practice A

As the training and work experience of staff requires recognition, we introduced a formal process for individually assessing staff knowledge and skills. Successful completion of the assessment recognises and accredits their prior learning (RPL). Our aim is to assess learning of staff for equivalence of the first unit in the postgraduate certificate for which they are given credit. Our view is that credit can be awarded for learning that can be demonstrated, and not just for the experience itself.

There are two parts to the assessment: a written exam and a skills exam. Part one, the written exam, determines the basic knowledge required of a child protection worker. This includes for example knowledge of the legislation, the ability to identify and apply theoretical frameworks through an analysis of typical case studies and the demonstrated understanding of the role and responsibilities of child protection workers and other key players in the system.

Part Two involves assessment of competence in child welfare practice and reflective practice skills

through utilising a live role-play exam and a written reflective report on the role-play. We utilise a similar format to that used with undergraduate social work students in the first year of their course. The student is briefed with basic case information and carries out a role play with a 'client'. The assessment involves the demonstration of specific skills particularly the ability of the student to engage the client.

In consultation with OCYFS staff the case study scenarios and skills checklists were developed. We also use a senior child protection worker on staff at the OCYFS and a member of the School to jointly assess the role-play exam. Having two assessors, one from the School and one from the OCYFS ensures the assessment has high reliability. Students are provided with a tape of the role play and feedback that can be used to further develop skills and, if required, for supervision.

Unit 2

Child welfare context and policy

The aim of this unit is to provide students with a comprehensive examination of child welfare policies and institutions. It gives students a context for understanding the development of child welfare policies in Australia and internationally and considers the surrounding issues. Students are assisted to develop a thorough understanding of the policies and issues in child welfare.

Unit 3

Child welfare theory and practice B

This unit builds on the knowledge and skills developed in Theories and Practice in Child Welfare A. It further develops student's knowledge and skills and gives them opportunities to understand theoretical perspectives, develop specialised knowledge in complex practice areas and frameworks for practice in care planning and case management. It examines the impact of disability, mental health and drugs and alcohol on parenting ability, assists in developing specialised skills for interviewing children with communication difficulties, and covers early intervention and preventative approaches.

Unit 4

Special studies in Child Welfare

In early discussions with the OCYFS, senior

managers were keen to have wider benefits of the individual's study. With this in mind we developed a Special Studies unit which allows students to explore in more detail a particular aspect of child welfare / child protection. The topics are developed in consultation with the student's work supervisor or manager to ensure that as well as benefiting the student areas/topics of exploration would benefit the wider organisation. In 2006 the Head of School of Social Work and the Executive Director planned to meet to identify OCYFS research priorities for students to choose for study in this unit.

It has become apparent that the Special Studies unit enables both the employer and the student to develop specific expertise and knowledge on particular topics. Examples of special studies projects that have been, or are being completed at present in the ACT program:

- the links between animal abuse and child abuse
- the relationship between child neglect and learned helplessness
- the relationship between learning disabilities and child abuse
- an international comparison of key issues in child protection services
- the use of risk assessments in child protection.

Extending learning beyond the individual practitioner – to the organisation/sector

In developing the course we also wanted to specifically increase 'organisational learning'. Opportunities for sharing individual practitioner's learning with the wider organisation broaden the impact of the educational experience. This has happened in a number of ways for example:

- providing assessment tasks that allow students to write directly about their practice in a format that could be published (in either an internal practice newsletter or in a refereed journal)
- presenting their work at monthly practice forums or welfare seminars
- discussing their learning in supervision explicit ways.

Learnings from the early cohorts

As stated above due to the untested ground of introducing the course as an explicit partnership

between the University and the ACT Government an action learning framework was utilised. This approach, taken from the beginning of the course, made explicit the need to question what was actually happening so that where necessary possible adjustments could be made earlier rather than waiting until the end of the course.

The course was discussed and reviewed in the course management committee, which met regularly. We have now assessed three groups of students for RPL and learning about how to work with students who do not meet skill outcomes in the first instance has been important. It is essential to build in good feedback processes for students that include clear communication between the University and the OCYFS's training unit. These procedures ensure students are provided with specific feedback and if necessary, given the opportunity to practice their skills (with their work supervisor or training unit staff member) and be supported and encouraged to sit a supplementary exam. The skills exam has also helped to identify training gaps.

Thus the RPL process, particularly the feedback for students who were borderline or found to be unsatisfactory, was improved over time by the critical reflection stage of the action research cycle. The optimum day and timing of classes was tested over the first three units, as was the best way to recruit students from the OCYFS.

An issue that required significant discussion was that of students withdrawing from the course past the University's cut off date when they had not completed their assessments. This was particularly important given that the OCYFS had paid the student fees upfront. The OCYFS is considering a range of solutions common to employer funding options for example: reimbursing students only on the successful completion of courses, paying a proportion of the fees rather than 100% or requesting reimbursement from students for non completion.

Students came from a variety of educational backgrounds, including Arts or Science degrees with psychology majors, welfare degrees and social work degrees, with different skills, knowledge and value bases. Feedback from some students with social work backgrounds stated that the material presented in the history and policy unit had already been covered in their undergraduate degree. However, for other

students the knowledge, skills and values covered was in their view essential to their understanding of the practice context.

The course began mid 2004 with an initial contract for one cohort of twenty students however a contract has recently been completed for a further twenty students. This suggests the successful implementation of the course with high levels of satisfaction from students and the OCYFS senior management. For example some students' comments of the course:

- I enjoyed the course very much – got me thinking outside of the way I had previously
- The historical information was very useful – particularly noting the similarity between previous and current practice.
- I like the format – good mix of lecture and time for student input
- I think the format was good and the sequencing of material was good too. I enjoyed the structure of the classes with information provision and opportunities for discussion
- I enjoyed the informal atmosphere, the way people's thoughts and sharings were respected, the way students and lectures communicated freely, the excellent way in which the course was prepared and executed and the broadening of my mind while participating.

How to evaluate the impact of the introduction of the postgraduate certificate?

In the OCYFS there have been changes since the course began which have included reduced turnover, staff profile retention (to include those involved in study). The staff turnover rate in 2003/04 was 42% in line with other jurisdictions. The current staff turnover rate dropped to 18% in 2004/5. This figure has further improved in the first six months of the 2005/06 financial year recording 4.4% turnover. Only one staff member has left the organisation of those enrolled in the post graduate program.

The opportunity for employer-supported post graduate study has attracted qualified staff into OCYFS including an increase in the number of new graduates taking up employment. In fact 30% of the 2005 social work graduates took up employment in the OCYFS.

A survey undertaken within the organisation provided endorsement of the current program with some potential revision of content. There is a plan to undertake a full evaluation in late 2006 in partnership with the University. ACU and the OCYFS are also considering the development of a specialised masters program to create further opportunities for staff to take up tertiary study. The OCYFS has received a strong response to this idea with twenty staff indicating their interest.

Conclusions

This paper has described the development of a postgraduate program in child welfare which demonstrates how successful partnerships between universities and governments can be developed. Its introduction was part of a strategy to retain and attract staff in child protection. Increasing the specialised knowledge and skills is also considered to be an important way of improving services to children and their families. Although not the complete answer to solving work force issues this strategy is one that has generated positive responses from staff and is beginning to have a beneficial effect on the statutory child protection agency in the ACT. The next step is the possible development of a specialised master's course, which will allow students to continue with their studies.

The partnership described above and the action learning approach we took to course development has also been positive for the School of Social Work. Our postgraduate program is building strongly and reflects our ability to respond to key employers needs.

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