

Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy—Working group for training & skills transfer

Background

The recently launched *National Plan for Protecting Australia's Children*¹ emphasises that the workforce must have increased capabilities to meet the needs of vulnerable young people “including through improving the skills, knowledge and practice of staff”, however, provides little guidance about the skillset that workers require. The balance between qualifications and skills is another workforce consideration, including the recognition of transferable skills, knowledge, and experience across the sector.²

The *Australian Universities Accord—Discussion Paper*, released in February 2023, recognises that the skills, knowledge, and capabilities needed across Australia's workforce requires a mix of pathways, courses, and enrolments.³ The *Discussion Paper* identifies that the links between higher education and industry are underdeveloped in Australia, and there needs to be better alignment between curriculum and the changing needs across the workforce.⁴

The *Discussion Paper* consultations also raised the overlap between the tertiary and vocation education systems. This includes calls for a non-hierarchical and flexible qualification framework, that encourages recognition of credit and prior learning.⁵

Current challenges

There is evidence that practitioners are not coming into the sector, or acquiring in a timely manner, the skills and knowledge they need.⁶ There is a gap between what employers require to meet industry needs and what training bodies provide.⁷ Much of the training provided is not considered to be culturally safe, and this needs to improve. Enabling the workforce to develop requisite capabilities and skills will involve major changes to the current training environment, which is fragmented, resource intensive and highly specialised.

In September 2021, ACWA released a briefing paper outlining the need for a more integrated strategy for the child & family workforce to provide greater clarity on the core skills, knowledge and attributes needed across the sector. A NSW Joint Workforce Skills Strategy could provide a platform for consistency in the quality and content of training, as well address issues for workforce training portability across the sector, and inform the work of training providers. A framework for the efficient use of the resources dedicated for training across the child and family services sector will deliver benefits for more targeted and consistent workforce development.

Key working group action areas:

- Create alignment across the NSW tertiary, vocational, government and private training providers for the child and family sector.
- Establish a NSW Child & Family Workforce Framework for necessary professional skills and competencies.
- Develop a tiered and integrated training model.
- Improve consistency and clarity in how different courses of study and professional experience are compared.
- Facilitate enhanced alignment between job requirements and recommended courses.
- Develop accredited training entry pathways into the child and family sector.
- Encourage consistency in post-qualification and on-the-job training.
- Promote pathways for career progression and opportunities for post-graduate qualification.
- Implement strategies to ensure staff have the capacity to attend and meaningfully engage in training, such as employing relief staff and reducing workloads.
- Pursue consistency across job titles, descriptions, and responsibilities to simplify pathways for emerging professionals.

Evidence-informed skills /training delivery methods

- 1. Delivery format:** Incorporating on-the-job practice or implementation of training is critical to effective transfer of training material. This is best achieved by incorporating specific plans to implement training content on the job when developing a training schedule or curricula.⁸ Generally, providing practitioners with an opportunity to perform and practice new tasks on the job and encouraging peer support and feedback when using new skills can enhance transfer of training.⁹
- 2. Training method:** A meta-analysis of effective training programs in organisational contexts found that the training method used is associated with the overall efficacy of the training program.¹⁰ In the child welfare workforce context, behavioural training programs that provide practitioners with education in core practice skills needed for effective practice have been found to produce significant knowledge gains, skills and confidence.¹¹ Both group and individual training of skills have been found to work for child welfare workers; however, group training has been shown to be more effective in facilitating transfer of skills to the workplace.¹²
- 3. Training content:** Research has shown that familiarity with training content prior to training is key. The more participants know about the training event, and the learning goals, the more likely the transfer of knowledge will occur.¹³ The opportunity to perform the learned skills on-the-job has a major impact on the transfer of knowledge and training effectiveness. The perceived usefulness of training content is also more important than whether the training is enjoyed by the trainee.¹⁴ This suggests that training should incorporate applied examples to demonstrate how skills can be used on the job to enhance relevance.¹⁵ Similarly, when workers participate in the development of the curriculum, content is perceived as more relevant,¹⁶ so involving practitioners in curricula and training development is recommended.
- 4. Action plans and reinforcements:** Training that incorporates self-evaluation components as well as ongoing reinforcement and evaluation have been shown to be effective.¹⁷ More generally, in a study of four reputable child welfare training programs, the following core components were identified: curricula addressing both knowledge and skills for workers; didactic learning supplemented with experiential activities; and integration of application, with workers being asked to try new material in the field and return to the classroom environment to discuss.¹⁸
- 5. Organisational learning culture and leadership supports:** Engaging agency leaders in training and ongoing professional development is critical to successful training and skills development. Research has shown that agency leaders play an important role in developing capabilities for using evidence-informed training via proactive planning, investment in support structures and maintaining relationships critical for effective implementation.¹⁹ Moreover, group supervision activities can help foster a positive learning culture.²⁰

There is poor alignment between jobs and recommended educational courses. More consistency in position titling, entry qualifications and additional support and pathways provided for job specific training is recommended.

Creating consistency across job titles, descriptions and responsibilities will simplify pathways for emerging professionals and help organisations to reliably recruit professionals with the necessary qualifications, skills, and experience to carry out their role effectively.

Common approach and shared values

Embedding learning into practice, providing pathways for career progression, and offering ongoing support for professional development offers many benefits for the sector, including increased job satisfaction and staff retention.

Structural issues need to be addressed before a workforce skills training solution can be developed. Currently, there are inconsistent service models across the sector and service delivery is very broad. Job descriptions, competencies and entry level qualifications also vary, even when the same model of service exists. Government and non-government approaches to workforce recruitment, development and retention are also different. Ideally, these approaches should be aligned, to empower and support professionals, organisations, and government to maintain practice standards, professional skills and competencies in the provision of child protection work.

The UK based Association of Directors of Children Services (ADCS) noted that while different government departments have responsibility for the delivery of aspects of children's policy, across a range of sectors, a common approach, based on shared values should be sought across the workforce. They recommended the use of restorative, relationship-based practices that help families find their own solutions. A coherent training strategy and consistent qualifications were seen as the first step in achieving this goal. ADCS also recommends the use of workplace-based apprenticeships be introduced to build an adaptable workforce.²¹

An effective framework should draw on existing best practice in the sector, such as the:

- **DCJ NSW Practice Framework,²⁴ which includes the principles, values, mandates, approaches and systems that underpin DCJ work.**
- **DCJ Caseworker Development Program (CDP)²⁵ which, while it is implemented to build professional skills and competencies, is not currently available to the NSW non-governmental sector.**
- **PSP priority practice areas.**

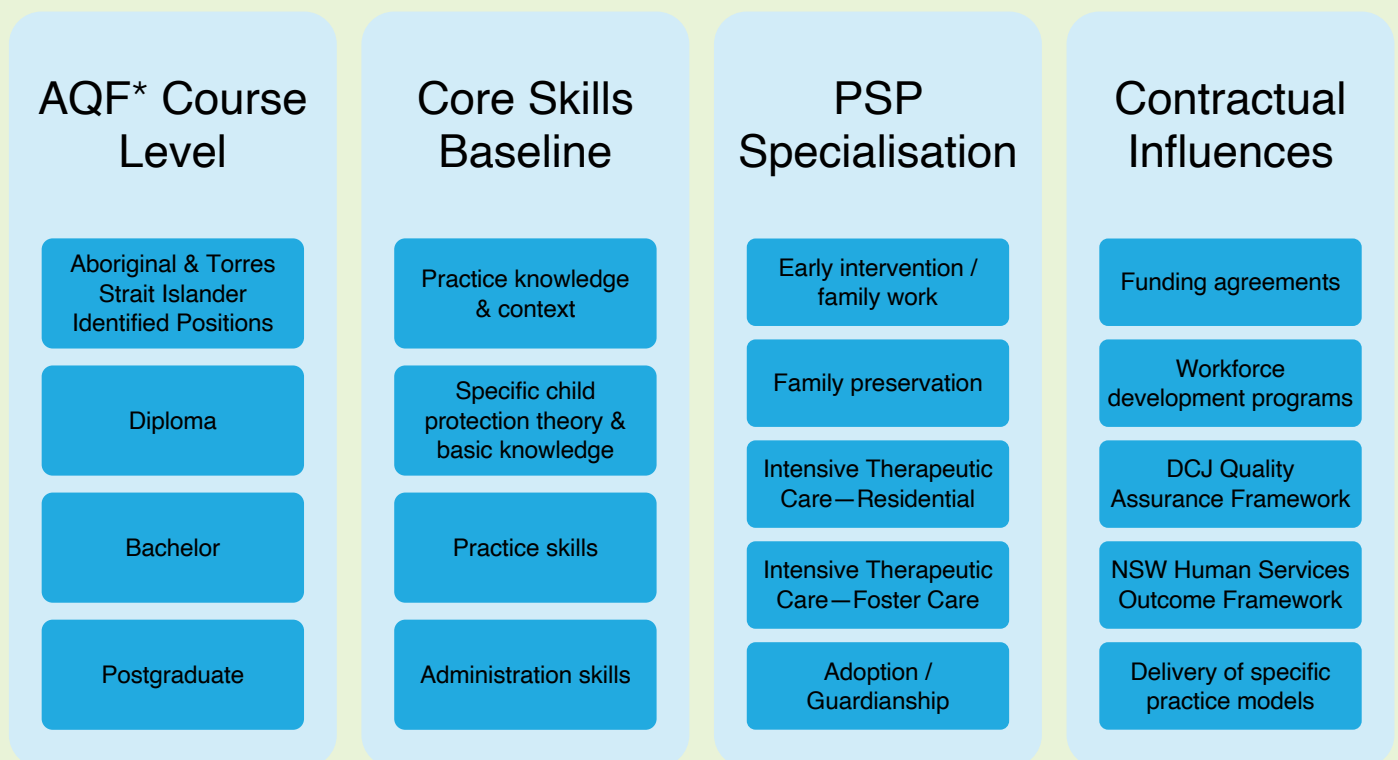
A recent systemic review of evidence for approaches to broader family support work found that attitudes held by practitioners towards their work, or their clients, were an important determinant of service user satisfaction and positive outcomes. Having strong planning and decision-making skills and to the ability to be flexible in one’s practice—knowing how to tailor services for different families’ needs—were also found to be important. The review identified the ability to communicate effectively and respectfully with families and to empower families to assist themselves as a key capability.²²

The Victorian *Child protection workforce strategy 2021-2024*²³ identifies the importance of shared values to underpin a ‘pathways to support’ model for children and families. The strategy recognises that more needs to be done to improve the diversity of the workforce, by addressing the systemic barriers to people from Aboriginal and multicultural backgrounds.

Consistency in post-qualifying and on-the-job training and support

DCJ currently provides two differing approaches to post-qualifying and on-the-job training and support for their staff. The *Change Together* model emphasises on the job training, coaching, integration, and evaluation, while the *PSP Model* focuses on self-paced learning, features no competency assessments, and is utilised inconsistently across the sector—such as when built into induction and orientation, listed as a requirement in performance reviews, and linked to supervision.

Recommendation: Develop a tiered and integrated training model



*AQF is the Australian Qualification Framework, for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training

Working Group

Lead:

- ACWA / AbSec

Working Group Members:

- DCJ
- AbSec
- Peak
- NGOs

Work-integrated learning enables students to apply knowledge they gain in the classroom to practical settings, thereby growing industry-relevant experience and giving employers access to highly skilled, career-ready graduates.²⁷

Pathways for post-graduate qualification

- Tertiary AQF 8-9 qualifications (which offers higher-level thinking, critical reflection and analysis, and specialisation in Child Protection)
- Specialist short courses in relevant topics such as trauma-informed practice, such as those offered by the Australian Childhood Foundation
- National Micro-Credentialing Framework
- Extending or aligning the public and private sectors along the DCJ Caseworker Development Program (CDP) Framework.

Entry pathways for child protection

Tertiary child protection workforces within statutory agencies are predominantly degree qualified. Currently in NSW the preferred degrees are Human Services, Social Work and Psychology.²⁶

Some courses are currently better aligned to the child and family sector; for example, the Bachelor of Human Services with a Child, Youth and Family Practice specialisation. This specifically designed degree suits practice and identified competencies across the PSP program areas—with a placement framework that allows on the job integration of learning with practice. Following the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Australian Psychology Accreditation Council's (APAC) lead, this course could be accredited as a possible standard level qualification into the child welfare sector.

Social work courses could better align with industry requirements if courses provided additional child and family specialised subjects. Currently, DCJ's induction model provides for on-the-job training, coaching and support over a 17-week period. Consideration needs to be given as to whether industry specific content (like that provided by DCJ) could be included in social work programs. This requires further exploration, including the potential of microcredentials.

Attention must be paid to best practice in how field placements are organised. Accredited social work degrees (BSW-Qualifying and MSW-Qualifying) require 1,000 hours of field placement inclusive of integrated field education. It is important for the sector to consider innovative and flexible fieldwork options; paid placements; the total hours of placement required by professions such as social work (AASW), psychology (APAC), and human services (Australian Community Workers Association); and the need to address field education barriers, such as those faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The *Accord Discussion Paper* identifies that opportunities to expand the scale of work-integrated learning placements may be hampered by the availability of guaranteed placements for enrolled students. This limitation can be a particularly problematic for students from regional, rural, and remote areas.²⁸

Australian Qualifications Framework

An audit of current education offerings available to the child and family workforce across tertiary, vocational, government and private training providers found 25 unique and relevant courses (59 total). The focus was courses directly relevant to child protection practice or containing relevant content.

Additional scoping uncovered four prominent post-qualification, role-specific training resources:

- Department of Communities and Justice *Permanency Support Program (PSP) Learning Hub*.
- Department of Communities and Justice *Change Together*.
- Department of Communities and Justice *NGO Learning Centre*.
- Australian Childhood Foundation training including graduate certificates.

Information on suitable courses for the child and family workforce are presented in more detail in the *Workforce Skill Strategy White Paper* (Appendix 1).

Microcredentials

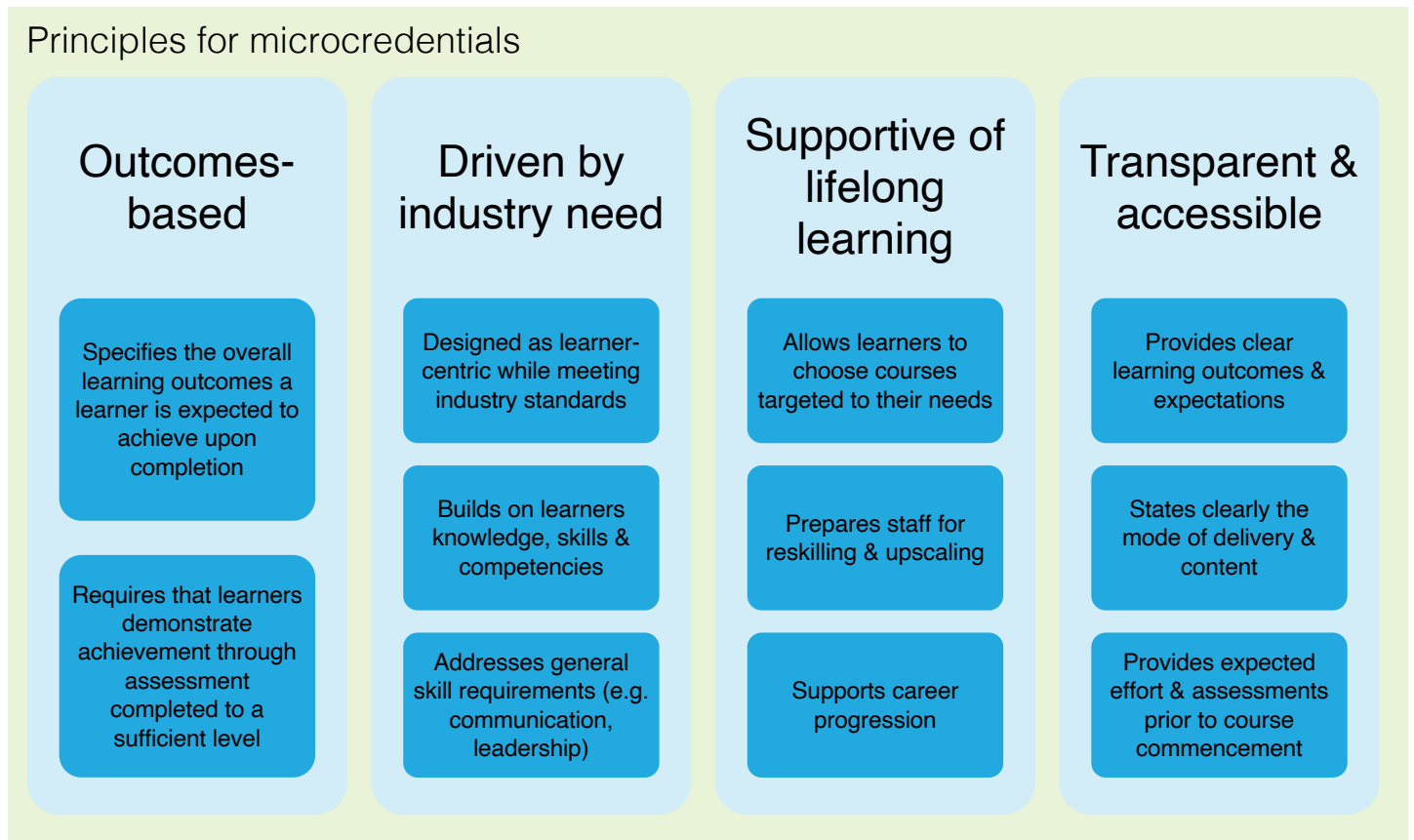
Microcredentials have been introduced into the Australian educational landscape to broaden the range of formats used to deliver postgraduate education addressing the changing educational needs and expectations of industries and communities. They bridge the gap between non-formal short professional development courses and formal award courses including Masters degrees.

Rapid advancements in technology, along with the transformation to online learning and practice as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, has elevated the potential for microcredentials for upskilling workforces. A review by the Australian Department of Education found that more consideration should be given to the use of short-form credentials, such as microcredentials, to provide more flexible training options to industry. However, one of the challenges for microcredentials is the lack of a consistent understanding and standard for their purpose across tertiary and vocation education, and industry.²⁹

Designed to:

- Satisfy professional learning requirements, an industry need or industry standards
- Enable entry into a recognised qualification or certification
- Provide credit towards a recognised qualification listed on the Australian Qualifications Framework.

Principles for microcredentials



Graduate Programs

Another strategy for attracting new recruits is through graduate employment programs. For example, the Victorian Public Service Commission and the NSW Government offer graduate programs. These programs offer paid on-the-job placements for 12-18 months, with the potential for a permanent role on the completion of the program. Applicants have to be enrolled in an eligible graduate degree, which includes social work, legal, and psychology studies.

The NSW graduate program operates in regional and metropolitan centres. NSW offers a targeted stream for social work students, providing experience in child protection work across systems, policies, and practice, as a pathway to becoming a caseworker.³⁰

Developing and investing in graduate programs offered by NGOs could assist with attracting desirable graduates. During workforce consultations, some participants expressed interest in establishing graduate programs. Others discussed how their agency was already in the process of doing so as a way of competing with government graduate programs.

“Next year we will run our first new grad program ever ... what I like about it is you get experience in two different teams ... the interest was really high in that and we just kind of wanted to beat DCJ at their own game a bit because they were poaching all the good graduates.”
Child & Family Services Manager, Sector focus group.

Workplace internships

Victoria is the only state that offers paid, multi-year internships for Aboriginal students interested in a career in child protection-related fields. The Aboriginal Graduate Program is being implemented as one of the strategies for achieving the target of increased Aboriginal employment to 3-4 per cent of the workforce by 2026.³¹

The Victorian Government has partnered with the national *Career Trackers* program to offer 12-week paid internships from year 12 and throughout each year of a degree for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.³² The program provides mentoring and additional support for leadership and professional development. Organisations who participate in the *Career Trackers* program are expected to provide interns with:

- an on-the job 'buddy'
- meaningful projects for each 12-week placement
- workplace goals and objectives with the internship
- a performance evaluation at the end of the 12-week placement
- support to attend *Career Tracker* training and leadership workshops.

Organisations are also expected to maintain engagement with their interns between placements. The aim of the program is to convert the internship into full-time employment upon the completion of the university degree. As well as employment opportunities, the program seeks to support Indigenous students to be successful in their university studies and in their transition to professional roles.

Victorian Youth Employment Scheme (YES) Trainee Program

The YES Trainee program in Victoria offers 12-month positions for young people, aged between 15 to 24 years, in a range of government departments. The positions offer structured training, on-the-job training, and mentorship for participants to obtain certificate level III or IV qualifications.³⁴ The scheme is designed to provide entry level qualifications for unemployed or underemployed young people not currently undertaking tertiary education.

Priority is given to young people who left school, or are at risk of leaving school, before completing year 12. Young people from disadvantaged, Aboriginal or culturally diverse backgrounds are also recruited into the program.

Aboriginal internships

*The Victorian Child Protection Workforce Strategy 2021-2024*³³ identifies the importance of shared values to underpin a 'pathways to support' model for children and families. The strategy recognises that more needs to be done to improve the diversity of the workforce, by addressing the systemic barriers to people from Aboriginal and multicultural backgrounds.

Strategies include offering paid, multi-year internships for Aboriginal students interested in a career in child protection and partnerships with tertiary providers to provide contemporary professional development.

For more information

Research Centre for Children and Families

e rccf.research@sydney.edu.au

w <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html>



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