

# REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND EMPLOYABILITY

## The contribution of becoming reflective on the employability of teachers and social workers

Employability is regarded as a key outcome of higher education. Given the importance of reflective capacities in the professional workplace, their development is now a focus of many tertiary courses. This inter-disciplinary project built upon earlier OLT projects on reflection, employability and work-integrated learning to investigate how the reflective capacities of social work and education graduates impact their employability and how the learning of reflection can be integrated across the professional pre-service curricula, in professional and field-experience settings and in the workplace.

### The Reflective Practice and Employability project (completed in 2018) produced the following outputs:

- a critical literature review that informed interviews, the research intervention and ongoing research publications
- individual and focus group interviews with 32 key stakeholders
- development and analysis of a curriculum intervention that was undertaken by 101 student participants across partner institutions
- interviews with student participants as part of the evaluation process to discuss efficacy of the curriculum intervention
- development of a stand-alone online learning environment (OLE) module on reflective practice trialled in 2018 at The University of Sydney that was open to all students
- development of an open-source website for use by academics, students, stakeholders, employers and others on reflective practice: <https://reflectionemployability.net/>
- international Social Work Conference presentations in Seoul 2016 and Dublin 2018
- workshop on project results presented at AARE Conference in Sydney 2018
- symposium to launch website undertaken in 2019
- publications, including book, in progress.

## Stage 1 Findings:

Interviews showed the value placed on reflective capacities in employment although there were differences in how the professions framed and discussed them. Thus indicating the value to students of developing an understanding of and applying different reflective practice frameworks.

Critical reflection is a key criterion of the Australian Association of Social Work Practice Standards. It is an expectation of professional practice and to critically analyse structures and power relations.

This is less so in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers although reference to critical thinking was relevant. Other documents focused on individual reflection to improve teaching practice and professional development.

Stage 1: audit on reflective practice (2016–17)

- Updated literature review.
- Interviews with key stakeholders.
- Document analysis of relevant national standards & employment criteria.

Stage 2: research intervention (2017–18)

- Design of the intervention informed by the analysis of data collected in Stage 1.
- Revision of the learning resources.

Stage 3: development of online and multi-media resources (2017–18)

- Publication and launch of revised learning resources via the research project's website.

## Stage 3 Findings:

Publication of online multi-media resources and dissemination of the findings of the project continue and include: • presentations at international social work conferences in 2016 and 2018 • workshop held on the research and findings at the Australian Association for Education Research National Conference in December 2018 • a public symposium to share the findings more broadly with tertiary educators as well as relevant stakeholders in 2019.

The online modules and insights gained from interviews with participants have influenced the development of an undergraduate 2 credit point unit which can be taken as a stand-alone unit or embedded into an existing course. The analysis of Stage 2 is being used to inform the final version of the open access online resource.

## Stage 2 Findings:

The original intention was to embed the learning materials into existing courses. This proved difficult due to several factors, including ethics approval. An intervention was designed which consisted of four multi-modal online learning modules and pre- and post-testing of professional vignettes by students. Student participant responses were analysed using a coding framework.

Participants interviewed regarded the modules as valuable and many commented that the material should be a formal part of their mandated studies rather than an extra-curricular activity.

The development of the modules and the insights from the interviews informed the development of an online undergraduate unit at The University of Sydney. Partner universities are also investigating integrating the modules into existing courses.

## Overall Implications of Project:

The research found that: • Employers of social work and education graduates value evidence of reflective capabilities when selecting suitable job candidates. • Pre-service teachers and social workers found learning explicitly about reflective practice very helpful and suggested it needed to be a mandatory component of their studies. • An understanding of reflective practice and associated frameworks can assist pre-service students in their field experiences. • Blended learning experiences about reflective practice could be most effective. • Explicit mention of reflection in professional standards is important in ensuring it is addressed comprehensively in pre-service courses. • Reflective practice is essential for inter-disciplinary work • Reflective practice can be useful to all students and contribute to greater awareness of the employability agenda e.g. graduate qualities or attributes.



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