



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Education**

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

**Final Report 2019**

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**Partner institutions:**

Charles Sturt University, Deakin University, Queensland University of Technology and The University of Wollongong

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<https://reflectionsemployability.net/>

Support for the production of this report has been provided by the Australian Government Department of Education. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Department of Education.



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2019

ISBN 978-1-76051-773-1 [PRINT]  
ISBN 978-1-76051-774-8 [PDF]  
ISBN 978-1-76051-775-5 [DOCX]

## List of acronyms used

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadershihp
BOSTES	Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards
EC	Early Career (used in interview transcripts)
ED	Education (used in interview transcripts)
OLE	Online Learning Environment
OLT	Office for Learning and Teaching
SW	Social Work (used in interview transcripts)
WIL	Work Integrated Learning
WPR	What is the Problem Represented to be

## Executive summary

Employability is regarded as a key outcome of higher education. Given the importance of reflective capacities in the professional workplace (Polkinghorne, 2004), their development is now a focus in tertiary courses. This inter-disciplinary project built upon earlier OLT projects and fellowships on reflection, employability and work integrated learning (WIL).

### Project aims

The project aimed to:

- contribute towards rethinking reflective teaching/learning practices across all aspects of the pre-service social work and education curricula
- integrate these with workplace-based needs for professional development
- develop creative learning experiences and resources to enable pre-service teachers and social workers across five universities to develop reflective capacities that had been identified as essential by employers
- investigate how reflective capacities impacted graduates' employability.

### Key stakeholders

The key stakeholders included:

- students in pre-service teacher education and social work programs
- university staff engaged in teaching reflection and/or practice education
- practice educators in schools and human service agencies
- employers from schools and human service organisations who will benefit from employees with stronger reflection skills
- relevant professional associations and accrediting bodies
- the Commonwealth Office for Learning and Teaching

### Project team

The project team also secured agreement from a reference group that included academics, potential employers, and other representatives of organisations active in teacher education and social work education and employment.

### Research aims and rationale

The project investigated:

- how the reflective capacities of social work and education graduates impact their employability

- how the learning of reflection can be integrated across the professional pre-service curricula, in professional and field-experience settings and in the workplace.

In achieving this, the project additionally feeds into the Australian federal government's national agenda for employability of graduates—how does reflection influence the employability of graduating teachers and social workers?

## Overview of the research design

The project proceeded in three stages.

Stage 1. Audit of reflective practice comprised:

- updated review of the literature on the development of reflective capabilities and pre-service social work and teacher education programs
- focus group interviews with key stakeholders and employers in education and social work
- document analysis of published employment criteria and national standards for social work and school education.

Stage 2. Based on the findings of Stage 1, multisite case study research focused on the phenomenon of reflective practice. An online multi-modal learning program that fosters reflective professional practice was designed. A key aim of this was to incorporate academic and practitioner perspectives and to directly address relationships between reflective practice and employment. The program was trialled by voluntary participants drawn from three institutions: the universities of Sydney and Wollongong and the Queensland University of Technology. All participants were final-year education or social work students recruited after approval of a strict set of ethical protocols by the Human Ethics committees of all partner institutions.

Stage 3. Development, refinement and implementation of a suite of online and multimedia resources made available on the website for the research project.

## Overall findings

### Stage 1

During the period July 2016–February 2017, single interviews and focus groups were conducted with 32 key stakeholders. These interviews and focus groups extended our knowledge of the relationship between reflective practice and employability by gaining the subjective but informed responses (Richards & Morse, 2013) of multiple stakeholders. The analysis of key documents revealed that, while critical reflection is a key criterion of the **AASW Practice Standards**, The **Australian Professional Standards for Teachers** include only one reference to reflection: the teaching standards, 'provide a framework by which teachers can judge the success of their learning and assist self-reflection and self-assessment' (p. 3); references to critical thinking were also considered relevant.

## Stage 2

As part of the intervention, six professional vignettes were developed by the academic partners. Each vignette provided details of a relevant critical incident (Fook & Gardner, 2007) followed by a series of questions to prompt participants to respond to that incident. The purpose of administering the vignettes was to gain insights into the respondents' understanding of, and ability to engage in, reflective practice, and to measure whether/how the learning program developed their reflective practice capabilities. The multimodal modules that formed the basis of the intervention included: filmed interviews with academic and professional experts and early-career teachers and social workers, presentations, reflective practice frameworks, annotated examples and readings.

The online modules covered four key areas, successfully integrating the major themes of the research and addressing the project's central focus on the links between reflective practice capabilities and employability, as shown in Table 2. After much discussion between the project team using input from key professional stakeholders, shared operational definitions of key concepts were negotiated and a coding framework developed for analysing the Stage 2 data to ensure a robust approach to reliability and validity.

The sample was self-selected and participation was voluntary and anonymous. As a condition of ethical clearance, the research partners could not directly recruit students for the project. The unit of analysis was the individual participant and a case study was deemed complete when the student had completed the four online modules and a pre- and post-written response to the professional vignette. The pre- and post-program vignettes (two for each area of study) were randomly assigned, and, to minimise the testing effect, the vignettes for the pre- and post-program tasks were different.

A total of 101 students consented to participate in the research and responded to the first professional vignette. From these, there were 36 complete case studies: 19 from education and 17 from social work. While the 36 per cent completion rate was disappointing, it must be acknowledged that the students were facing increasing curriculum demands and work commitments. They were understandably wary of the considerable additional time required to complete four online modules and written responses to two professional vignettes.

## Stage 3

Insurmountable challenges were associated with integrating resources on reflective practice into existing units of study, and so the research design was adapted to create a suite of four online modules that participants would complete outside the mandated units.

This opportunity to develop rich multimodal resources that call on the expertise of academics and practitioners in a systematic and logical way has already proved useful for a much broader potential audience of early-career professionals through the launch of a public website in December 2018, a symposia for stakeholders to be held in February 2019 and the subsequent design of an online learning environment (OLE) on reflection in professional practice piloted at The University of Sydney in 2018.

## Conclusions

There was strong evidence for the successful development and use of four online modules as efficacious and effective teaching/learning resources. Participants confirmed the modules developed deeper awareness and understanding of the major concepts related to reflection in professional practice and the skills that underpin effective use of that practice for both preservice and in-service teachers and social workers.

There was also evidence that the understandings generated from the modules have the potential to be translated into action in both preservice and inservice professional field settings. While there was also strong evidence from employers that the demonstrable capacity for reflective practice is important in the employability of graduates entering both teaching and social work, it was not possible, within the limitations of this project, to gather evidence from graduates seeking employment that demonstrable reflective practice was important in their employment. This is something for further research.

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# Chapter 1: Background

## Rationale

It is a given that employability should be a key outcome of higher education. It is interesting that reflective capacities are now almost universally regarded as important for the professional workplace (Polkinghorne, 2004) and hence should be a focus in tertiary courses. Professional practitioners need to be adaptable in responding to increased complexities and uncertainties in the context of continual change, including the ongoing development of the knowledge and dispositions that inform their professions. Reflective capacities thereby underpin the attainment/development of advanced professional standards to ensure practitioners make a positive difference to children, families, schools, communities and societies.

In higher education settings, it is important to be able to teach people how to reflect on experience in a way that enhances professional practice. Our conception of reflection aligns with the Socratic idea of reflecting to develop a more ethical and compassionate engagement (Nussbaum, 1997). Yet many professional workplaces are not inherently conducive to this kind of reflective practice.

At the same time, reflection has long been regarded as difficult to identify, teach and assess in valid and reliable ways (e.g. Fook et al, 2016; Smith, 1999a and 1999b). Thus, authentically integrating the outcomes of learning to be reflective in ethical and compassionate ways with the skills of employability presents an ongoing challenge for both educators and employers.

This project was deliberately interdisciplinary in aiming to provide resources to enable pre-service teachers and social workers across five universities to develop reflective capacities that had been identified by employers as essential. Originally, to maximise the transferability of the learning, it was also intended that the project would be conducted in three different countries (Australia, England and Scotland). Unfortunately, workplace changes for some of the project team in England and in Scotland meant that the larger international project did not eventuate.

The project developed creative learning experiences and resources that were designed to have the potential to change teaching/learning practices across all aspects of the pre-service curriculum, and to integrate with workplace-based needs for professional development. The development of these experiences and resources was informed by knowledge about the ways in which early-career teachers and social workers, and their potential employers, conceptualise reflection and how it is applied in both theory and practice.

The project also aimed to investigate how reflective capacities impact graduates' employability, and how learning could be integrated across the professional pre-service curricula and the workplace, including in professional and field-experience settings. The project team intended to reach the full range of people engaged in professional development (students, educators, employers and managers), especially those focused on designing and implementing curricula and those with responsibilities for professional practice education, and their counterparts in professional practice.

There were six key stakeholders:

- students in pre-service teacher education and social work programs
- university staff engaged in teaching reflection and/or practice education
- practice educators in schools and human service agencies
- employers from schools and human service organisations who will benefit from employees with stronger reflection skills
- relevant professional associations and accrediting bodies
- the Commonwealth Office for Learning and Teaching.

## Theoretical framework

How reflection is structured and guided depends on how it is theorised and understood. Over the last few decades, many models for practising critical reflection have been developed, some building on learning from experience (Dewey, 1933) as a fundamental framework. Habermas used a critical theory framework to establish three kinds of reflection: technical, practical and emancipatory (Taylor, 2006). Many professional programs use a model of reflective practice based on the work of Donald Schön (1983). It provides a framework for accessing the implicit assumptions embedded in people's practice, to examine them and remake or reframe their own theory of practice in line with ideas or values they choose. Other models are based on Kolb's (1984) framework for experiential learning. In adult education, Brookfield's (1995) work on critical reflection, based on a critical theory framework, is probably the best known. Hatton and Smith (1993, 1995) developed a teaching framework based on Habermas' critical theory model for pre-service teachers. The underlying principles and learning strategies were then shared with social workers and health practitioners. More recently, Fook and Gardner (2007) have integrated several approaches and concepts (reflective practice, reflexivity, post-structuralism/deconstruction and critical social theory) to develop a model for critical reflection that incorporates several different traditions.

More recently, other western theorists have begun to use age-old concepts of spirituality as theoretical frameworks for reflection (e.g. Gardner, 2013; Hunt, 2016). Such frameworks pay attention to the greater meaning that is made through reflection, and how professionals may reconnect with fundamental values and a sense of what is important to them, both as professionals and in life more generally. This is often associated with people being able to develop a sense of integrity, of being able to find a pathway for aligning their values with their professional actions. This is particularly important for professionals who feel constrained by roles which they feel are not congruent with their original set of professional principles.

All these models incorporate slightly different concepts and frameworks to understand reflection.

In terms of identifying the extent to which reflective practice has been realised, a number of schemas exist. These may include: Habermas' three domains of knowledge (Redmond, 2006), Hatton and Smith's three levels of reflection (1995), Kember's four levels of reflection (2001), and King and Kitchener's (1994) seven levels of pre-reflective and reflective judgement. The project team aimed to devise a schema that integrated each of these, consisting of four types of reflective capacity: a purely descriptive perspective, reasoning from a single perspective (i.e. a

focus on one explanation for a child's behaviour), development of multi-perspectives, and an understanding of a wider political and social-cultural perspective. Each of these will be defined in more detail in the methodology of the project.

This project built on earlier OLT projects and/or fellowships on reflection, employability and work integrated learning (WIL). The projects on reflection involved teaching reflective writing (Ryan & Ryan, 2012), assessing the development of reflective skills in professional experience (Bloomfield et al., 2013) and developing communities of reflective practitioners to enhance effective evidence-based assessment. The fellowships and other projects included employability (Oliver, 2010; Oliver & Whelan, 2011; Beck, 2014,) where key skills and attributes were identified from the perspectives of the key stakeholders (students, employers, professional bodies, government regulators and academics), practice-based learning (Higgins, 2011) and work integrated learning (Billet, 2011; Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014).

In this current project we set out to explore the extent to which reflection is supported in the workplace. An analysis of the criteria for employability and the identification of the manner in which reflection is essential in workplace practice enabled the development of a mapping scaffold. It was hoped that students would be able to map their progress in undertaking the different types of reflection and the degree to which they could demonstrate the achievement of the criteria for employability that identified the need for reflective decision-making.

## **Project team**

The Project Leaders—Professors Fran Waugh (Social Work) and Robyn Ewing (Education)—were responsible for coordinating and overseeing the development of the project and its deliverables in Australia. They were responsible for: the establishment and maintenance of links with professional associations and employers/industry; overseeing the design and conduct of focus groups with employers and stakeholders; overall analysis of the data; their institutional case studies (in education and social work); overseeing the design of web-based materials including the frameworks/models/toolkits/videos; and providing guidance to the project partners as they conducted their case studies. The Project Leaders are also responsible for the content, production and dissemination of the final project deliverables.

The Senior Research Associate—Dr Josephine Fleming—coordinated and managed the day-to-day organisation of the project, including the application to ethics review committees, communication with the project participants at The University of Sydney, and the collating, coding and analysis of data. She edited and produced the audiovisual materials and contributed to the overall design and content of the four online modules. She also liaised with the web designer in the creation of the public resources.

The Project Manager—Belinda Chambers—managed the project's overarching administration and finances, including: devising, monitoring and reconciling the budget; organising and administering contracts; sourcing and engaging external contractors and resources; and maintaining contact and organising meetings with the funding body, university research office, project partners and the reference group. She was also involved in the planning, design and conduct of the focus groups, and contributed to the literature review and report writing and production.

The evaluator—Dr David Smith—was involved with the project from its outset and ensured the implementation of a client-focused evaluation design and process.

The Project Partners—Professor Wendy Bowles (Charles Sturt University), Associate Professor Joanne O’Mara (Deakin University), Associate Professor Christine Morley (Queensland University of Technology), Associate Professor Lisa Kervin and Dr Jessica Mantei (University of Wollongong)—were responsible for overseeing their institutional case studies, as well as for offering both contextual and interdisciplinary perspectives to improve and/or develop frameworks/models/toolkits/videos to enhance reflective pedagogy as a means of integrating learning and contributing to employability. They collaborated on the production and dissemination of the final models/tool kits/video materials. In the next few months they will lead workshops/seminars to disseminate these models at their universities and at other national and international symposia and conferences.

The project team secured agreement from a reference group that included academics, potential employers and other representatives of organisations active in teacher education and social work education and employment. The reference group participated in seminars to examine potential models/frameworks/toolkits/videos and to offer advice on overall project strategy. Furthermore, reference group members provided ongoing advice and guidance on particular aspects of the framework, and on the resources developed, as requested by the project partners.

## Project reference group

<i><b>Member name</b></i>	<i><b>Representation</b></i>
Professor Donna Baines	The Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work, formerly Professor Social Work and Labor Studies, McMaster University, Canada
Dr Jo Barkham	Department of Teacher Development, Bishop Grosseteste University
Deirdre Cheers	Chief Executive Officer, Barnardos Australia
John Healy	Director, Initial Teacher Education and Professional Learning, New South Wales Board of Studies Teaching and Education Standards
Professor Karen Healy	President, Australian Association of Social Workers
Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith	Honorary Professor and expert on reflection in teacher education
Dr Phil Lambert	General Manager, Curriculum, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) , Adjunct Professor the Universities of Sydney & Nanjing Normal, China
Dr Rosalie Pockett	Honorary, Faculty of Education and Social Work, Former Head Social Worker, Westmead Hospital, Sydney
Vicki Pogulis	Principal, Glebe Primary School
Lyn Romeo	Chief Social Worker for Adults, Department of Health, England
Dr Frances Whalan	Teacher Accreditation Consultant, and Honorary Associate in Faculty of Education and Social Work

## Chapter 2: Research design

This section introduces the aims and rationale that informed the project's research design and methodology and outlines our three-stage approach. A key challenge in designing a research project that seeks the participation of diverse stakeholders (in this case, academics, employers, students and early-career practitioners) is to adopt precise operational definitions that ensure the analysis is reliable and that meanings are shared by the research partners. For example, while understandings of concepts such as 'critical reflection' may differ between participants, definitions must be consistently applied throughout analysis. The thinking behind the development of the conceptual frameworks that were used to analyse the Stage 1 and Stage 2 data are explained, as are the ways in which meanings were negotiated between research partners. The selection and recruitment of participants is discussed. Finally, the Stage 2 research intervention is outlined. This took the form of four online learning modules and two critical-incident vignettes, to be completed by participants either side of the learning modules.

### Research aims and rationale

The project aimed to investigate the following:

- how the reflective capacities of social work and education graduates impact their employability
- 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 purpose is to contribute towards rethinking reflective teaching/learning practices across all aspects of the pre-service curriculum and to integrate these with workplace-based needs for professional development.

In achieving this, the project additionally feeds into the federal government's national agenda for employability of graduates—how does reflection influence the employability of graduating teachers and social workers?

### Overview of the research design

The project proceeded in three stages:

#### Stage 1

Stage 1 was an audit of reflective practice comprising:

- updated review of the literature on the development of reflective capabilities and pre-service social work and teacher education programs
- focus group interviews with key stakeholders and employers in education and social work
- document analysis of published employment criteria and national standards for social work and school education.

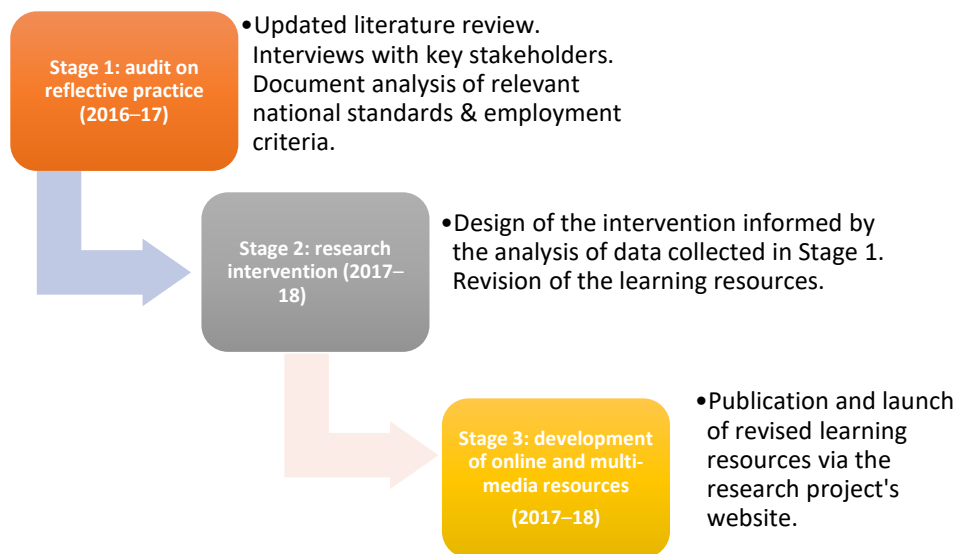
## Stage 2

Knowledge acquired in Stage 1—about the way in which pre-service teachers and social workers, professionals and employers conceptualise reflection, and how it is applied in both theory and practice—was used to develop creative learning resources that were trialled in Stage 2.

Based on the findings of Stage 1, multisite case study research focused on the phenomenon of reflective practice. An online multi-modal learning program that fosters reflective professional practice was designed. A key aim of this program was to incorporate academic and practitioner perspectives and to address directly the relationships between reflective practice and employment. The program was trialled by voluntary participants drawn from three institutions: the Universities of Sydney and Wollongong and the Queensland University of Technology. All participants were final-year education or social work students recruited after approval of a strict set of ethical protocols by the Human Ethics committees all partner institutions.

## Stage 3

Stage 3 comprised the development, refinement and implementation of a suite of online and multimedia resources that were made available on the research project website.



**Figure 1: Overview of the research design**

Each stage of the process is described in detail in the following sections.



## Chapter 3: Stage 1: Audit of reflective practice

Stage 1 of the project consisted of three strands:

- literature review updated
- interviews with key stakeholders
- analysis of documents relating to professional standards and published relevant employment criteria.

### Literature review

The project team reviewed recent research on the development of reflective capabilities of students undertaking professional higher education programs in social work and education and allied areas such as health and medicine, as well research that investigated reflective practice in workplace settings. The literature searches included theoretical and empirical studies and a shared registry of recent research was established and shared via EndNote™ between team members. The review influenced the interview schedule for key stakeholders and informed our decision-making for the Stage 2 intervention.

### The interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed around a descriptive/divergent model (McIntosh & Morse, 2015) to elicit the perspectives of academics (teachers), school principals, organisational directors and managers (employers), field educators, tertiary mentors and teachers, and early-career professionals. The interview questions explored eight themes: key features of reflection, understanding reflection in the workplace, practicing reflection in the workplace, personal reflective practice, enabling reflection in staff, experiences of reflective practice in the workplace, influence of organisational culture on reflective practice and employment criteria relevant to reflective practice (see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule).

The themes were guided by the findings of previous OLT projects exploring WIL (identified in the *Theoretical Framework* section of this report). The aim of this strand was to develop interview themes that would extend our knowledge of the relationship between reflective practice and employability, by gaining the subjective but informed responses (Richards & Morse, 2013) of multiple stakeholders. The semi-structured nature of the schedule also allowed us to compare the data across a number of dimensions, such as role and discipline.

Identifying potential research participants was a key aspect of this research strand, as the findings would guide the development of the learning resources in Stage 2. This required us to be sensitive to the following:

- how key concepts were defined by different stakeholders
- the expectations of employers in relation to the reflective capabilities of employees
- the underpinning theoretical knowledge needed to be reflective
- the needs and experiences of those who have recently entered their field of practice
- how reflective practice is theorised and how it is practiced in the workplace.

To capture the range of potential stakeholders who could benefit from the project's outcomes, we decided to select a small representative sample of respondents from the following populations:

- academics (social work and education)
- early-career teachers and social workers
- field educators (social work)
- teacher mentors (education)
- school principals
- organisational directors and managers (social work).

As per the requirements of The University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee, all participants voluntarily chose to take part in the project, were assigned pseudonyms and were free to withdraw at anytime.

The participants were identified using purposive sampling, a logical decision given the significant professional experience and contacts of the project's chief investigators, Professors Fran Waugh and Robyn Ewing.

## Data collected

During the period July 2016–February 2017, single and small-group interviews were conducted with 32 key stakeholders:

**Table 1: Respondent interviews for Stage 1**

<i>Professional area</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Number interviewed</i>
<b>Social work</b>	CEO/Director	5
	Academic	6
	Early-career social worker	1
	Field Educator	3
<b>Education</b>	School principal	4
	Academic	6
	Early-career teacher	3
	Teacher & tertiary mentor	4
<b>Total interviewees</b>		<b>32</b>

## Analysis

The interview transcripts and field notes were analysed using the qualitative data analysis program NVivo. The coding framework for this strand was based on the eight interview themes. The initial findings were discussed at a two-day symposium organised for the research partners and the project reference group (as outline previously in the *Background* section) in December 2016. A key outcome of the discussion was to revise the Stage 2 research design and to adopt a pre-test, post-test intervention model. The analysis (detailed in the following *Findings* section of this report) was completed in February 2017 and informed the design of the Stage 2 intervention.

## Relevant documents

Key documents, including the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and the Australian Association of Social Worker (AASW) Practice Standards, along with relevant employment criteria from professional organisations, were collected and analysed. The purpose was to develop an information base by identifying:

- the role of reflection and reflective practice in professional standards and employment criteria
- the ways the nature and role of reflective capabilities are translated into practice in workplace settings
- exemplars of actual situations/incidents in which reflective capabilities are embedded as scenarios for potential benchmarking, teaching and assessment.

## Documents analysed

### *Standards*

- *AASW Practice Standards, 2013*
- *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, approved 2012. AITSL (adopted by BOSTES).*

### *Selection criteria*

- *Action Now: Selection of entrants into initial teacher education. AITSL, 2015*
- *Executive and Principal Positions—a guide for addressing the general selection criteria, 2014*
- *NSW Department of Education guide to application writing for classroom teacher positions, 2015*
- *Performance and Development Framework for Principals, Executives and Teachers in NSW public schools, 2015.*

## Analysis

Textual analysis was undertaken in NVivo guided by Bacchi's (2009) 'What is the problem represented to be' (WPR) approach to examine how reflection and reflective practice is represented in the collected documents. While these were not policy documents as such, they can be read as containing 'implicit problem representations' (Bletsas & Beasley, 2012, p. 22) and the WPR approach encourages a critical appraisal of how language is used. As well as analysis of whole text, stemmed searches were undertaken to contextualise how key terms and concepts related to reflection were used. New terms were added to the searches as links were found between concepts, such as reflective thinking and critical thinking. This was particularly useful when comparing the *AASW Practice Standards* and the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*.

The findings for Stage 1 interviews and document analysis are presented in the next section.

## Findings Stage 1 audit of reflective practice

### 1. The interviews and focus groups

#### *Key features*

Interview schedule: What are the key features of reflection?

#### *Social work*

The features emphasised by social work respondents overall drew on theoretical/conceptual ideas. Respondents in all roles frequently identified *critical reflection* as a means to deconstruct systems in relation to socio-cultural and social justice issues and as a tool to question the reflector's own assumptions, values and background. This was most marked in the responses of the interviewed CEO/directors. An example follows:

*It's much broader than just how I feel; that's just telling you how I feel today, this is not personal psychotherapy at all, it's absolutely about the use of self in what you bring to create social change, bigger changes than just one-on-one. (SW CEO/director)*

The terms used to describe dispositions of reflection include curiosity, mindfulness and openness (to exploring incidents from multiple perspectives). Examples are:

*I think it's the ability to reconsider a dynamic that's happened that you may have been involved in as a worker that you're looking to consider again, perhaps from a number of different vantage points, what that process was, what decisions were made, what people's roles were in that perhaps decision-making or encounter. (SW CEO/director)*

*... I look at perhaps an intervention that I might have had or an interaction and I then think about what happened in that interaction, what I was doing and what I brought to it, some of the thoughts that I might have had that made me act in the way I did. (SW field educator)*

*That's where that curiosity comes from, it's that what's happening here and then trying to make sense of the what's happening, is what engagement is about and from a critical perspective what's happening here, what's the politic in this with what's happening here in terms of the power of relationships... (SW academic)*

While improved practice of the individual was often articulated as the intent of *being reflective*, the focus was usually on the connectedness of self to societal constructs and systems. That is, the individual can improve practice by examining their actions within a wider context than just the self. Examples are as follows:

*...really encouraging the student to think through the situation or the incident or whatever's happened and use the learnings of the degree or of the course and the various theoretical underpinnings of social work to think about how that's impacted on the student's practice, how that's informed – you know, what's happened in that particular situation, what they might do differently next time. (SW field educator)*

*Yes, so it's a social aspect. It's not just a private one. I mean, it's often private but it comes from—Like, the knowledge is socially constructed, the values are socially*

*constructed. Our interactions that we're probably evaluating are completely social, and reflexivity is this opportunity to put something together in a string of thoughts, you know. You can feel discontent with a situation or frustrated, or like that went really well but unless you examine it, critically reflect on it, it's hard to even repeat or to avoid it.*  
(SW academic)

*I think that there is a distinction between reflection and analysis and mindfulness and being thoughtful and observant, and that's the capacity of reflection to examine oneself in the environment and in the interaction. And you become aware of your own thoughtfulness and your own thinking, so you become aware of your, what is it, metacognition, how you're thinking, and the values that you're bringing, the beliefs and the experiences that are influencing how you are perceiving and judging and making decisions.* (SW CEO/director)

Distinctions were made between different types and levels of reflection, such as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. There was some concern raised by academics that students can conflate critical reflection and criticism and this may not serve them well in field placements. A comment made by a social work academic is revealing:

*...sometimes our students get mixed up what critical means and critical doesn't mean necessarily being negative all the time or having to find the negativity or seeing the glass half empty...* (SW academic, Speaker 2)

This had the potential to be problematic during field placements, when social work students applied critical reflection to incidents and this had a negative response from the assigned field educators.

#### *Education*

The key features discussed by education respondents were often framed in terms of improving practice to achieve better student outcomes with less use of conceptual terminology. Compared with the social work interviewees, more emphasis was placed on self-analysis of the individual, rather than the connectedness of the individual to a larger system. It must be noted that four early-career teachers were interviewed, whereas only one early-career social worker was interviewed. This may, to some extent, explain the greater focus on individual practice.

The early-career teachers and academics largely discussed *reflection-on-action*, described by one respondent as looking back and 'plotting pathways forward'. For these respondents, reflection was a means to critique performance in the classroom—what worked, what did not work, what improvements could be made. Some examples follow:

*Honesty is fundamental to reflection. This includes being honest with both the positive and constructive aspects of the experience. It provides a true and valuable account of the events and this in turn enables you to make the most worthwhile decisions for what next. In this light, honesty is essential for reflection to be of any value whatsoever.*  
(Education, early-career (EC) teacher)

*Our ability to control and manipulate our emotions is related to our ability to become self-aware. In my opinion, this is a huge part of reflection—being able to identify things in ourselves (and others) with a critical mindset.* (Education, EC teacher)

*[Key features] are thinking back on the processes/strategies used and evaluating their success. (Education, EC teacher)*

*What worked? What didn't work? What will I do again? How can I improve for next time? Personally evaluating the level of engagement of the students. (Education, EC teacher)*

*You have to make decisions in the moment and you don't always get it right. You need to reflect on what you've done and how your students have responded and not be afraid to be flexible. (Education, academic)*

Overall, there was more emphasis on the concept of a right perspective rather than on multiple perspectives. However, this was not always the case. One early-career teacher noted that reflection

*allows teachers to understand the situation from numerous perspectives including that of the learner and is closely related to emotional intelligence. (Education, EC teacher)*

Peer reflection was frequently referred to as being a key feature of effective reflection. Through observing others one can not only offer constructive advice but also learn about one's own practice.

The teacher mentor and education academic comments were more nuanced:

*An ability and willingness to think deeply about your own actions, reactions, beliefs a readiness to consider the various perspectives of those involved, including knowledge about the practice gained from research literature or/and others' experiences... (Education, academic)*

The principals' discussion on key features drew extensively on their own experiences, and there was some divergence in views. There was emphasis on both professional and personal reflection. Professional reflection assessed an individual's progress toward meeting formal objectives, such as laid out in the Performance Development Framework (PDF). Personal reflection was informal, although related to practice.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the organisational environment formed part of the discussion on key features by the principals, specifically the need to create a safe environment:

*Participant 1: It's taken me back to the key features of reflection. I think it's got to be authentic.*

*Participant 2: The feedback?*

*Participant 1: And what you share...the honesty and the authenticity...*

*Participant 3: True.*

*Participant 1: And coming from a place ...*

*Participant 3: And truth...I don't like confrontation but one thing I've become good at is giving feedback regardless.*

*Participant 2: Yeah.*

*Participant 1: And if possible it's almost like the Hippocratic oath: 'first do no harm.' And in a way that is constructively said and sensitively communicated.*

*Participant 3: Yes sensitively where people are listening...*

*Participant 1: ... where there is a readiness and doing it so it's not traumatic.*

There was some divergence of opinion on the key features, in particular differentiating between reflection and feedback. One principal came to the conclusion:

*I don't really know what reflection is ... I might have to go back and do a bit of reflecting on reflection. I know that most of the staff actually teach reflection. I know they've got reflection journals and they ask pertinent questions at the end of the day. But I'm going to go back and have a little more ... articulate reflection.*

In summary, SW respondents emphasised *critical* reflection more strongly than did education respondents. SW respondents discussed reflection in more conceptual terms than did ED respondents. ED respondents were more focused on the improvement of individual practice as measured by formal standards and student outcomes. There was little consensus on the key features of reflection.

#### *Reflection and reflective practice in the workplace<sup>1</sup>*

Interview schedule: What do you understand reflection in the workplace to mean? Do you put this into practice in the workplace? How?

##### *Education*

In their discussions on reflection in the workplace, most education respondents distinguished between professional reflection and personal reflection. Professional reflection was formal and was often structured into evaluation and development processes, such as Annual Performance & Development and professional learning. Personal reflection was more informal and unstructured, with little reference to theory or frameworks.

Consistent with the discussion about key features, the predominant focus of both personal and professional reflection in the workplace was on individual practice and improvement, rather than examining the constraints within a system. Examples are:

*So when you're working as a teacher so you're planning and assessing and developing teaching and learning opportunities for your class you have to reflect on your practices, your beliefs, how they're impacting on your students you're working with and your teaching practices. (Ed, academic)*

*By identifying things within yourself, teachers reflect on the way they conduct themselves during a lesson as well as the way in which children respond to the learning activity. Reflection allows teachers to consciously contemplate certain aspects of their teaching by slowing down the moment to look closely at a situation. From this, teachers*

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<sup>1</sup> In most cases *reflection in the workplace* and *practice in the workplace* were conflated in the respondents' answers.

*identify areas of future development while acknowledging the successes of their lessons and the learning outcomes of their students. (Ed, EC teacher)*

The early-career teachers interviewed regarded personal reflection as an opportunity for growth in their practice; one teacher also used personal reflection with her students to 'help' them identify individual strengths and weakness. This practice of monitoring was often described in abstract ways not anchored to reflective practice theory or frameworks:

*I continually reflect on my personal practice, however not always in a formal sense. I am constantly monitoring my teaching practice and adjusting as time goes on. I identify areas that I am strong in, and others in which I need to focus on more. (Ed, EC teacher).*

The school principals placed more emphasis on the value of embedding reflection into existing formal frameworks, such as the PDF to provide structure and guidance. According to one principal, such structures assist in focusing reflection on school goals. While she stated that personal reflection was important, she also noted that there needed to be a balance:

*I don't want somebody who's going to be deeply engrossed in themselves ... I don't want that.*

Another principal stated:

*I've tried in the schools where I've been to link the PDPs to the QTF [Quality Teaching Framework] and you get some messages from Directors that "Oh no we don't want anything that structured". But I think if you're not using something like the quality teaching framework, higher order thinking, high expectations, reflecting on what the children are doing in the lessons and what they're saying and I think for me that's where there's a little bit of a gap. (Ed principal)*

The need to tether reflection to organisational frameworks and goals was reinforced, perhaps surprisingly, in comments from early-career teachers that implied the individual should be subservient to the organisation. In the words of one EC teacher, reflection

*should be linked with the strategic direction of the workplace, and that in turn should reflect the goals and ambitions of individuals as a means of achieving the overall objective of the environment.*

Not all these respondents viewed these connections positively.

The academics interviewed did not necessarily regard these frameworks as providing the best structures for reflection. Rather, links were drawn between organisational frameworks and an overly supervised experience for students in workplace settings (tertiary supervisor, supervising teacher) that disempowered students and discouraged reflection. That is, the direction and guidance emphasised the supervisor's role over the individual's self-awareness and insight gained through reflection. Expanding on this, a tertiary supervisor interviewed said that his authority (strictness) intimidated the students:

*I was disabling students to feel safe to make mistakes and that's not what I was intending at all.*



Other themes/issues raised in the interviews with educators were: the need to provide a safe environment for workplace reflection (covered in *organisational culture*), importance of peer reflection, and time pressures due to overcrowded teaching and administrative pressures. Academics and school principals were also concerned that reflection was not explicitly referred to in the recently released national professional standards for teachers. This is discussed further in the next section.

#### *Social work*

The SW respondents emphasised the vital role of reflective (and critical reflective) practice in the workplace, and field educators and directors gave many examples of how it was implemented in their own workplace on a regular basis, such as clinical meetings and supervision sessions. The field educators spoke of their experiences working in multi-disciplinary environments such as health, and the value of using reflection within structured settings to understand the perspectives of practitioners in different roles and to encourage and challenge other team members.

The field educators also discussed working with students to encourage and to assess their critical reflection capabilities. The discussion suggested that a student's reflections gave the field educator insight into how well she/he understood the dynamics of specific events/incidents—this suggests there is an expectation that students have a working knowledge of reflective practice and, furthermore, this may have a bearing on future employment prospects.

Tensions can arise during field placements when field educators resist attempts made by students to use critical reflection. Perhaps, as intimated by one of the academics interviewed, this problem is caused/compounded by a student's lack of skilled use of (critical) reflection and a tendency to equate critique with being critical (see *key features*).

The SW academics placed emphasis on critical reflection that encompasses more than individual practice. *Agency* is important and critical reflection provides a means to work effectively within flawed systems:

*because they need to stay there and do the work and do the advocacy and I think that all of those things require critical reflection, not just the analysis of what they see and what they experience and how they respond.*

One academic said that she was impressed by observing students on placement who were using frameworks such as anti-oppressive practice 'to bring out critical reflection in practice settings'. Related to this, an environment of trust was necessary 'to feel safe to critically reflect'.

Most SW respondents discussed practice in the workplace rather than the role of reflection in the workplace. The CEOs regarded reflection as allowing for reappraisal of events from different perspectives. Also, while it is separate to personal reflection, the same thinking can be applied to work systems and processes.

The discussion among the CEOs/directors touched on the indistinct lines between analysis and reflection, which had also featured in the school principals' discussion of the key features of

reflection (above). Comparing the micro (self) with the macro and meso systems level, one respondent noted:

*it might be that I'm stretching the definition of "reflection" somewhat, but I think it's the same kind of analysis.*

One notable moment in the academics' discussion was the account by one respondent of her/his personal experience of a resolution process that followed a student accusation. The context (potentially very confronting) was outlined quite dispassionately and the respondent then analysed the relationship between her/him and the person managing the appeal and the skilled advice he/she was given. To some extent this could be seen as a meta-account—critical reflection in action.

The SW CEOs also touched on the relationship between supervision and reflection (which was seen as problematic by some ED academics). One respondent noted:

*there is an element of reflective practice in accountability, and there has to be so, as it needs to be explicit in the form of supervision sessions.*

Social workers are working with vulnerable adults and children, often behind closed doors, so decisions need to be discussed and scrutinised.

In summary, reflection in the workplace for both education and social work respondents included both individual reflection on personal goals and development and reflection on the goals of the organisation—the latter being a more formal and structured reflection process. Like the discussion on key features, the SW respondents did identify different types of reflection—critical reflection, transformational reflection, reflection on action and reflection in action—and often used conceptual terminology in their discussions. The ED respondents placed more emphasis on reflection on action.

### *Enacting personal reflection*

Interview: Do you enact reflection personally? How?

#### *Social work*

The discussion about personal reflection was less specific for SW educators and academics than when they were discussing key features and reflection in the workplace. The importance of reflection was stated, however, the form of the interaction was not clearly outlined and terminology less conceptual. For example:

*I work with four other social workers in the team and so we spend a lot of time being able to, you know, think about what we're bringing to the work. (SW, field educator)*

*So if I'm talking to the students about critical reflection I might ask them to engage in—you know, think about an incident that triggered an emotional response for you and then let's unpack that. I think the same thing happens to me. (SW, academic)*

*... to talk to colleagues and kind of critically reflect and try and get a clearer position. (SW, academic)*

The examples referred to were often informal, such as grabbed conversations in hallways with colleagues. This was seen as a problem by some:

*It would be helpful sometimes to have like, sort of, a reflection your teaching experience, as a group ... both in terms of critically reflecting on your own teaching but for the very purpose of learning and learning from each other, so I think we don't have that so it tends to be the hallway conversations. (SW, academic)*

SW CEOs/directors did describe their own experiences in more conceptual terms. One described reflection as a 'habit of mind' and she scheduled regular reflection sessions with her supervisor and with a professional outside the organisation. She argued that thinking/writing about self limits the individual to his/her own thinking structures. External reflection can challenge cognitive processes.

*When you write your reflective journals and you think about yourself, you're really just limited to your own thinking structures. And I think the most powerful reflection is when you have some else looking into your cognitive processes and your values and your assumptions and challenge you. (SW CEO/director)*

This begs the question—do these organisations offer this to their staff?

#### *Education*

Journaling was important for some as a means to reflect on events and students, and to maintain curiosity. Several academics used this tool at a personal level rather than as a tool for critical reflection referencing scholarship and theory.

Flexibility was regarded as important in relation to reflection and being able to change classroom activities due to reflection on student response/feedback. Acknowledging changes and being transparent with the students about these was also noted, along with the importance of modelling reflective behaviour for students.

During fieldwork it was critical for the pre-service teacher to have opportunities for reflection with the mentor teacher. Reflection was seen as connected to better practice, better teaching.

Several respondents commented that they did not use a formal reflection model.

## 2. Document analysis

A stemmed search for *reflect* was conducted across the documents. On finding links between reflective thinking and critical thinking in the **AASW Practice Standards**, a further stemmed search for *critical* was conducted. These brief notes are based on the results of the search.

While these links were not replicated in the **Australian Professional Standards for Teachers**, in which there was no reference to *reflection* or *reflective thinking*, the references therein to critical thinking were arguably relevant.

#### *Reflection*

- Critical reflection is a key criterion of the **AASW Practice Standards**. The standards emphasise that critical reflection is a necessary capability for professional SWs to deconstruct work events as well as their personal background and values.

- In reference to deconstructing larger systems and structures, such as related to power and disadvantage, the standards also refer to critical analysis.
- The standards foreground the dynamic environment in which SWs operate and critical reflection is essential to interpreting that environment from multiple perspectives.
- Critical reflection is an expectation of professional practice.
- Critical reflection is described in ways that imply a community of practice.
- The **Australian Professional Standards for Teachers** includes only one reference to reflection: the teaching standards ‘provide a framework by which teachers can judge the success of their learning and assist self-reflection and self-assessment’ (p. 3). Reflection is focused on the individual.
- The glossary included in the professional teacher standards does not include terms relating to reflection.
- There is no reference to reflection in **Action Now** AITSL’s guidelines for the selection of entrants into initial education.
- The focus on reflection as self-improvement is a theme in the NSW application guide for graduates. Potential applicants, through the sample applications provided, are encouraged to include references to self-reflection. Neither the process nor the practice of self-reflection is elaborated.
- The document relating to the general selection criteria for executive and principal positions places some emphasis on reflection—primarily in the area of strategy (reflecting on) and inspiring self-reflection in teachers.
- The **Performance and Development Framework** includes self-reflection as a component in the three phase—plan, implement, review—framework. The role of reflective practice is cyclical in the implementation phase to allow for adjustments and refinements. The teacher determines when and how she/he will use self-reflection and, while it is given as one of the measures for reviewing performance, this is tied to self-reflection on professional learning.
- There is no elaboration on the processes or purpose of reflection in the education documents.

#### *Critical thinking/critical reflection*

- Reflection was specified as critical reflection in the **AASW Practice Standards**.
- The references to critical thinking in the **Australian Professional Standards for Teachers** focused on the collaboration with colleagues to ensure effective teaching strategies.
- The two references to ‘critical’ in the selection guidelines for initial teacher education did not relate to critical thinking or reflection.
- The selection criteria for executive and principal positions made two references to critical analysis and in both cases this related to effective strategic decision-making.
- The **Performance and Development Framework** does not include reference to critical reflection or critical thinking.

## **Implication of Stage 1 findings for the Stage 2 intervention**

The project partners met in December 2016 to discuss the development of the case studies (Stage 2). Part of this discussion was to determine how salient findings from Stage 1 could contribute to the design of the Stage 2 learning materials, which are outlined in the next section. It was decided that the views of academics, employers, early-career practitioners and

mentors should be included, and that learners should be guided through the different perspectives in a logical and structured way.

It was agreed that the links between reflective practice capabilities and employability should be a key component in the design, examining the question: how does reflection influence the ability of students to be employed? Thus, the perceptions of employers were regarded as being vital to the content, particularly given the rich material that was collected from the interviews. It was decided that one way to demonstrate the multiple perspectives and to engage students was to develop a suite of short topical videos that capture the views and experiences of a sample as diverse as that represented in the Stage 1 interviews. Because of the nature of the research and the interest it generated, the task of finding people willing to contribute to the videos was straightforward.

The findings also confirmed the value of reflective practice frameworks. It was clear that some early-career graduates, particularly in education, struggled with how to apply reflection in systematic ways that moved beyond judging their own practice. Frameworks are potentially valuable tools, allowing students to recall and transform practice and also to enable students to contextualise their practice within the structures, and often the constraints, of the systems they were working within. It was determined that a number of frameworks should be made available and explained to students, with worked examples to clearly demonstrate the different types of reflective practice and reflective practice writing.

Finally, the findings revealed the need for clarity in the way terminology is used in the materials, while acknowledging that there were often differing perceptions between the professions (education and social work) and stakeholders (academics, employers, employees).

## Chapter 4: Stage 2—Development of the research intervention

### Rationale for redesign

Originally, the learning materials were to be embedded within existing courses that were linked to field experiences and taught by the project partners. This initial intention proved unachievable as a result of several factors, including the ethics approval. These are outlined in the accompanying *Evaluation Report*. It was decided instead to redesign our research approach.

After much fruitful discussion, it was determined that an intervention model would best serve the research aims. The revised research was designed around two professional vignettes in each area (primary education, secondary education, and social work) and four online learning modules to cover key topics in a systematic and logical way. The research participants would respond to the two vignettes, one prior to and one following their participation in the online modules.

We concluded that setting up the materials online would make the content more accessible and consistent across the partner universities, and ultimately make it available for broader dissemination.

Because of these changes, the application to The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee for Stage 2 was resubmitted and a delay in ethics approval resulted in timeline adjustments.

### Design and implementation of the intervention

The chief investigators, senior research associate and research partners collaborated via face-to-face and telephone meetings and through email communication to develop the six professional vignettes and to design the online modules. Each of the vignettes provided details of a relevant critical incident (Fook & Gardner, 2007) followed by a series of questions to prompt participants to respond to the incident. The purpose of administering the vignettes was to gain insights into the respondents' understanding of and ability to engage in reflective practice and to measure whether/how the learning program developed their reflective practice capabilities. The vignettes were to be accessed via SurveyMonkey and would include the collection of some ancillary data—university attended, gender, language spoken at home, area of study and the likelihood that they would seek employment as a social worker or teacher on completion of their studies (see Appendix 2 for examples of two professional vignettes).

A multimodal approach (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014) was used to design the four online modules, which included: filmed interviews with academic and professional experts and early-career teachers and social workers, presentations, reflective practice frameworks, annotated examples, and readings (see Figures 2 and 3). The modules had to be adapted to the different learning management systems used by the partner universities. This presented a number of

challenges and some delays, however the multi-modal nature of the material added flexibility to achieve.

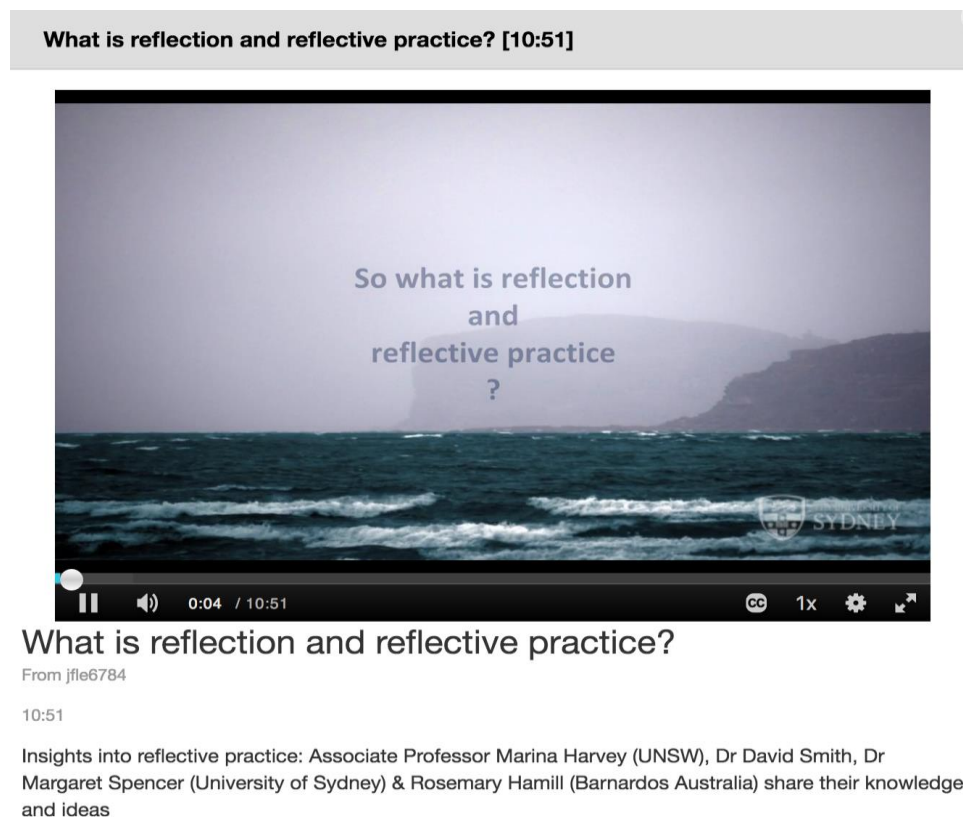


Figure 2: Example from online module—video introducing the concepts of reflection and reflective practice

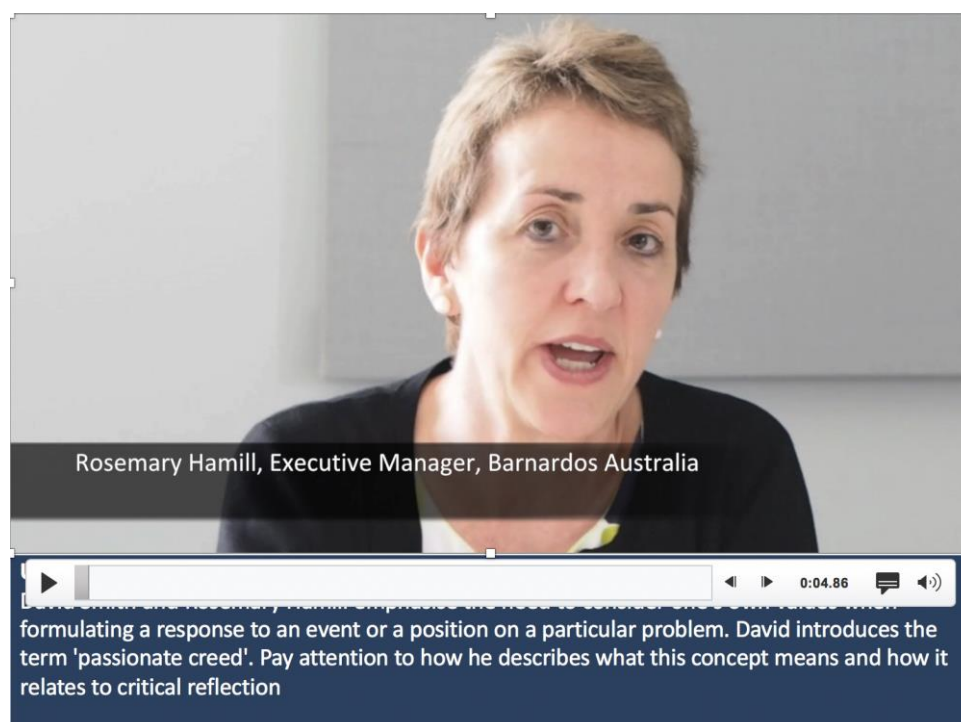


Figure 3: Example from online module—video examining the influence of values and background

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

The online modules covered four key areas, successfully integrating the major themes of the research and addressing the project's central focus on the links between reflective practice capabilities and employability (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Structure of the project's online learning modules**

<i>Module</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Content</i>
<b>1</b>	What is reflection and reflective practice?	The problematic nature of reflection and reflective practice—establishing a shared understanding
<b>2</b>	Why use reflective practice in the workplace?	Rationale(s) of reflective practice and the importance of this in the teaching and social work professions; strategies for incorporating reflective practice into education and social work
<b>3</b>	What are the different types of reflection: characteristics and models?	Walking and talking reflectively, including annotated examples of recount, technical/descriptive reflection, communicative/dialogic/hermeneutic reflection and critical/transformational reflection
<b>4</b>	Reflective practice in the workplace: insights, scenarios and examples	The relationship between reflective practice and the professions; its role in the workplace.

After much discussion between the project team using input from key professional stakeholders, shared operational definitions of key concepts were negotiated and a coding framework developed for analysing the Stage 2 data to ensure a robust approach to reliability and validity.

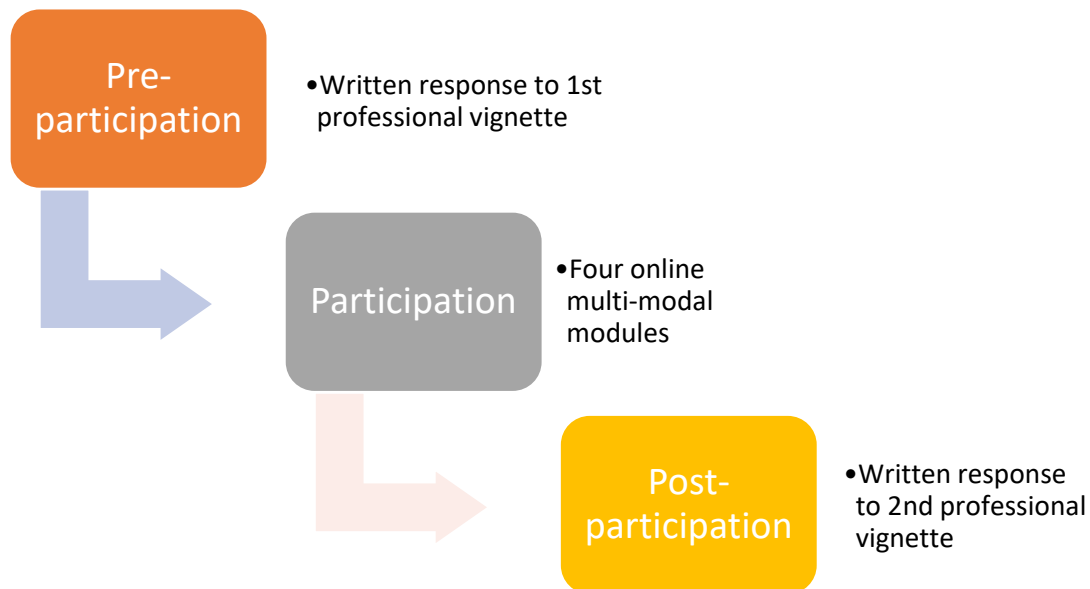
While there were insurmountable challenges associated with integrating resources on reflective practice into existing units of study, these challenges were met by adapting the research design to create a suite of four online modules. This opportunity to develop rich multimodal resources that call on the expertise of academics and practitioners in a systematic and logical way will prove useful for a much broader potential audience of early-career professionals.

## Recruiting participants

The sample was self-selected and participation was voluntary and anonymous. As a condition of ethical clearance, the research partners could not embed the modules in units of studies nor could they directly recruit students for the project. Instead, the relevant program director invited students to participate in the project via email, providing participant information sheets and consent forms. Students therefore opted in to be part of the research. It is clear that this limited the number of participants involved.

The unit of analysis was the individual participant, and a case study was deemed complete when the student had completed the four online modules and a pre- and post- written response to the professional vignette (see Figure 4). The pre- and post- program vignettes (two for each area of study) were randomly assigned and the vignettes for the pre- and post- program tasks were different to minimise the testing effect.





**Figure 4: Stages of the intervention**

A total of 101 students consented to participate in the research and responded to the first professional vignette. From these there were 36 complete case studies at the time of writing this report (as per Table 3), that is each of the participants had:

- responded to the first professional vignette
- participated in four online modules
- responded to a second professional vignette.

**Table 3: Participants taking part in the original and the revised intervention by subject area**

	<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Pre-intervention</i>	<i>Post-intervention</i>
<b>Intervention—Original: developed by research team</b>	Social Work	39	9
	Education	39	19
<b>Intervention—Revised</b>	Social Work	21	8
	Education	2	
<b>Total</b>		101	36

While the 36% completion rate was disappointing, it must be acknowledged that the time required to complete four online modules and written responses to two professional vignettes was challenging. Increasing curriculum demands placed on students, coupled with work commitments, understandably cause them to be wary of additional time commitments. This is even more disappointing given the consistent finding—drawn from the interviews with research participants by project evaluator, Dr David Smith—about the positive contribution participation in the project made to students’ awareness of reflective practice and the strategies they can use to assist their professional learning. In addition, some have also shared anecdotal comments about the project’s contribution to their preparation for employment.

Of note is the success of the research team at the University of Wollongong in adopting an approach the project partners have since termed the *Wollongong Way*. At the request of the recruited students, Associate Professor Lisa Kervin and Dr Jessica Mantei facilitated a time and place for participants to work together through the first three online modules, rather than accessing them individually. This has encouraged the other research partners to adopt a similar approach.

The participants' responses to the vignettes (before and after completion of the modules) were analysed using a coding framework developed by the project partners (see Appendix 3), following extensive discussions, to arrive at consistent and calibrated operational definitions of key concepts that relate to reflection and reflective practice. This framework was used to measure and analyse whether the learning program had a positive influence on the reflective capabilities of the participants.

The project evaluator, Dr David Smith, interviewed a sample of research participants who consented to be interviewed to gain their insights about the online resources and the ways in which their evolving understanding of reflective practice had, or has the potential, to influence their future professional employment and careers. The evaluation interviews with Dr David Smith gave the team valuable insights into the effectiveness of, and the issues with, the online learning modules. Overall, the response to the materials was positive; however, there are aspects that can be usefully revised prior to the publication of the online resources at the end of this project.

As a result of the development of the modules and the insights gained from the interviews with participants, in 2018 an online unit of study was established for undergraduates across all faculties at The University of Sydney. This unit of study drew substantially on the content developed for this research. The research partners are now currently investigating how to further integrate the content of the modules into existing units of study at their respective universities. A consistent comment from the research participants was the need for such material to be included within their mandated formal studies, rather than be extra-curricular.

A screenshot from the online unit of study developed is shown in Figure 5.



## Welcome to Understanding Critical Reflection

Understanding Critical Reflection will introduce you to reflective practices and online resources. You will discover how to connect key learning experiences across your degree, including personal achievements, milestones and abilities, to the six University of Sydney graduate qualities.

Some of the content for this unit was developed as part of a research project, *The Contribution of becoming reflective on the employability of teachers and social workers*, which was funded through the Federal Government's Office for Learning and Teacher and led by Fran Waugh and Robyn Ewing.

If you have signed up for the zero credit point component on this unit (OLEO1132), you will have access to Module 1 including a ten-question quiz. You will not receive any credit towards your degree but you will come away with an understanding of the University of Sydney's six graduate qualities as well as an overview of critical reflection, which you can apply to your learning. This unit should take you a maximum of 10 hours. To successfully complete the zero credit point component you will need to

## So what is reflective practice?



**REFLECTION** has many definitions, depending on the interests, assumptions, beliefs and purposes of different people. In simple terms, however, 'reflection' may be defined as deliberate and focused attempts to make greater meaning and understanding of our experience. We experience hundreds of events, ideas and feelings every day; mostly, we don't stop to take time to think about or talk about these. Reflection is about creating time and opportunity to step back from some of these events, ideas and feelings and to spend time considering them, what we learnt from them and exploring possible alternatives and the consequences of these alternatives.

**WHY REFLECT?** There are at least six interrelated purposes for being a reflective professional and/or practitioner. These can be briefly stated as:

- fidelity to rules, procedures or ends—in other words are we conforming to our own or someone else's specified rules, procedures or ends in our decision-making;
- solving problems;
- developing a deeper understanding of our own practices and what underpins and informs our decision-making, including the impacts of the wider society;
- informing our own individual and/or collective professional practice by understanding competing views and ideas;
- reconstructing, reframing or rethinking our experience towards transforming our professional

## Approaching employment (video)

Dace Elletson (School Principal, Annandale Public School), Raelene Seales (Chief Operating Officer, General Insurance Division, Zurich Australia) and Belinda Walker (Senior Counsel, University of Sydney) discuss what they look for when interviewing job candidates. This relates to the [earlier conversation between Richard Miles and Fran Waugh](#) when Richard emphasised the importance of learning from failure. As our interviewees in this video explain, a candidate's insights into how they learnt through their mistakes can speak volumes.

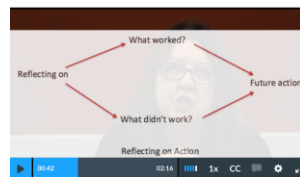


### SUGGESTED ACTIVITY:

1. Watch the video
2. Think about an interview you have attended or might attend in the future
3. Note down a few details about the job to help focus your mind
4. Can you think of a relevant

## Definitions of reflective practice (video)

This video explores the meaning of reflection and reflective practice. Dr. Marina Harvey explains some of the stages of reflection noting that 'true' reflective practice results in some future action. Dr. David Smith touches on the fact that there are many definitions (it is a contested area), however in essence reflective practice is about turning experience into learning, an idea that we will explore further in module 2. Pay attention as Dr. Marg Spencer makes an important distinction between reflection and reflective practice. Rosemary Hamill further develops our understanding of reflective practice by emphasising the importance of exploring what informs the work that we do. This steps us into the terrain of critical reflection, as we will discuss later.



### SUGGESTED ACTIVITY:

1. Watch the video
2. Note down the reasons you think reflective practice is important, think in particular of your experiences at university.

**Figure 5: Pages from The University of Sydney undergraduate unit, *Understanding Critical Reflection*, which was based on the research intervention modules**

The second two-day partners' symposium (in February 2018) and Advisory Group meeting discussed the findings to date. The partners unanimously agreed to a second version of the professional vignette that required participants (using pseudonyms) to construct an original professional scenario on which they would reflect before and after completing the online modules. The format of the modules was not changed to maintain consistency throughout the intervention.

To date, 28 students have constructed their own vignettes prior to accessing the modules, and nine students have responded with a revised vignette after completing the modules. The data collection is ongoing.

## Findings

The findings for Stage 2 are discussed in the *Final Evaluation Report* section of this document.

## Chapter 5: Stage 3—Publication of online multimedia resources and dissemination of the findings

A symposium about the research and its findings has been held for the 2018 national conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education and a book proposal for Macmillan International is in development. A public symposium to share the findings broadly with tertiary educators, as well as relevant stakeholders, is planned for 12 February 2019.

As a result of the development of the online modules and the insights gained from the interviews with participants, an online unit of study was established for undergraduates at The University of Sydney in 2018. Its success ensures it will be offered in 2019 and can be either undertaken as a standalone 2-credit-point unit or embedded in another unit of study. The research partners are currently investigating how to further integrate the content of these modules into existing units of study at their universities

Our completed analysis of the Stage 2 intervention is being used to inform the final version of the online resources (modules) (see Figure 6) which will be launched at the public symposium in February 2019 and made freely available online. An educational website developer has designed the online architectural framework for these resources.

URL: <https://reflectionsemployability.net/>

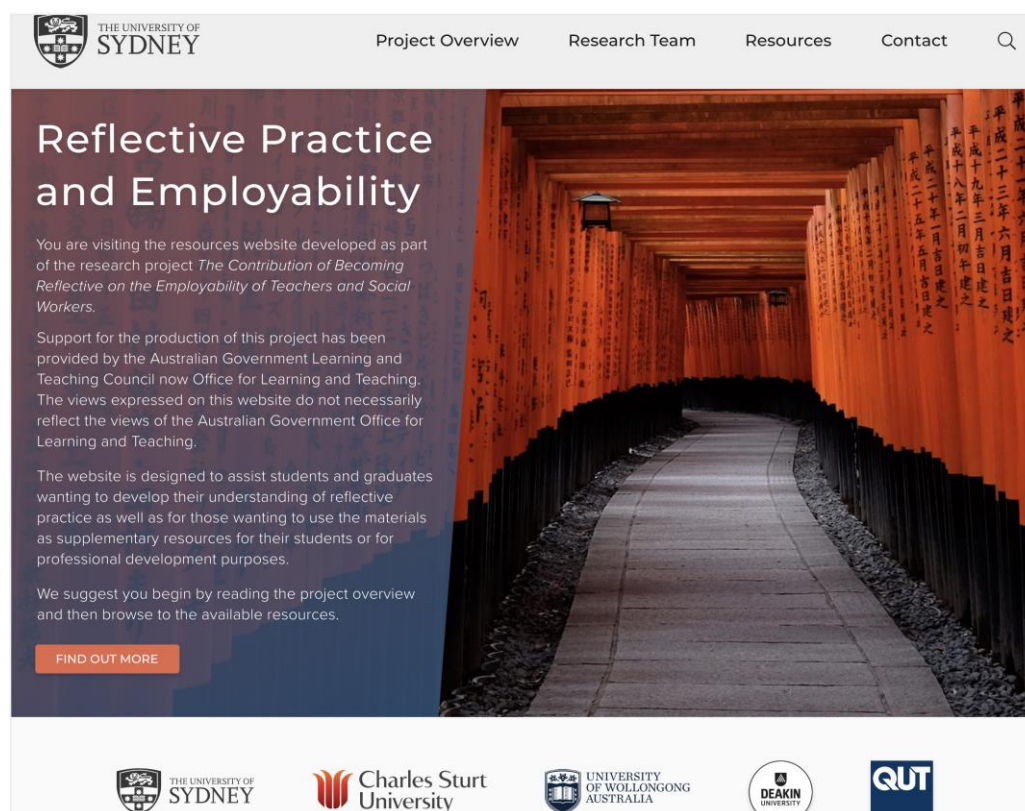


Figure 6: Online resource website for academics, students, early-career professionals and employers

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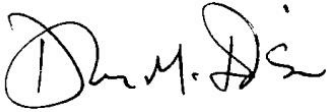
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## Appendix A: Certification

### *Certification by Deputy Vice-Chancellor (or equivalent)*

I certify that all parts of the final report for this OLT grant provide an accurate representation of the implementation, impact and findings of the project, and that the report is of publishable quality.

Name:  Date: 11/1/2019

Professor Duncan Ivison  
Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research  
The University of Sydney

# Appendix B: Final Evaluation Report

## Executive summary

### 1. Overall findings:

- I) Strong evidence for the successful development and use of four on-line modules.
- II) Strong evidence that these are efficacious and effective teaching/learning resources to develop deeper awareness and understanding of the major concepts related to reflection in professional practice and the skills that underpin effective use of that practice for both preservice and in-service teachers and social workers.
- III) Evidence that the understandings generated from the modules have the potential to be translated into action in both preservice and in-service professional field settings.
- IV) Evidence in Stage 1 from interviews with employers of teachers and social workers that the demonstrable capacity for reflective practice is important in the employability of graduates seeking employment. However, it was not possible, within the time limitations of the project, to confirm the accuracy of these statements with students who had sought employment.

### 2. Methodology of the evaluation

- I) The evaluation employed a client-focused methodology in which each decision during the course of the evaluation was negotiated with the CIs and project management team.
- II) This methodology has been shown to be most effective in producing reliable and valid results and is the methodology that has demonstrated the greatest potential to affect decisions to improve the effectiveness of the evaluation as it proceeds. Further, it is the methodology claimed to bring about changes in practice at the conclusion of the evaluation.
- III) All major decisions regarding protocols to be used in the evaluation and the conduct of the evaluation were negotiated with the Project Team.

### 3. Context for the evaluation

- I) Challenges to the project, identified below, resulted in compromises to the evaluation originally planned.
- II) Planned evaluation design elements:
  - Volunteer preservice students taught by project academic partners in academic course units with content and learning outcomes dealing with understanding reflection and the development of professional reflective capacities.



- The four OLT project modules would be completed by each student individually and on-line, if possible, close to a professional field experience.
- Learning from the completion of the modules would be supported in the course units, particularly, the characteristics of oral and written evidence ('reflective genre') to demonstrate reflective professional capacities.
- Volunteer student participants would complete written responses to two vignettes on incidents in their professional discipline, written by the academic partners: one response prior to completing the on-line modules and one after.
- Responses would be coded to identify the frequency of evidence of reflective writing. Positive changes in frequency from pre- to post- responses would provide one form of evidence of the impact and effectiveness of the on-line modules.
- The other source of evaluation data was focus interviews, individual and/or group, with student participants and academic partners.

#### 4. Challenges to, and changes in the evaluation

- I) Ethical clearance prevented academic partners working directly in course units with volunteer student participants. Recruitment of volunteers was by non-Project academics. This resulted in severe difficulties in recruiting sufficient student participants in three project sites and obtaining post-OLT module engagement vignette responses.
- II) Completion of OLT modules became optional rather than an integral component of any formal course unit structure.
- III) Lack of compatibility of on-line platforms across project sites delayed the beginning of the project until second semester, 2017.
- IV) Delays meant completion of OLT modules were not always linked to field experiences.

#### 5. Evaluation information/data gathered

- I) To date 101 student participants have provided written responses to vignettes.
- II) 36/101 have provided both pre- and post-engagement responses, 19 Education and 17 Social Work. There is no second vignette for 67 participants.
- III) The majority of the complete sets are from two sites, one Education and one Social Work.
- IV) Student Interviews – 26 – three Education student focus groups ( $n=17$ ) from one site; three telephone and four email with seven Social Work students from second site; two email responses from Education students in a third site.
- V) Academic Partner Interviews – two Education from focus groups site. All Academic Partners invited to send any comments/suggestions/recommendations prior to the

writing of this report. Two email responses reiterating problems of recruitment in their sites.

## 6. Analysis of information/data

- I) All completed sets of written responses were coded independently by two academics with experience in the literature on reflection, professional reflective practice and particularly, written evidence of reflection/critical reflection.
- II) Responses from all interviews were content analysed and common and uncommon themes identified.

## 7. Findings

### *Written responses to vignettes*

- I) Analysis of the written response sets of the first cohort of students to engage with the OLT modules indicated little evidence of increases in the incidence of reflective writing.
- II) A change in the on-line format for vignette response from four separate question response spaces to a single response space was decided on in the hope that it would produce more extended flowing written responses providing increased incidence of reflective writing.
- III) While the changed format produced longer responses, it did not increase the incidence of reflective writing.
- IV) There was minimal positive change pre- to post-response. These changes were increases from single to multiple reasoning and from technical to hermeneutic reflection.
- V) Any positive changes were, however, balanced by the frequency of no or minimal change.
- VI) Resulting from strong evidence in the initial focus group interviews it was decided to trial, in one site, a third response format, in which students would write responses to their own created vignette based on some professional experience.
- VII) To date, eight completed sets of written responses to student-generated vignettes have been analysed. These have shown significant positive changes in the incidence of reflective writing. However, it is not possible to determine whether the positive increases are the result of the change to responding to a personal professional incident or the fact that the responses were completed close to the completion of other course units and engagement in a research project dealing with professionally reflective practice. Evidence from these were clearly in evidence in the eight post-responses.
- VIII) Currently the analysis of the very limited number of complete sets of written responses does not provide sufficient information to make any conclusions

regarding the potential impact of the OLT modules to produce changes towards greater incidence of reflective writing. This requires further investigation.

### *Interviews*

There is very strong unanimous interview evidence across all interview sites and from interviewees in Education and Social Work that the OLT modules are:

- I) highly effective on-line learning materials – compared to other experienced on-line learning modules continually scored 8–9/10. No criticisms of structure or content.
- II) powerful learning resources that produced deep understandings about reflection and professional reflective practice, complementing, and enhancing understanding from previous resources and teaching about reflection and reflective practice
- III) most powerful when opportunities for face-to-face sharing/discussion of module content with peers is possible.

## 8. Conclusions

- I) Given the difficulties and challenges in many ways this project should be considered more as pilot research to an extended research project. This extended research should:
  - a) aim to gather stronger evidence in relation to the potential for the modules developed to produce positive change in professional reflective thinking and practice by preservice and in-service professionals
  - b) should also gather evidence from graduates as to whether the demonstration of reflective capacities does enhance a graduate's potential for employment, as claimed by employers in the Stage 1 interviews for this project.

The OLT Project, notwithstanding the difficulties described has achieved:

- i) an extensive, comprehensive and up-to-date critical review of literature dealing with reflection and professional reflective practice in Social Work and Education
- ii) a critical analysis of the presence/absence of reference to the importance of demonstrating reflective capacities in national standards dealing with employment and accreditation of teachers and social workers
- iii) interviews with significant persons/agencies at government, institutional and systems levels regarding the importance of being able to demonstrate reflective capacities to gain employment as a teacher or social worker
- iv) the successful design and development of four on-line modules capable of producing powerful learning for both preservice and in-service professionals about reflection and reflective skills and capacities in Education and Social Work
- v) collaboration across four university sites and across two academic professional disciplines to implement successfully a complex research and development project

- vi) continuing collaboration between Project academic partners to work towards a number of national and international presentations related to the Project as well as the publication of a book for which chapter synopses have already been prepared.

## 9. Recommendations

Recommendations arise from both student/Academic Partner interviews and from the analysis of information/data gathered through the evaluation of the project.

- v) That future funding be sought by the project team to enable the continuation of research into the impact of the on-line modules on the written and oral evidence of participants' reflective capacities and evidence from graduates seeking employment of the importance of demonstrating reflective skills in employment applications and interviews.
- vi) That any engagement by students with the OLT modules should:
  - a. be within a defined course structure, where engagement is part of the required course assessment: it should not be an optional extra
  - b. provide for face-to-face interaction and sharing, either in virtual or non-virtual group settings
  - c. occur in conjunction with or as close as possible to a field placement
  - d. require each student to write their own vignette based on some experience during field placement which is then shared, discussed and critiqued by peers, and
  - e. occur so that there is sufficient time between engagement in each module for reflection, deeper understanding, particularly as it relates to professional contexts.
- vii) That any course unit that uses the modules should, after the module that deals with evidence for reflective practice, provide explicit teaching regarding the 'genre' of reflective writing as described in the modules. This teaching should also provide examples of writing and talking that illustrates the different types of reflection and reflective writing.
- viii) That for any research/development project across a number of separated academic sites there should be regular communication between project partners and budget to provide for both regular actual and virtual meetings should be an important element of any research/development application.

## The Report

The project began in late 2016 and was completed in December 2018.

This report begins by outlining a context for the evaluation, the methodology on which the evaluation was based and the sources of information and data to be gathered. It continues by discussing some of the issues that impacted the actual information and data gathered and then presents the results of the evaluation. The report ends with conclusions and suggestions for further research and action.

The overall findings from the evaluation indicated strong evidence for the successful development and use of four on-line modules. There is also strong evidence that these are efficacious and effective teaching/learning resources to develop deeper awareness and understanding of the major concepts related to reflection in professional practice and the skills that underpin effective use of that practice for both preservice and in-service teachers and social workers. Further, there was also evidence that the understandings generated from the modules have the potential to be translated into action in both preservice and in-service professional field settings.

Evidence in Stage 1 of the project from interviews with employers of both teachers and social workers indicated that the demonstrable capacity for reflective practice is important in the employability of graduates entering both teaching and social work. However, it was not possible, within the time limitations of the project, to gather evidence from graduates seeking employment that demonstrable reflective practice was important in their employment. This is something for further research.

### Methodology of the evaluation

The methodology employed in the evaluation is best described as 'client-focused'. This methodology has been shown to be most effective in producing reliable and valid results. More important, it is the evaluation methodology that has demonstrated the greatest potential to affect decisions to improve the effectiveness of the evaluation as it proceeds. Further, it is the evaluation methodology claimed to bring about changes in practice at the conclusion of the evaluation (Patton, 2008). The central feature of this methodology is that each of the major decisions in the implementation of the evaluation is discussed with the clients/commissioners. This optimises the potential for the evaluation to gather timely information that is necessary for the clients to make the best decisions in regard to the aims and purposes of the project and its evaluation.

The evaluation described in this current report employed a 'client-focused' approach for the entire period of the evaluation. Negotiation began with the CIs and the project manager at initial meetings at the end of 2016. This continued in the meetings with project partners and members of the project Advisory Board during 2017 and 2018.

At the December 2016 meetings, draft documents forming the basis of the evaluation, that had been circulated to all partners prior to the meetings, were tabled and discussed. These included, definitions and the nature of and types of reflection in reflective practice. Examples of the vignettes in teaching and social work that were to be used in the evaluation were also negotiated, as were criteria for evidence of reflection in student participants'

responses to the vignettes. In addition, all information gathering strategies and analysis frameworks were also negotiated. As a result of these negotiations a number of amendments to previous elements, some quite significant for the project, were made. At the end of the January meetings a document of agreements reached in regard to all elements of the evaluation, the information gathering and analysis protocols to be employed and a timeline for the evaluation was sent to and confirmed by all partners.

In addition, as a result of the analysis of responses to the vignettes by the first cohort of students to complete the modules, in an attempt to gain stronger evidence, a number of changes were made to the on-line format of the response section of the vignettes..

## Context for the evaluation

Any evaluation and its structure, processes and implementation are largely determined by what is possible within the context and circumstances of the sites in which the evaluation is to take place and information and data gathered. What can be achieved is often a compromise between what was intended and what was possible because of difficulties that arise in the sites. The likelihood of such compromises is much greater when the evaluation is spread across several discrete institutional sites as in this project.

The original project design had cohorts of students being taught with project partners in courses that would have teaching and learning experiences dealing with reflection and reflective practice linked to field experiences. This meant that students being recruited would have some professional relationship with project partners and that while the completion of the modules would be individual and on-line, these experiences would be supported by several teaching sessions related to reflection, reflective practice and the nature of written evidence for reflective professional practice. Thus, there would be some organised course structure in which the experience of completing the modules would be located. It was hoped that this would maximise recruitment of students to the project and maximise the collection of complete sets of written responses by students, one prior to their completion of the modules and one after completion. This pre-/post- organisation of vignette responses provided the opportunity to identify changes in the nature of the student's writing and thus possible increases in their capacity to write reflectively. Any increases would provide some evidence of the positive impact of the experience of the modules on participants' learning. The pre-/post-intervention structure had been used successfully to demonstrate students' successful learning in previous projects.

In addition, this originally proposed organisation linked the experience of learning from the modules to participants' field experiences. This facilitated the possibility of examining the impact of the module learning on actual practice in professional settings: one of the aims of the project. The principles behind this original plan were well validated in previous research (eg, Hatton & Smith, 1993; Smith, 1999a).

It became very clear at the initial meetings of project partners that this original planned project structure was not possible for a number of reasons. The first issue emerged from the conditions of ethical clearance for the project. This disallowed any project partner to be engaged in teaching any student participants in course units that included any elements of the OLT project or OLT modules during the time of the project. Even the possibility of

teaching a cohort of project participant students but having no part in the evaluation of their work was rejected.

Thus, there was a significant loss of control by project partners in their capacity to be able to recruit student volunteers into the project. This meant fundamental changes to the structure of the project. Most important, it meant that project partners had to rely on second-hand support from colleagues for recruitment of student participants and any, if at all, teaching regarding reflection, reflective practice and skills in producing written evidence of reflection: colleagues who had no direct investment in, or commitment to the project. This change resulted in difficulties, sometimes very severe, in recruiting numbers of participant students in some of the project sites. It also presented significant problems in obtaining complete sets of student vignette responses for analysis. Insufficient recruitment meant the delay of the beginning of the implementation of the project in some sites and in others, continuing lack of sufficient recruitment for the entire period of the project.

Difficulties in effective recruitment were probably the most important factor in the project not being able to realise its implementation as intended in the original project design.

It is interesting to note that student participants in all sites where interview information was gathered were unanimous in expressing the view that the modules should be embedded in structured courses as integral teaching/learning resources and not provided as options, as occurred in most of the sites for the current project.

A second issue was the lack of compatibility of some of the on-line platforms that were being used in different university campuses. This led to some delay, until semester 2 of 2017 in beginning the project at two sites. Further, two sites had none or minimal participation by students up till the time this report was completed.

## Evaluation information and data

The original project design included gathering information from two sources, student participants and academic partners. Information from students would consist of written responses to two vignettes related to their specific professional work, either social work or teaching. Examples of the vignettes used have already been referred to in the main project report.

Each student would complete a response to one vignette prior to any engagement with the modules. They would complete a written response to a second different vignette after completing the four on-line modules. The pair of vignettes had been negotiated with academic partners and had been agreed as having the same level of difficulty and providing the same degree of cue information regarding the incidents and characters. These pre- and post-intervention completion sets of responses would then be analysed to establish the incidence of evidence for different types of reflection [technical, hermeneutic, critical] as already described in the main report. One evidence for the impact of the modules on student learning was posited as any increases in the incidences of reflective statements between the pre- and post-intervention responses. The other main intended evidence from students was to be realised through interviews with student participants, either individual or small-group.

Actual evaluation evidence gathered was still the same as that planned and described above. However, because of the challenges and delays already identified, the number of both completed sets of vignette responses and interviews was significantly reduced.

#### *a) Analysis of vignette responses*

There were 101 students who provided responses to vignettes. The very large majority of these, (N= 65), however, at the time of writing this report have only completed a response prior to completing the on-line modules. For some students, this is because they are still completing the modules. If so, it is still possible that the number of completed pre- and post- sets of responses will increase after the close of the current project. In many cases, however, even though students who have completed the modules have been followed up and reminded to complete the post- response, often more than once, they have not done so.

The high degree of non-completion is, quite probably, in large measure due to the fact that the students are not completing the modules within a course structure and are not being taught by the project partners: the non-completion is a product of the add-on optional nature of how the modules had to be delivered. Added to this, was the pressures on students of both part-time work and practicum commitments during the period of the project. The pressure from field placement obligations was increased partly because of the delayed beginning to the project until the second semester.

36 completed vignette responses were available for analysis, 19 from Education and 17 from Social Work preservice students. Further, the large majority of these came from only two of the four sites of the project, one each for each discipline. Thus, the amount of student written evidence available is only small and can only provide minimal evidence of any impact of the learning experience of the modules on producing changes in students' writing towards greater incidence of writing that is reflective in nature.

Analysis of the 36 sets of completed pre- and post-intervention vignette responses was undertaken, however, and evidence of changes towards greater incidence of reflection identified. This analysis was completed by two of the project team independently using the criteria for recognising the different types of reflection, already described in the main report.

The general findings from this analysis showed that for 34 sets of responses there was minimal frequency of increased evidence of reflective writing. This pattern of results changed for the eight most recently analysed response sets. Results from the analysis of these last response sets are discussed further below.

Changes for the first 34 response sets were either increases from single to multiple reasoning about events/interactions or increases from technical to hermeneutic reflection. This minimal positive increase was balanced by equal evidence of negative changes between pre- and post- vignette responses. There was evidence of increased length of writing when the format of the vignette on-line response was changed from a four-separated section response to one providing a single open response space. However, the anticipated increase in the incidence of evidence of reflective writing did not occur. Possible reasons for these results and their implication for the future use of the modules are discussed below.



An issue that emerged from the analysis of responses is that of the most appropriate format of the task that asks students to provide written responses in any program of research investigating the efficacy and effectiveness of strategies to develop reflective capacities. In the current project, there were three variations in the format of the task that requested students to provide written responses.

The first two formats used vignettes that had been written by the project partners. In the first response format, four questions were organised into four response spaces provided on-line, one separate space for each question. Responses by the first students to use this format showed little evidence of any reflective writing. From analysis of responses it was decided to provide just one response space and group the four questions together as indicative rather than demanding specific answers to each. While this format produced longer responses it did not produce any significant increase in the number of incidences of reflective writing. 34 response sets used one of these formats.

The third format arose from information provided in interviews with both students and the partners in one of the research sites. They reported that students engaged in individually writing their own vignette based on their professional experience in schools and then sharing this with other students, was one of the most powerful learning experiences of all. As a result of this comment from both students and the partners, and previous research findings that support such comments (eg, Smith, 1999a) it was decided by the project team that the strategy of getting students to respond to their own vignette would be trialled in at least one of the project sites. At the time of writing there are eight complete sets (both pre- and post-modules) of responses from this site using the third format.

An analysis of these eight response sets indicated quite different results from those of the previous 34 sets. All of these eight postgraduate Social Work students had completed the four OLT modules individually on-line, as intended. However, the teaching/learning context in which the individual on-line completion of the modules occurred was significantly different to any of the previous student participants. Each of these eight students was completing at the same time a Masters level research project. This project was supported by course units specifically dealing with reflection and critically reflective professional practice. A model by Fook was suggested as a useful reflection framework in the research project. Further, it was suggested that it would be useful to use the critical professional incident that was central to the research project, as the subject for the pre- and post-completion responses in the OLT project.

Because of these significant changes to the manner in which the last eight response sets have been completed it is very difficult to draw any useful conclusion from the results. The analysis of these response sets showed some increase in the incidence of reflective writing in the pre-completion of the modules when compared with the other 34 students. Further, there were generally across the eight response sets, increased incidence of reflective writing from pre- to post-completion of the modules. In some cases, this increase took place in the incidence of critically reflective writing.

Given the significant differences in the teaching/learning context, particularly related to reflective practice, and particularly, critically reflective practice, as already detailed above, it is impossible to identify the factors that produced this increased incidence of reflective

writing. Was it the opportunity to use a written vignette based on the student's own personal professional experience that produced the increased evidence of reflective writing? Even more, was it writing about an experience that was identified as a 'critical incident': there was no indication to the partners who wrote the original vignettes that it was to be a 'critical incident'. Maybe, labelling the vignette in this way provides an indication of what sort of writing should be completed. There was also strong evidence in the eight response sets of the use of the Fook model. Again, no model was suggested for use in the previous vignette response formats. Finally, while both pre- and post-completion responses were longer in all eight cases, much of the content of the longer responses read more like a written response to a detached university examination question, often supported by extended reference to academic literature, rather than a personally reflective piece of writing.

With only these eight result sets, and the significant differences in the context of their construction, it is much too early to provide any reasonable discussion about the efficacy or effectiveness of the strategy that asks students to write responses to their own experienced critical incident rather than to a vignette written by someone else. However, it is interesting to speculate about the nature and structure of the task that is most likely to produce powerful reflective writing.

What should also be considered, however, is that even if future evidence emerges that writing, that is in no way supported by the pedagogical context of the eight students referred to above, but that is associated with a personal experience as provided in the third format employed in the OLT project, produces greater incidence of reflection, it is possibly an artefact of the manner in which the task is worded. In the first two formats, students were simply asked to write a response to two different vignettes. In the third format the instruction to students included: 'Revisit your initial account...Reflect on and write about what (if anything) has changed in how you feel, make sense of, think about or might act in relation to the situation now'. Arguably, words such as 'revisit', 'reflect on', 'what (if anything) has changed' could all, not intentionally, suggest to students that there is some expectation that their post-intervention response will be different to their pre- response, particularly when the student is writing this post- response after completing the modules dealing with reflection and reflective practice.

This point is raised not in any criticism of those who drafted the task. All partners in the project came to an agreement about the words after much discussion. This included trying to ensure that the questions of the task did not include words/phrases that demanded reflective writing. However, possibly, when the task involves pre- and post-writing in response to the same task it is hard to construct the task and not use words that even, implicitly, suggest that there should be differences in the writing between the pre- and post-responses. The point is that in any research protocols the wording of tasks must avoid producing results that are an artefact of the words of the protocol task themselves.

There is no doubt from previous research, and evidence gathered in the evaluation of this project from both student participants and academic partners that the strategy of asking students to write and share their own accounts of a critical incident from their professional experience is regarded as a very powerful strategy to produce reflection. However, such a strategy is only likely to produce powerful results if it is embedded in learning experiences

that support this. These might include a course of explicit teaching about reflection and reflective practice, that employs the use of the OLT modules. In addition, one that emphasises the nature of evidence for reflection, particularly written evidence and the 'genre' of reflective writing. Finally, it should include an activity in which students are asked to write about one critical incident that has emerged from their professional experience, preferably one that involved themselves in a recently completed field placement.

Questions related to the most effective research designs to investigate strategies to develop effective reflective practice in preservice professionals and the structure of tasks to investigate the degree to which strategies are effective, cannot be answered from information from the current project. They are questions that await further in-depth investigation.

### *b) Interviews*

Again, because of the challenges to beginning the project as planned and the significant changes to the organisation of project implementation, the number of interviews conducted was considerably reduced. Three focus group interviews were conducted with 17 Education preservice student participants at one site. Seven Social Work postgraduate students from another site completed individual interviews, three by telephone and four by email. Two Education students from a third site provided email responses and responses from two Education students at a third site are still awaited at the time of writing.

A copy of indicative interview questions is included as Appendix 1. The focus-group interviews were audio-recorded. Notes from telephone Interview responses were made during the interview.

While the number of interview respondents was much less than planned, the commonalities of responses from both Education and Social Work interviewees across all interview sites were very strong. Interviewees from both professional disciplines, both undergraduates and postgraduates, were unanimous in their views that all four modules were highly effective on-line learning modules. When asked to compare them with other on-line learning resources they had experienced, the most common response was 8–9/10. There were no criticisms of any of the modules and no significant suggestions regarding improvements to their structure or content.

All interviewees recorded that the modules were powerful learning resources that produced for them deep understanding about reflection and professional reflective practices. Many interviewees, particularly the postgraduate Social Work students, said that they complemented other learning about reflection and some interviewees reported that they were far more powerful and effective than previous learning resources dealing with reflection and reflective practices.

There was strong suggestion that some time was needed between the completion of each module so that the content and ideas of the module could be reflected on, made more sense of and maybe tried in actual contexts. This comment was particularly from those who had completed all the modules in short time frames.

There were two other near unanimous strong recommendations. The first was that the modules should be located within a formal course structure of the particular degree and not an optional extra. Many interviewees suggested that the modules should be a compulsory part of that course structure. The second recommendation was that the engagement with the modules should be as close as possible to a field placement. This recommendation was from interviewees in each site, but was particularly strong from those interviewees who had been able to do this. They reported how the content of the modules had given them new insights and understandings into their own and others' (eg, supervising teachers, parents and university supervisors) planning and actions and informed their practice while on field placement. This latter recommendation of course reflects the original intended structure of the project, an element based on the experience of much of the reported research regarding the most effective ways to develop effective reflective professional practice in preservice students (eg, Smith, 1999b).

Another strong suggestion from those interviewees who had only completed the modules on-line was that the engagement with the modules would have been far more effective if they had been able to share ideas from, and reactions to, the content of the modules as well as their own learning experiences, with others. This suggestion reflects a large amount of research on the efficacy and effectiveness of on-line learning: that any on-line learning should be mixed with opportunities for 'face-to-face' sharing, either on-line or in actual non-virtual sites.

One cohort of Education students in one project site were able to share their experience of the modules in non-virtual face-to-face engagement as a voluntary group meeting outside any organised course-unit structure. These were students in the three focus-group interviews. The strongest positive comments from every member of the three groups related to their opportunity to learn together. This cohort had met together to engage with each of the modules. Their unanimous and strong argument was that the power of their learning from the modules was because of the opportunity to share ideas and reactions, argue from different perspectives and from different viewpoints and engage with each other about the content. They also commented strongly on the importance of the roles of the academics who worked with them in their group learning.

Most of these interviewees had engaged in the shared learning while they were also completing their field placements. A number of them clearly identified the ways in which their learning from the modules changed the way they understood their own and other's practices during their professional school placements. Specifically, they indicated, 'increased awareness and capacities for more tentative approaches to making sense of situations/events/behaviour' and 'multi-causal and multi-perspectival thinking' about reasons for events/interactions/issues.

All interviewees, in both disciplines, reported that they believed that understanding reflection and being skilled in reflective practices would make them a more effective and successful professional. They also reported that they believed that being able to demonstrate evidence of their ability to be a reflective professional would be useful, even necessary, in gaining employment. Unfortunately, however, it was not possible within the timeframe of the project to interview any student who had participated in completing the modules and who was also seeking employment. Thus, it was not possible to test the

validity of this strongly held student belief and the reports from employers interviewed in Stage 1 of the project.

The only evidence for the importance of demonstrating reflective practices for employability from preservice students came from some who were casually employed in jobs related to their professional training. Their evidence was very general and implicit, rather than evidence of the explicit necessity to be reflective in order to be employed. It was more along the lines of an employer saying, 'Tell me about an incident that has taken place and how you dealt with it. Would you deal with it any differently now? If so, how?' This evidence of the implicit importance of reflection in employability, reflects to some degree the comments by the employers interviewed.

### *c) Partner interviews*

Interviews with all project partners was intended and planned for as part of the evaluation. However, because of the changes and challenges already reported, only three partners in two sites had reasonably sized cohorts completing the modules and also providing complete vignette response sets. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with two Education partners from one of these sites. These two academics basically confirmed everything their students had already reported in the focus-group interviews: that the modules were very effective on-line learning modules promoting powerful learning and understanding about reflection and reflective practices that could be applied to professional practice both in the preservice university and field placement contexts. They also both argued very strongly that it was the opportunity to engage the students with the modules in the group setting that produced the most effective and powerful learning.

An invitation to provide any final comments regarding the modules, the implementation of the project or recommendations for changes was extended to all project partners via email prior to this report being finalised. Only one partner from one of the sites that had experienced difficulty engaging in the project provided a response. Her comments reiterated all of the problems with recruitment that have already been identified, lack of direct contact with potential participants, completion of the modules being a non-assessable option rather than a required component of a course unit and the pressures of work and field placement commitments on students.

## Conclusion

In many ways, the difficulties experienced and described in this report reflect the very real current challenges of conducting research with preservice university students. These are difficulties particularly in the Social Sciences and because of the increasing pressures on time experienced by students because of work and other non-university commitments. These challenges are even more severe when student participation is voluntary, any tasks to be completed are non-assessed components and are not integral elements within a formal course unit framework. Partners in every project site have identified similar problems of recruitment.

In some ways, some central aspects of the project have only been able to be realised in what might be considered as a pilot to a much more extensive future program of research. There is no doubt that already-made commitments by the partners to embed the modules

in formal course units will provide opportunities for such further research. In particular, this research should focus on gathering stronger data related to the impact of the modules in producing positive changes in students written and/or spoken evidence of reflection from 2019 onwards. It should also focus on following students engaging with the modules through their experiences of seeking and gaining employment.

With these caveats, however, the project has achieved some very important results and there is strong evidence to support these achievements. First, an extensive, comprehensive and up-to-date critical review of the literature dealing with reflection and reflective practice particularly as it relates to the professions of Social Work and Education was completed at the beginning of the project. It served as the basis for many of the subsequent project implementation decisions. Also included in this review was a critical analysis of the presence or absence of reference to the importance of being able to demonstrate reflective practice in the national standards dealing with employment and accreditation of teachers and social workers. The review will provide the basis for a number of publications and conference presentations.

Second, the project successfully drew together academic partners from four discrete universities. They worked collaboratively in face-to-face and teleconference meetings to plan and implement an across-campus and across-discipline project related to the facilitation of learning about reflection and professional reflective practice.

Third, interviews with significant persons from government, system and institutional levels responsible for the employment of Social Workers and Teachers at government, system and institutional levels were completed, recorded and transcribed. The interviews were concerned with establishing the importance attached by interviewees to prospective employees being able to demonstrate understandings and skills related to reflection and reflective practice in employment applications and interviews. The interviews provided strong evidence that ability to demonstrate skills of reflective practice by graduates seeking employment were considered to be important by all interviewees. This was particularly the case for Social Workers where national standards specifically demand the requirement to demonstrate skills in critical reflection. This was not the case with national teaching standards where some interviewees reported a perceived loss of the explicit requirement of reflective skills for accreditation and suggested it would be important to reintroduce this requirement.

Fourth, and maybe most important of all considering the intended project, was that four on-line modules designed to produce powerful learning about reflective practice were successfully developed and employed. These modules effectively integrated content from, the literature review, the interviews with employers and a number of academics who had investigated/written about reflection and reflective practice as it applies to teaching and social work. The modules also included tasks for completion by student participants designed to assess their learning and understanding of the modules' content.

More important, every student participant interviewed and who had completed the four modules were unanimous in their unequivocal praise of the quality of the on-line modules and their capacity to realise very powerful learning about reflection and reflective practice.

The learning from the modules was reported unanimously as being most powerful when completed with opportunities for face-to-face sharing with others. Further, the students also reported that the learning from the modules could be employed in both university preservice and professional workplace contexts.

The modules are now available to be used in any site that requires on-line resources that have been proven capable of realising very powerful individual and group learning about reflection and reflective practice in the professions. Some of the content of these modules is already being applied very successfully in a credited course in one of the project sites with student participants across a wide range of professions apart from social work and education. The modules are applicable in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses as well as professional learning tools in professional workplaces.

Finally, the project has also achieved collaboration across the four university sites in the planning of a number of publications and conference presentations related to the project and its achievements. For example, a book proposal reporting the project and discussing the implications for research and development arising from it has already been developed between the partners. Already a number of the partners have worked together to develop chapter synopses and a number of potential publishers have been identified. Further, a panel symposium presented by a number of partners has already been planned and accepted for the December meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education.

Other partners have also submitted paper and presentation applications to future conferences in Australia and overseas.

Possibly the area most lacking evidence from the current project is whether engagement with the modules provides sufficient content to develop participants' understanding of and skills in providing written and/or spoken evidence of reflective thinking and practice. Because of the limited number of post-intervention written responses to vignettes and limited opportunities for interviews it was difficult to ascertain whether this was the case or not. Certainly, evidence from previous research (see Smith, 1999a) suggested strongly that undergraduate students in Education were not naturally skilled in providing written evidence of their reflection. Smith suggested that there is a 'genre' of reflective writing: in other words, the use of key words, phrases, ideas and structures that provide evidence of reflection. Further, he recommends very strongly that the features of this 'genre' require explicit teaching with examples of different types of writing for evidence of different types of reflection.

While explicit attention to this 'genre' were included in module content, particularly in some of the interviews with the academic researchers, because of the individually optional nature of engagement with the modules there was little, if any at all, explicit teaching about the characteristics of the 'genre' of reflection. This fact alone may explain the lack of evidence of any significant change in the incidence of reflective writing between pre- and post-vignette responses in the project. Alternatively, maybe the vignettes were not effective in, or structured effectively to produce reflective writing. These possible causes for lack of evidence require further research and exploration.

Thus, while facing a number of significant challenges that have impacted on some elements of the original project plan some of the most important aims and intentions of the project have been very successfully achieved. A number of recommendations for future research and development arising from the experience of the project and the findings from the evaluation are now suggested below.

## Recommendations

- I) That future funding be sought by the project team to enable the continuation of research into the impact of the on-line modules on the written and oral evidence of participants' reflective capacities and evidence from graduates seeking employment of the importance of demonstrating reflective skills in employment applications and interviews.
- II) That any engagement by students with the modules should:
  - a) be within a defined course structure, where engagement is part of the required course assessment: it should not be an optional extra
  - b) provide for face-to-face interaction and sharing, either in virtual or non-virtual group settings
  - c) occur in conjunction with or as close as possible to a field placement, and
  - d) require each student to write their own vignette based on some experience during field placement which is then shared, discussed and critiqued by peers.
- III) That any course unit that uses the modules should, after the module that deals with evidence for reflective practice, provide explicit teaching regarding the 'genre' of reflective writing as described in the modules. This teaching should also provide examples of writing and talking that illustrates the different types of reflection and reflective writing.

**Dr David Smith**

**28<sup>th</sup> November, 2018.**



## **Appendix C: Interview schedule**

Protocol:

- The following themes will be covered in the open-ended interview and focus group conversations.
- Suggested probes are noted in brackets.

### **The key features of reflection**

[What do you think are the key features of reflection?]

### **Understanding reflection in the workplace**

[What do you understand reflection in the workplace to mean?]

### **Practicing reflection in the workplace**

[Do you put this into practice in your workplace? How?]

### **Personal reflective practice**

[Do you enact reflection personally? How?]

### **Enabling reflection in staff**

[Do you enable reflective practice for your staff? How?]

### **Influence of organisational culture on reflective practice**

[Does your organisation (culture and context) value and support/enable and inhibit reflective practice both individually and as a group? How?]

### **Experiences of reflective practice in the workplace**

[What sort of problems/incidents/situations rely on the use of reflective practice to ensure satisfactory outcomes? Can you provide some examples?]

### **Employment criteria relevant to reflective practice**

[To what extent is the ability to be reflective included in your employment decisions?]

# Appendix D: Example of two professional vignettes

## Social Work



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

This task-based questionnaire asks you to answer three questions and then to respond to a hypothetical *critical incident vignette*.

**Important:** Please enter in the following order:

First and last letter of your given name; first and last letter of your family name; day of birth

Example: Jane Smith, birthday 12 May =

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. Gender: Female

☐

Male

☐

2. Language other than English spoken at home:

Language

Not applicable

☐

3. Do you plan to seek employment as a social work professional on completion of your studies? *Select applicable option*

Definitely

Probably

Not sure

Probably not

Definitely not

**Critical incident vignette:**

Please read through the following critical incident and then undertake the task.

Graham is 50 years old. He was born in Australia. Until recently he worked for a well-known Australian car manufacturer. He was retrenched when the factory downsized prior to closing. He has now been unemployed for 6 months. Graham has never had to go through a formal job application or interview process. He went straight from leaving school at 15 years of age into an apprenticeship in the car factory.

He reports that he has applied for over 100 jobs in the last six months but has never been successful in getting past the written application stage. Graham says that he feels ashamed and a 'bit lost'. He says he never thought that he would end up being a 'dole bludger'. He is now taking antidepressant medication as recommended by his doctor.

**Your task:**

You have been assigned as Graham's case manager. What are your thoughts about his situation? What are you going to do and why?

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this task. You will be emailed a link to the online course materials shortly.**

## Primary Education



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

This task-based questionnaire asks you to answer three questions and then to respond to a hypothetical *critical incident vignette*.

Please enter in the following order:

First and last letter of your given name; first and last letter of your family name; day of birth

Example: Jane Smith, birthday 12 May =

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐

2. Language other than English spoken at home:

Language

Not applicable

☐

3. Do you plan to seek employment as a teacher on completion of your studies? *Select applicable option*

Definitely

Probably

Not sure

Probably not

Definitely not

### **Critical incident vignette:**

Please read through the following critical incident and then undertake the task.

You are a teacher of Year 5 at an inner city primary school. Juan is one of your pupils.

Juan lives with his Mum and his four-year old sister in an apartment in a multistorey public housing precinct. All of his Mum's family lives in Brazil. His dad left Juan's Mum last year and they are currently going through divorce proceedings. Juan doesn't see much of his Dad who has moved to a city in the south. His grandfather, his Dad's father, has been very important to Juan, particularly since Juan's own father left. He has supported Juan, acted as sort of a surrogate Dad, a positive role model and kept him on the 'straight and narrow'. But Juan's grandfather died last term.

Juan is usually a reasonably well-behaved and mannered student who has positive relationships with his peers. However, there have been some significant changes in his behavior towards both his peers and his teachers, including you. He has been cheating a lot lately. Sam and Anthony, two of his good friends, have told you that Juan has been cheating a number of times at games in the playground over the last few weeks. Sam told you that Juan had cheated from him in the Maths test in class the other day. One of the other teachers who had been on playground duty yesterday also told you that she had to break up a fight between Juan and Marcello. When the teacher intervened, Marcello, another of Juan's mates, told her that Juan had been cheating in cricket and would not give Marcello the bat when Marcello bowled him out.

Everything came to a head this morning when at recess you tried to talk to Juan about these things and what is happening with his behavior. In the middle of your conversation he shouted at you "I just can't lose anymore!" and ran out of the classroom, obviously distressed. He returned after recess but has been disruptive in class since then. You have now arranged to see him with the school Counsellor this afternoon during your RFF time.

**Your task:**

You are thinking about Juan and his recent behavior and how you will conduct the meeting with him this afternoon. What are your thoughts about his situation? What are you going to do and why?

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this task. You will be emailed a link to the online course materials shortly.**

## Appendix E: Stage 2 Coding Framework

### Framework for the analysis of student vignette responses

Coding Category	Description
D	Description only – no reasoning/reframing/reflection
<i>Technical (Means/Ends) Reflection</i>	
Ts	Technical Reflection based on a singular reason/factor/dimension
Tm	Technical Reflection based on multiple reasons/factors/dimensions
<i>Communicative/Hermeneutic/Dialogic Reflection ('dialogue with self/others')</i>	
Hs	Communicative Reflection based on a singular reason/factor/dimension
Hm	Communicative Reflection based on a singular reason/factor/dimension
	Communicative Reflection based on multiple reasons/factors/dimensions
<i>Critical Reflection (actions/events in the wider political/socioeconomic contexts)</i>	
Cs	Critical Reflection based on singular reason/factor/dimension
Cm	Critical Reflection based on multiple reasons/factors/dimensions
Ca	Critical Analysis
Sub-categories Critical reflection	
Cauth	Critical Reflection around statutory/appointed/elected Authority (principals, managers, legal mandates, politicians etc)
Cp	Critical Reflection around non-statutory Power (eg, peers;clients;parents )
Ce	Critical Reflection around Socioeconomic factors (eg, poverty; income etc)

Coding Category	Description	Criteria
D	Description only – no reasoning/reframing/reflection	<b>Recount:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not reflective – description of events/interactions/report of literature</li> <li>- No attempt to provide reasons/justifications</li> </ul>
<i>Technical (Means/Ends) Reflection</i> <i>Tentative – Hermeneutic. Dialogic</i> <i>Technical: Reporting in more cause/effect</i>		<b>Descriptive/ Technical (Ends/Means) Reflection:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some attempt to provide reason(s)/justification(s) for events/actions/interactions but in a descriptive manner</li> <li>- Possible reframing/'other' perspective(s) about the event/experience being reflected upon and/or literature</li> <li>- BUT again in descriptive/reportive manner – no evidence of 'dialogue with self/others'</li> </ul>
Ts	Technical Reflection based on a singular reason/factor/dimension	
Tm	Technical Reflection based on multiple reasons/factors/dimensions	
<i>Communicative/Hermeneutic/Dialogic Reflection ('dialogue with self/others')</i>		<b>Communicative/Hermeneutic/Dialogic Reflection:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Main feature is clear evidence of 'dialogue with self'/others</li> <li>- Demonstrates a 'stepping back' from the event/action/experience leading to a different level of mulling about, discourse with self and exploring and reframing the experience/action/event from different angles/perspectives identifying possible alternatives and explanations, hypothesizing about possible consequences of different actions</li> <li>- Such reflection is integrative of different factors/perspectives and more analytical in nature.</li> <li>- This reflection only considers the IMMEDIATE actors and context of the site in which the event/action/interaction/experience occurred.</li> <li>- Eg '...while I had planned to use mainly written materials in this lesson I knew pretty quickly that a number of students were not responding to these like I thought they would...they seemed bored...could be that I misjudged how confident those NESB kids were in handling the level of the text...but I know that some of those have handled texts a lot more difficult. Maybe I need to try to identify how those kids learn best...they could be more visual or tactile in their learning, particularly the indigenous kids...anyway I think I have to use more active 'hands on' tasks with that class...even in literature lessons'</li> </ul>

Hs	Communicative Reflection based on a singular reason/factor/dimension	
Hm	Communicative Reflection based on a singular reason/factor/dimension	
	Communicative Reflection based on multiple reasons/factors/dimensions	
<i>Critical Reflection (actions/events in the wider political/socioeconomic contexts)</i>		<b>Critical Reflection:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evidence of Dialogic Reflection BUT GOING BEYOND to demonstrate</li> <li>- Explicit evidence of awareness that the action/event/ experience and factors/reasons for its occurrence are not only located in the immediate <b>context but in the wider HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, SOCIAL and ECONOMIC</b> contexts of the region/state/nation/world: justice, power, authority</li> </ul>
Cs	Critical Reflection based on singular reason/factor/dimension	
Cm	Critical Reflection based on multiple reasons/factors/dimensions	
Ca	Critical Analysis	<b>Critical Analysis:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analysis of wider politico-socio-economic contexts of power and authority in society with no explicit connection to the person doing the reflection</li> <li>- Has potential to lead to a different understanding of the person's understanding of their professional role and actions in relation to the context of the vignette.</li> </ul>
Sub-categories Critical reflection		
Cauth	Critical Reflection around statutory/appointed/elected Authority (principals, managers, legal mandates, politicians etc)	
Cp	Critical Reflection around non-statutory Power (eg., peers;clients;parents )	



Ce	Critical Reflection around Socioeconomic factors (eg., poverty; income etc)	
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