



**Critical research of graduate outcomes,  
feedback and industry input into the  
development of undergraduate and  
postgraduate curriculum regarding the  
improvement of quality professional  
social care service delivery**

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# **Critical research of graduate outcomes, feedback and industry input into the development of undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum regarding the improvement of quality professional social care service delivery**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The intention of this project was to enhance the ability of graduates of Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services) degree to address the complex, changing and diverse social care needs of service users and communities, and to better meet the professional practice standards and expectations of employers and professional bodies such as the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW). It was envisaged that by using Human Service graduate outcomes and feedback, and industry input, to collaboratively develop relevant undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum, the quality of professional social care service delivery would be improved.

Methodology involved both qualitative and quantitative analysis from sources such as focus groups, industry forums and finally a questionnaire. Data analysis focused on identifying the degree of graduate satisfaction with course preparation; curriculum requirements to address graduate and industry needs and relationships between graduate outcomes and undergraduate curriculum.

The overall results of the questionnaire indicate that participants were mostly positive in their responses regarding the adequacy and relevancy of the undergraduate curriculum in preparing students for professional practice.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Social care delivery is conditioned by the relationships between society and individuals; in particular the social, political and historical contexts. As society changes and evolves, so too does the social mandate for the human services. In the recent past there has been rapid social, economic and political change evidenced by, among other things, altered demographics such as ageing, family composition and roles, globalisation and increased inequities, technological advances and communications, and the ascendancy of conservative ideologies which promote individualisation and self-reliance rather than communalism. Whilst there has been considerable challenge to the legitimacy and affordability of formal social care arrangements, there has also been considerable growth in community services in a climate of fiscal restraint. Continued growth is forecast (McCormack, 2001).

Along with changes in the governance provisions within government and the human services, there has been profound restructuring and reconfiguring of the structures and processes used to deliver programs and services, frequently incorporating Post-Fordist arrangements. A new 'Social Market Approach' has been widely adopted (Adams & Hess, 2000). According to these writers, this is consistent with a reform agenda that utilises 'Public Choice theory' to argue that competitive practices and increased choice for service users will lead to greater public benefit. Thus there has been the advent of managerialism, which emphasises business management principles, efficiency and effectiveness but is less concerned about social justice and traditional human service values. In addition, the challenges of post modernity, plurality and emerging practice fields have led to a sometimes-fragmented service delivery system.

QUT's Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services) degree program was created in the early 1990s, with over 600 alumni graduating since 1993. There have been two major curriculum reviews conducted, the last being in 2001. Recent research has highlighted the critical importance of preparing human services practitioners to operate in an increasingly uncertain practice context and to train them to reflectively develop their expertise and creativity whilst contextualising the knowledge they possess in order to appropriately and ethically respond to the complex practice situations they will confront (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000). The course has appropriate Course Experience Questionnaire evaluations and has experienced steady growth in undergraduate enrolments, although the postgraduate course is still in its infancy and enrolments are growing from a modest base. However, in an environment characterised by increased competition from other tertiary institutions, a rapidly expanding labour market, and significant potential for postgraduate training opportunities, it is an appropriate time to be examining the curriculum and ensuring its ongoing relevance and linkage with our industry partners.

The project involved an investigation of Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services) graduates' career outcomes, their feedback of the adequacy of their course in preparing them for professional practice, and their perspectives, along with those of industry employers, about the development of the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum. An industry reference group was established to guide the development and implementation of the study. Thus, the project entailed evaluative research within a collaborative partnership with alumni and industry to facilitate curriculum development.

## **PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY:**

Research was undertaken to address the following questions:

- How satisfied are all stakeholders with the adequacy and relevance of the undergraduate curriculum?

- What factors influence the career outcomes and developmental paths of alumni?

Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were utilized in an exploratory design that embraced iterative and collaborative processes to integrate and distil data collected from a variety of industry stakeholders and alumni. The design incorporates three stages to the research project.

Table 1: Stages of research project

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Identification of the contemporary professional issues and areas of inquiry. Refinement of survey questionnaire	Examination of the career outcomes of alumni and the perceptions of required skills, knowledge and attributes for successful practice.	Dissemination of findings and determination of structures and processes for continuous curriculum improvement.
Method Qualitative Alumni Focus Groups and industry forums	Method Quantitative Survey of alumni	Method Qualitative Ongoing processes and forums for curriculum development

The industry reference group consisted of key stakeholders including representatives from major employers, professional bodies and alumni. It met on several occasions prior to the development of the major questionnaire in order to provide assistance and guidance to the research team with respect to the areas to be specifically addressed, and refinement of the research processes and methodology. The focus groups, industry forums and survey methods involve a mixture of methodology and data sources that enable a triangulation method, which strengthens the reliability of findings.

Groups and forums were attended by supervisors of human service student professional practice placements and 20 past students. The information and perspectives collected from these groups were used to refine the survey instrument. A total of 448 alumni were invited to participate in the study; 57 subsequently agreed to be research participants.

Specific areas examined in the questionnaire were participant demographics, course satisfaction, career development needs for industry, evaluation of specific parts of the course, the professional practice, that is, field component of the course, suggestions for improvement of the curriculum, for example,

emerging areas the should be covered and finally questions were asked about lifelong learning. The survey data were statistically analysed using factor analysis and analyses of variance.

### **Analysis of survey**

Items were prepared for inferential analysis by entering all items into SPSS factor analysis and setting the procedure to generate a scale score across the items treated as a single factor to derive the scale score. A general reason for this approach is that it produces a scale score that approximates interval measurement properties. A more specific reason is that while participant responses to sets of items might cluster in subscales, these subscales cannot be identified reliably because of the small sample size. Levels of agreement approximate or exceed: High levels 80%, Moderate levels 40-80% and Low levels less than 40%.

## **RESULTS:**

### Industry Reference Group and Forums

The initial industry reference group involved key stakeholders from various universities, Queensland Community Services and Health Industry Training Council, Department of Communities and Department of Corrective Services. Members provided assistance and guidance to the research team with respect to the areas to be specifically addressed with both Industry Forums and Focus Groups.

The Industry Forums consisted of 16 representatives from major employers and professional bodies and 20 alumni. Members of the Industry Forums addressed the following questions:

- What skills, knowledge, and/or attributes do you think good practitioners should have?
- Does the current Human Services curriculum adequately prepare students for professional practice?
- Do you think the professional practice component of the undergraduate course is beneficial for practitioners entering the workforce?
- What are the contemporary and emerging areas of practice and other issues that should be covered in the Human Services UG curriculum if it is to remain up to date?
- What are the contemporary and emerging structural and other issues that should be covered in the Human Services UG curriculum if it is to remain up to date?
- What are the areas that should be included in post-graduate learning options so that practitioners can professionally develop and increase their career options?

The most notable finding in relation to the skills, knowledge and attributes of good practitioners is that graduates should be able to reflect critically on personal issues as well as the broader industry processes. Also high on the list of required skills and attributes was students' ability to clearly understand

their personal values and beliefs and how these affect practice. Members stressed the importance of new graduates' ability to articulate their personal and professional framework for practice and the integration of this framework into the workplace context. The ability of new graduates to link the theoretical knowledge accumulated during their studies into the practice arena of the workplace was another important issue, particularly for Industry Forum members.

Many members felt that two industry placements were preferable – one in 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the course, which would be beneficial in assisting students to examine the notion of linking the theory into the practice context of the placement agency, and the second in 3<sup>rd</sup> year to cement the learning from both university and industry.

### **Focus Groups**

The purpose of the five Focus Groups was to discuss the aims and areas of inquiry with groups consisting of alumni, who are employed by (1) state government agencies; (2) non-government and for-profit agencies; (3) those who have graduated within the past two years; (4) between three and five years; and (5) greater than five years. These groups have been identified as having different professional interests and developmental needs.

Questions posed to the Focus Groups centred around the first research question examining *why* participants enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Science course, *what* was their first professional human services position following graduation and *how well* the course assisted them in gaining and competently fulfilling the position. The major issues addressed by the focus groups covered areas of teaching, course structure, specific areas of required knowledge, ethical practice and organizational issues. The reasons that participants enrolled in the course were varied, several had previous diplomas which linked directly with the Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services) degree, a few missed out on the Bachelor of Social Work (UQ) degree and so accepted the Human Services course, several had a background in nursing and felt that the Human Services course was a natural progression and several mentioned that the Human Services course appeared to provide necessary practical skills.

Participants commenced work in a diverse range of human services positions, working across all service areas. Most agreed that the course had assisted them to gain employment although several commented that they felt required to undertake specific counselling courses in order to gain sufficient skills to compete with some other graduates in positions that required counselling skills.

The majority of graduates agreed that undertaking a professional practice placement enabled them to gain skills relevant to future employment with several past students gaining either full-time or part-time employment with their placement agency. All graduates agreed that a second professional practice placement would be more beneficial than undertaking the Initial

Professional Practice unit in first semester of second year and then the Professional Practice placement in the final semester of the course, stating that two placements would have allowed them to build on the skills learnt during the first placement and further advance the link between theory and practice.

A predominant comment was that graduates believed university lecturers should have worked extensively in the field prior, or during, their role as lecturer so that they are equipped to better explain and illustrate concepts with the use of anecdotes and practice wisdom. All graduates felt that they completed the course as critically reflective practitioners.

### **Questionnaire**

Participant responses to the groups of categorical or Likert scale items analysed were for the most part positive, with agreement approximating or exceeding 80% of participants. Also, for the most part, the 57 participants responded uniformly to items rather than differing significantly by group. However, there was a tendency for younger participants currently studying and older participants not currently undertaking postgraduate study to be more positive in their response than their age-related peers.

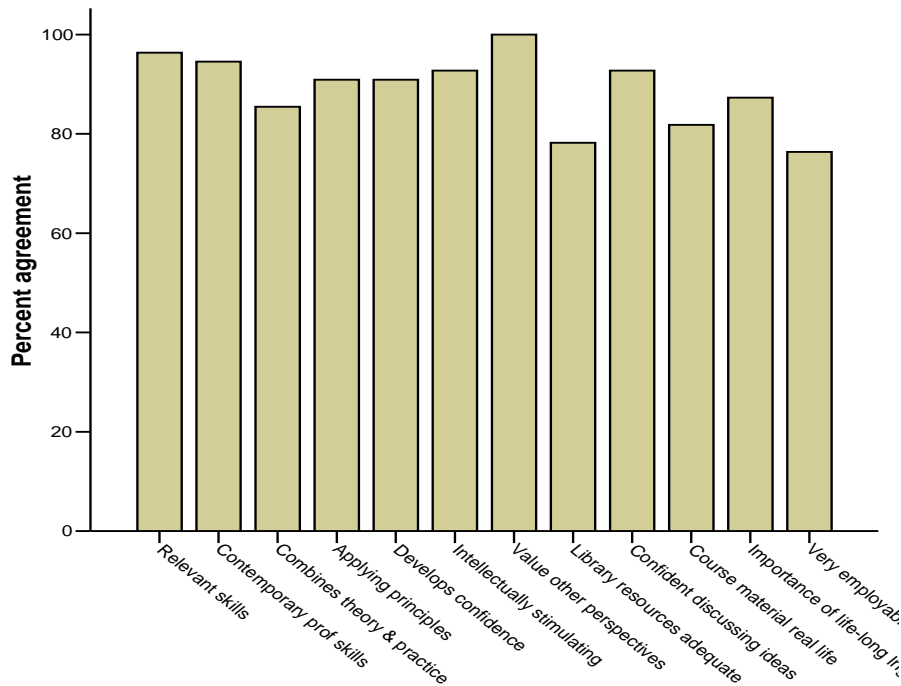
The majority of participants between the ages of 20-39 were male whereas the majority of older participants (40+) were female. This demographic is more a reflection of those participants who agreed to undertake the questionnaire rather than a representative sample, given that the human services course is predominantly undertaken by females, young and mature aged. The current breakdown of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services) degree, as at October 2004, shows that there are 55 males and 253 females in the younger age group (to 39) and 13 males and 41 females in the older age group.

### **Research Question One:**

*The following tables relate to research question one which examined the adequacy and relevancy of the undergraduate program's curriculum in preparing graduands with the knowledge, skills and attributes required for successful practice as a human services professional.*

### **Overall course satisfaction**

Participants were asked 12 questions about overall course satisfaction as well as being asked to respond to three open-ended questions (see Figure 1).

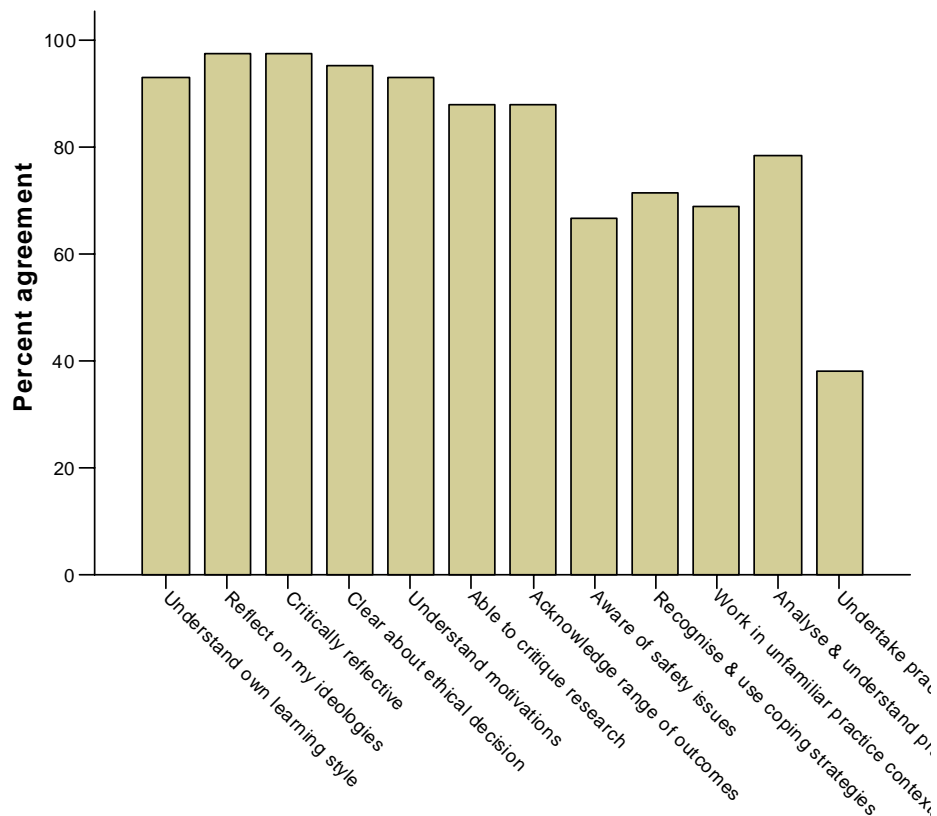


Participants were very positive in their responses to all 12 items, with agreement (agree plus and strongly agree categories) approximating or exceeding 80% across the 12 items. As these 12 items were selected by both forum and focus group members as being the most important components of the Human Services course, it is gratifying to learn that, apart from the adequacy of library resources and possible concerns about the employability of graduands, all participants' agreement exceeded 80%.

Open-ended questions also elicited valuable feedback. One graduate, 1991-1993, stated that "I thought the course enabled me to grasp concepts and ideas that have relevance to my work. For example, resource implications, some policy analysis and the ability to critique policy and process from a social justice perspective". And from a recent graduate 1997-2001, "Overall I felt that more of an emphasis on practice skills is required, for example counseling, therapeutic work with young people and families etc, would have been good. However, I also feel that the focus on macro issues was extremely valuable and will be more so as my career advances". And from a part-time graduate, "the practicum was the most useful subject".

### **Personal practice frameworks and practice methods**

Participants were asked 12 items related to personal practice frameworks and practice methods. Figure 2 responses below.



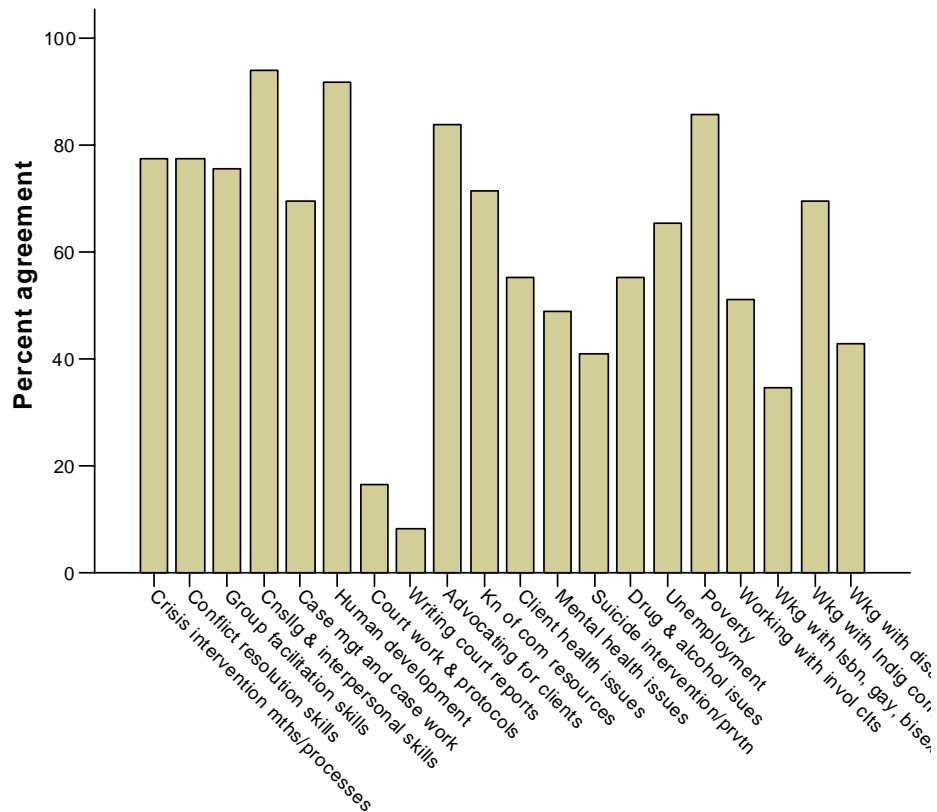
Eighty percent or more of the participants were in agreement with eight of the twelve items. However, less than 80% were in agreement about awareness of safety issues, recognition and use of coping strategies, and working in unfamiliar practice contexts. Only 40% were in agreement about undertaking practice in rural and remote communities.

This result indicates that 80% or more of the participants in the study agreed that the course had properly prepared them to:

- Understand their own learning style;
- Reflect on their personal ideologies and approach the Human Services practice;
- Be critically reflective of their practice frameworks;
- Be clear about their ethical decision making;
- Understand their own motivations for working in Human Services;
- Confidently challenge and critique research;
- Understand and acknowledge that not all clients and situations they work with will have good outcomes; and
- Analyse and understand complex practice contexts and dynamics.

### **Working with Clients**

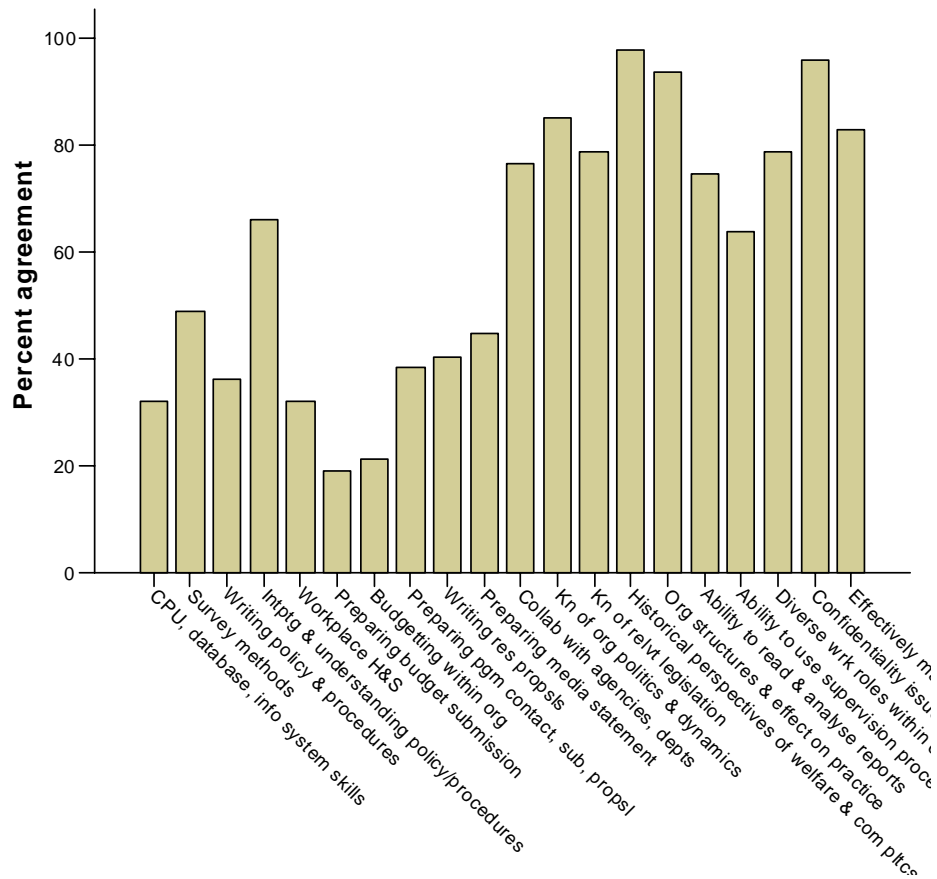
Participants were asked to respond to 20 items probing the extent to which the course prepared them to work with clients. See figure 3 below.



Response rates approximated or exceeded 80% for six items, including crisis intervention methods and processes, conflict resolution skills, case management and case work, human development, advocating for clients, and poverty. Responses approximating or less than 40% of participants in agreement concerning their preparation for court work and protocols, writing court reports, suicide intervention or prevention, disability, and working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender clients or communities.

### **Working in human service organisations**

Participants answered 20 items related to the extent to which the course had prepared them for working in human service organisations. See figure 4 below.



Participant agreement approximated or exceeded 80% for eight items, including:

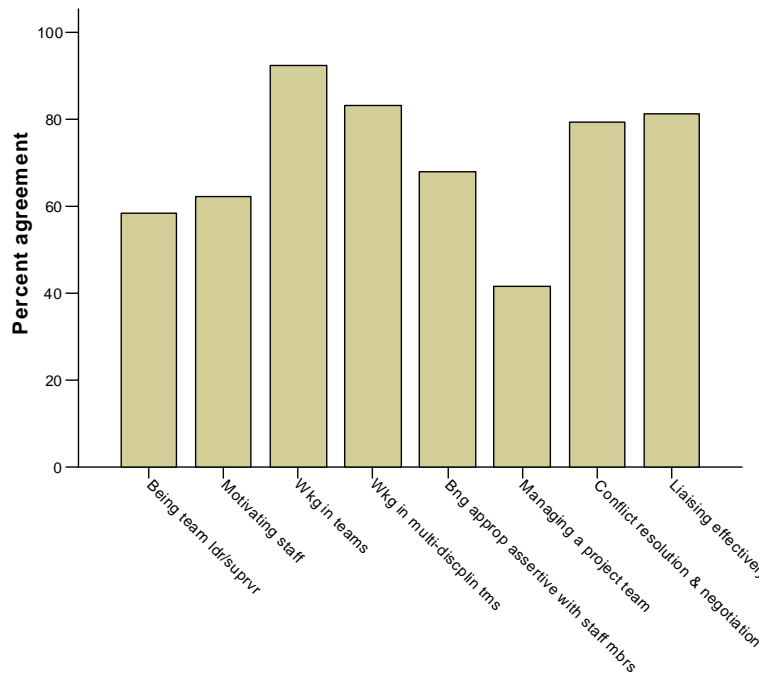
- collaboration with agencies and government;
- knowledge of organisational politics and dynamics;
- knowledge of relevant legislation;
- historical perspectives on welfare and politics;
- organisational structures and effect on practice;
- diverse work roles within organizations;
- confidentiality issues; and
- effectively managing time.

Participant agreement approximated or was less than 40% for another seven items, including: computer, database, information system skills; writing policy and procedures; workplace health and safety; preparing budget submissions; budgeting within organizations; preparing program contracts and submitting proposals; and writing research proposals.

Univariate ANOVAs indicated that the two-way interaction between age and study status predicted scores on the working in human service organisation scale score such that younger participants who were studying and older participants who weren't studying were more likely to make positive responses ( $F(1, 32)=4.475, p<.05$ ).

## Working with colleagues

Participants were asked to answer eight items about the extent to which the course had prepared them for working with colleagues. See figure 5 below.



Agreement levels approximated or exceeded 80% for four of the eight items including: working in teams, working in multi-disciplinary teams, conflict resolution and negotiation skills, and liaising effectively with staff in other agencies. Agreement levels approximated only 40% for the item, managing a project team.

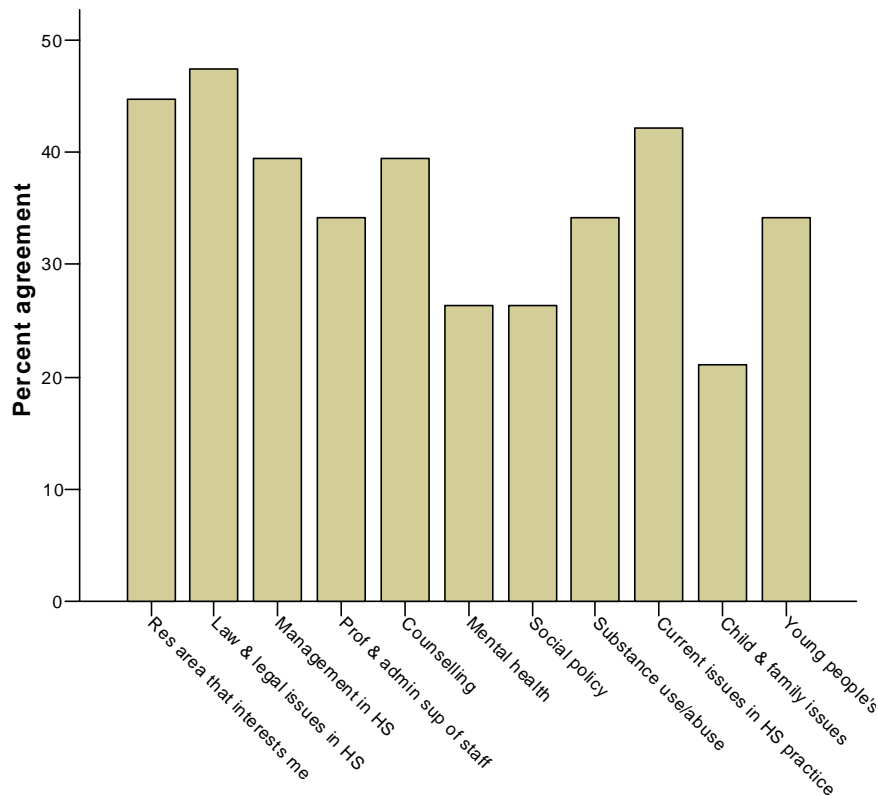
## Summary

The outcome of the first research question relating to the adequacy and relevancy of the undergraduate program's curriculum in preparing graduands with the necessary knowledge, skills and attributes required for successful practice as a human services professional shows that, predominantly, participants were very positive in their responses to most of the questions asked. Areas of concern centred upon issues such as the adequacy of library resources, employability upon completing the course, being prepared for employment in rural and remote communities, preparation for court work and protocols, writing court reports, suicide intervention or prevention, disability and working with lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender clients or communities. The need for counselling skills and therapeutic work with young people and families was another area that participants believed could be included in the curriculum. The fieldwork practicum was stated to be the most useful subject with several participants suggesting that there should be two practicums rather than the Initial Professional Practice unit in its present form.

## Research Question Two:

*The career outcomes and developmental paths of graduates.*

Participants were asked if the course had provided them with the desired knowledge and skills relevant to specific practice contexts. See figure 6 below.



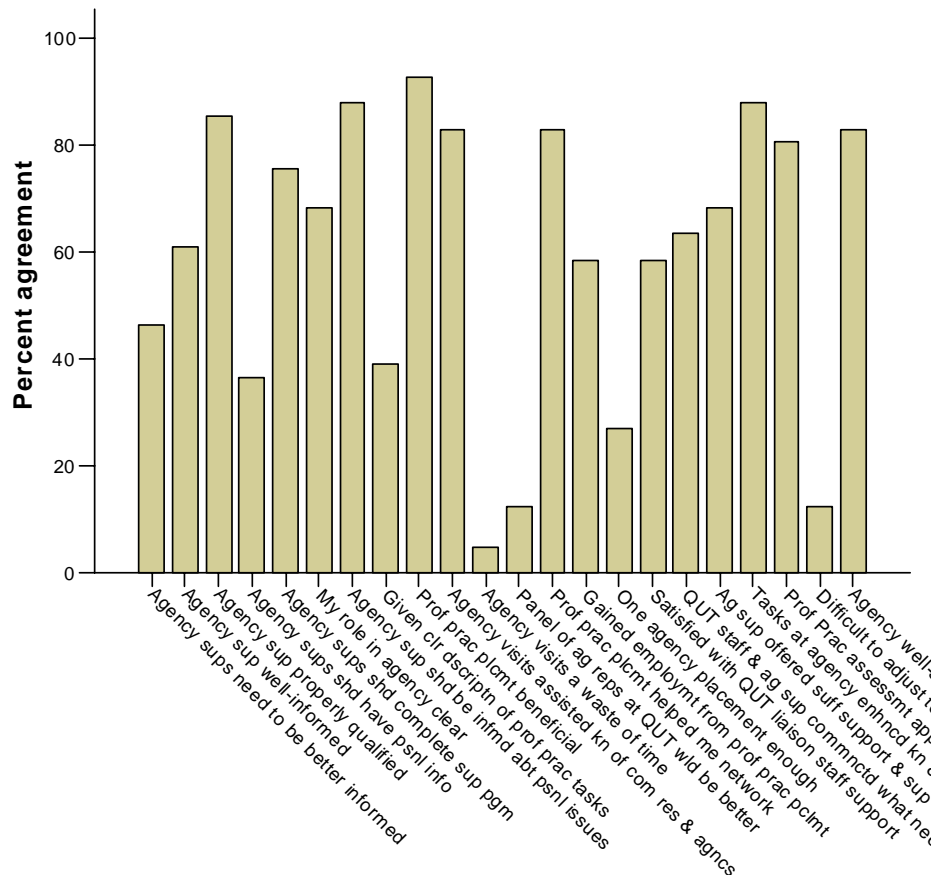
There were low agreement levels in all but three of the 11 items. These three items include:

- Research an area that interests me
- Law and legal issues in human services
- Current issues in human service practice.

The response of participants regarding this question indicates that graduates are not adequately prepared to commence their human services career in specialist areas of work, but rather need to upgrade their skills in many specialist areas such as mental health, counselling and management.

**Professional practice**

Participants answered 22 questions related professional practice placements. See figure 7 below.



There were high levels of agreement (approximating or exceeding 80%) for eight of the 22 items:

- Agency supervisor properly qualified
- Agency supervisor should be informed about personal issues that impact on their placement
- Placement was beneficial for gaining the skills and knowledge necessary for practice
- Agency visits very conducive to my knowledge of community resources and agencies
- Placement helped me to network with other human services agencies and workers
- Tasks and duties given by agency enhanced my knowledge and skills for working with clients
- Assessments with placement were appropriate for enhancing skills at practical level
- I was placed in an agency well suited to meeting my professional development and learning needs.

This question shows low levels of agreement (approximating or less than 40%) for six items:

- Agency supervisor should have personal information about student prior to placement
- Given clear idea of tasks during placement at QUT interview

- Agency visits were a waste of time
- Panel of agency representatives would have been more beneficial to learning than agency visits
- One agency placement enough to meet my professional practice and development needs
- I found it difficult to adjust to the culture of the agency.

### **Summary**

Research question two in relation to the career outcomes and developmental paths of graduates elicited responses that indicated that in order to work in specialist areas of human services, graduates would need to undertake further study in areas such as counselling and management for example. Regarding the professional practice placement there was low level of agreement that the liaison visit was a waste of time, indicating that students place value on this support mechanism. There was also low level of agreement that one professional practice placement was sufficient to good practice indicating that students believe they would benefit from two practice placements rather than one. One issue that could be improved in regard to placement involves the giving of clear information about the types of tasks students would be undertaking on placement by their agency supervisor. Overall, participants were highly satisfied that their learning throughout their practicum was beneficial regarding practice knowledge and future employment prospects.

### **OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Study outcomes and recommendations will be addressed in relation to each research question.

*The adequacy and relevancy of the undergraduate program's curriculum in preparing graduands with the knowledge, skills and attributes required for successful professional practice.*

Research outcomes in relation to question one indicate that participants were quite positive regarding their responses to all items with agree and strongly agree categories chosen for over 80% of participants. Some major points of agreement follow.

New graduates require the ability to critically analyse theoretical knowledge, therefore, it is recommended that the emphasis on critical analysis and reflection, as indicated by Fook et al (2000), Belenky et al (1986), Boud and Knights (1996), and discussed in the literature review, should be maintained and encouraged throughout the course. Such critical analysis must also encompass students' practice framework.

It is vital that new graduates have examined the issue of self knowledge, knowing oneself and how the personal self integrates with the professional human services worker, as addressed by Kramer (1974) in the literature review, who asserts that it is vital that there is congruence between students' attributes and their preparedness for change.

A matter of importance is that lecturers remain practice-based in order that they do not become too removed from the realities of working in human services agencies.

Practice based units including “hands on experiential learning” should be continued and enhanced according to the results of the research project. Perhaps it is possible to workshop more study areas as many students learn experientially. Different modes of teaching could be linked to the different modes of learning, including lectures, tutorials, workshops, practice-based scenarios and on-line teaching.

Skills such as writing of court reports and budget submissions should be taught at undergraduate level. It is possible that these practice skills could form part of the HHB201 Initial Professional Practice unit.

It was determined that an elective in micro-counselling and general counselling could be explored in order to assist graduates to develop these vital practice skills. Most participants agreed that no matter what area of the human services workers were employed, general counselling skills were a requirement.

*The career outcomes and developmental paths of graduates.*

According to participants, while the course was “fantastic” it was of concern that some employment doors remain closed. Moves are currently underway to have Human Services students accepted as a special category of welfare workers at the Royal Brisbane Hospital. If this occurs it will open the door to many more jobs. The other major practice context that is often closed for our students is the counselling area. In order to deal with this issue, a specialist counselling unit would need to be included in the course.

Participants hold the view that practice frameworks should have been developed early on during the course rather than being left until the final semester. This comment relates to those students who are given credit for the Initial Professional Practice unit, students mostly with a TAFE diploma. These students would benefit greatly from the undertaking of the Initial Professional Practice unit as they often struggle to articulate their practice framework throughout the final semester of study on placement.

It was agreed that there should be two professional practice placements rather than one. There was agreement amongst participants that if there were two placements, the first could serve as an introduction to the field followed by more theoretical studies and university integration of the practice context. Students would then be in a more advantageous position to select and gain a professional persona from a second industry placement which would more than likely lead to employment. This outcome links directly to Patford’s (2000) belief, see literature review, that practicums are “the single most important factor in the preparation of social/human services workers” (p43).

There should be more concentration on the development of professionalism, for example, how to collaborate with other agencies, economic rationalization, industrial issues, managerialism and the impacts on workers within the industry.

It was agreed that students should be taught to challenge the status-quo, what they read and what they are told. Other important recommendations of the study were that students should gain an understanding of the lack of resources in many agencies, including government agencies, as well as employers expectations of new graduates.

**Overall**, participants were positive in their views of the Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services) course. Major areas of concern, or need for change, focused on the enhancement of practice skills, the need for more support in relation to research and library services, the desire that lecturers remain “in touch” with current practice and that a second professional practice placement would be preferable to the current Initial Professional Practice unit.

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Literature Review, tables and Appendices are available from the author [j.oliver@gut.edu.au](mailto:j.oliver@gut.edu.au). The full literature review will form part of a subsequent paper.