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# Gatekeeping or redressing social exclusion: Expectations on social work educators in relation to incarcerated students

*Beth Crisp*

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*Beth R. Crisp is Associate Professor in Social Work at Deakin University in Australia, where she is also selection officer for the Bachelor of Social Work degree. Her current and prospective students occasionally identify themselves to be serving prisoners.*

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## **Abstract**

Until recently, the author was in Scotland, where professional registration in social work extends to students and involves criminal record checks prior to acceptance into a course of study. She is now teaching at Deakin University in Australia, which places a high priority on making higher education available to persons and groups who have traditionally been excluded, both through the provision of courses through off campus (distance education) study mode and an innovative and culturally sensitive mode of provision for indigenous Australians. One result of our attempts to redress social exclusion is that, on occasion, we discover that some of our students are incarcerated. There are important logistical issues which may emerge as a consequence of accepting prisoners into a program of social work education. However, it would seem that the inclusion of prisoners is symbolic of a fundamental difference in philosophy with programmes of social work education in countries where there is a strong expectation that social work educators act as gatekeepers to the profession, especially in respect of students with criminal convictions. This in turn reflects an expectation among social work educators in Australia that it may be more appropriate for professional associations or registration bodies to determine whether or not a graduate with a criminal record is suitable for employment as a professional social worker. In some settings, a prior criminal record is not a barrier to being an effective service provider, as well as international differences in understandings of the social work role and employment destinations of social work graduates.

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## **Introduction**

The question of the role of schools of social work in deciding who is fit and proper to be a social worker is something I have been thinking about a lot in the last couple of years. Until a year ago, I was teaching social work at the University of Glasgow and played an active role in the development of the Glasgow School of Social Work's new undergraduate social work degree, which meets the newly revised requirements for social work education in Scotland. Contemporaneously with the introduction of the new degree was the development of a registration system for social workers and social care workers, with this requirement for professional registration extending to social work students. Registration cannot be

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completed without the registration authorities being satisfied with the results of criminal record checks, and this has to occur prior to enrolment being finalised.

In early 2005 I returned to Australia to take up a position teaching social work at Deakin University, which is one of a handful of Australian universities accredited to teach social work in distance education mode. In my first semester, I discovered that some of our students not only have criminal records but were actually incarcerated. While this situation would be quite unimaginable to my Scottish colleagues, it would seem to be a symbolic statement as to what the role of social work educators is in Australia in respect of gatekeeping.

## **Gatekeeping and students with criminal convictions**

Notwithstanding the key aim of social work education being to prepare students for professional practice, course providers have often been viewed as 'gatekeepers' whose task it is to screen out those unsuitable for professional practice (Moore and Unwin, 1991). This typically commences at the point of entry, especially in respect of applicants who have a criminal record.

Amongst social work educators, there has been considerable disagreement as to the suitability of applicants with criminal records (Cobb and Jordan, 1989). One study of schools of social work in the US found only 5.8 percent considered criminal convictions in determining suitability for social work education (Miller and Koerin, 1998), despite supposedly widespread concerns as to the appropriateness of admitting students who have a conviction to a programme of social work education (Gibbs, 1994). While some social work educators have argued that admission of persons with a criminal conviction should occur on a case by case basis (Scott and Zeiger, 2000), others have argued vehemently against this. For example:

A felony conviction is a social sanction, a form of social control to enforce society's standards. People convicted of a felony lose certain rights, both immediately (eg, the right to free movement by being jailed) as well as for the long-term (eg, the right to own a gun). Denial of admission to professional education is simply one aspect of this social sanction. Social work education programmes are part of the legal and societal milieu and have a responsibility to assure consistency in the enforcement of sanctions. (Magen and Emerman, 2000: 401).

Magen and Emerman (2000) justify their stand, citing statistics that approximately two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested on serious charges within three years of release. As staff involved in student selection are unlikely to have access to sophisticated actuarial tools which have a significantly better chance to predict violent or other offending behaviours in the future (Mossman, 1994; 1995), this is likely to lead to very conservative selection procedures which may screen out potentially suitable applicants.

If gatekeeping has not occurred at admission, then a crucial point can be at field placement. It has been argued that social work programmes have an obligation not only to any potential clients with whom a student may have contact, but also to the staff of agencies in which students are placed (Mossman, 1995). Furthermore, many agencies require students to undertake some form of police check or criminal convictions disclosure either prior to commencement of a placement or prior to unsupervised client contact. It is then the agency's prerogative as to whether to accept or reject a student for whom convictions, or in some cases, allegations, are identified as part of this process. As field agencies will typically accept

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only those students for whom they consider the risks involved as negligible or non-existent (Gelman and Wardell, 1988), the need to ensure that placements can be secured for students with criminal convictions has sometimes been used to justify screening of offenders at the point of selection (Perry, 2004).

A consequence of policies which rigidly exclude offenders from entry into social work education can be an implicit designation of social work students and offenders as two distinct categories. Offenders are people who social work students have as clients (Pomeroy, Holleran and Kiam, 2004; Pomeroy, Kiam and Abel, 1999). As such, they are perceived in the category of 'other' and a mutually exclusive set of persons to social work students. And prisons are somewhere social work students visit to gain practice experience rather than places of residence for some social work students (Alexander and Brown, 2000; Noble and Severson, 1995; Severson, 1999).

## **The registration of social work students in Scotland**

In Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, social work students have been required to disclose criminal convictions on entry to a course of study which qualifies one to be a social worker (CCETSW, 1989) since the early 1990s. While applicants with a criminal conviction are not automatically banned from commencing social work training, they nevertheless need to convince representatives of the profession of their professional suitability. However:

Despite the lack of a sound research base for decision-making, programme providers have devised selector guidance about what might constitute a problematic candidate offence profile; but this guidance is neither routinely published nor made available to candidates. There is no discernible evidence of a widespread public debate about what should constitute a problematic offending profile and, in any event, there may not be a universally acceptable one. Social work is diverse. Some agency interests may be willing to accommodate offence histories that others would want to avoid; the consequence of agency philosophy and political considerations perhaps. For that reason, the application of a lowest common denominator offending profile could work against the human rights interests of aspiring social workers and, more significantly, the users and agencies in need of their services. (Perry, 2004: 1006).

Recent research at the University of Edinburgh has indicated that these measures have resulted in a decrease of students with criminal convictions applying for a career in social work (Perry, 2004). However, it is important to recognise that criminal conviction checks identify only crimes for which students have been convicted or there is a formal record of a charge or warning. Many offences are never recorded, and the Edinburgh study found fewer than three percent of social work students responding to an anonymous questionnaire admitted to having committed none of a list of 11 offence types. The majority of students self reported having committed traffic offences, theft and drunkenness, and more than one-third reported having committed offences such as possession of drugs, fraud, excise (smuggling) or breach of the peace (Perry, 2004).

Since September 2004, there has been a requirement in Scotland that new social work students be registered with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Scottish universities are required to 'Use selection procedures that ... exclude individuals who would not meet the SSSC's registration conditions' (Scottish Executive, 2003: 15). These are that the applicant be of 'good character' and 'good conduct', submit to an enhanced police check and pay the

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annual fee (SSSC, 2005). Where convictions are found, the decision to register applicants is based on the decision of a sub-committee of the SSSC after a further investigation as to the applicant's professional suitability. Even if students are registered, their registration can be revoked due to subsequent behaviour which is not in keeping with expectations of persons on the register, and universities are required to notify the SSSC should they become aware of any such breaches.

## **Prisoners as social work students in Australia**

Despite being a profession which claims actively to be about promoting social inclusion, social work education in Australia has traditionally been somewhat socially exclusive. Prior to the early 1990s, there were relatively few opportunities to study social work which did not require full-time study on a metropolitan campus. The last 15 years have seen an enormous growth in social work education, with an increase from 13 to 23 providers, with the majority of these new courses in regional centres. However, an even more fundamental change has been the introduction of off campus (distance education) programmes, and there are now a number of Australian universities offering the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) fully or partially in this mode of delivery. This at times has resulted in the admission of students who are incarcerated.

Deakin University is one of the accredited providers of the BSW by distance mode. Deakin places a high priority on offering educational opportunities to potential students who demonstrate aptitude for university study but due to various reasons require a flexible mode of delivery in order to access higher education. Hence, in addition to on and off campus enrolments in the BSW, there are students enrolled through the university's Institute for Koorie Education (IKE), which provides culturally sensitive provision of higher education courses for indigenous Australians. Not only is there a long history of exclusion of indigenous Australians from university education, but a much higher rate of imprisonment. Although the delivery of teaching occurs differently for IKE students, they must meet the same standards as other students to be awarded the BSW, including meeting the requirement of completing two placements in different fields of practice.

It is theoretically possible for students enrolled in either the mainstream or IKE programmes to be prisoners at some stage in their studies. Students are selected on the basis of their written applications and supporting documentation, and unlike my former students in Scotland, do not attend for interview as part of the selection process. Hence, as social work educators, we often only become aware that an individual student is in prison, when their imprisonment conflicts with some course requirement and alternative arrangements are sought. Examples include a request for a deferred exam due to prison authorities preventing a student from attending the prison education centre on the day of the exam or in the days immediately prior to an exam. Or prisoners may request hard copies of information be posted to them as they are unable to access the internet and the university's online information system, which is a key mechanism for providing updates to students during the semester. We have yet to deal with the issue of a serving prisoner seeking to undertake a placement, but expect that this might emerge in the future.

Although several staff involved in the Deakin BSW can recount instances involving incarcerated students, there are no systematic records about such students. However, it

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is thought most likely to have included a very small number of students over the decade since the course began in 1994, with some students having had contact with multiple staff. However, if a recent letter the author received in her role as selection officer is any indication, it may well be that the prospect of studying for a BSW appeals to some prisoners. The writer identified himself as a serving prisoner, noted his release date and indicated that he'd become interested in studying social work after looking at the learning materials a fellow prisoner was studying. In addition to requesting information on applying for a place in the course, he included his attempt at answering one of the activities in the learning materials for our first year Introduction to Social Work unit. As this arrived just as I was about to commence a period of leave, my response was to ask one of our administrative officers to send the standard information about our application procedure. In doing so, I rationalised that I was neither actively encouraging nor discouraging an application, and fulfilling the requirement that I answer public queries about studying social work at Deakin. Nevertheless, I am aware that even responding in the relatively impersonal way might be interpreted by some as encouraging an application from an unsuitable applicant.

### **Making sense of the differing expectations**

I would argue that the contrast between excluding potential social work students due to a criminal record and accepting prisoners into a social work degree represents a fundamental difference in philosophy in social work and social work education between Scotland and Australia. It has been noted elsewhere that in recent decades Australia has moved on from importing British and American versions of social work (Napier and George, 2001) and has developed Australian versions of social work which reflect our distinctive national history, health and welfare systems, economic and social policies, as well as the experiences and expectations of social workers (McCallum, 2001). This is particularly evident in the related issues of student selection, graduate destinations and registration.

The registration of Scottish social work students reflects the overwhelming expectation that at the conclusion of their training, they will be employed in direct service work, predominantly in the statutory sector. This expectation is arguably not as widely held in Australia where there is currently no registration of either social work graduates or students. To some extent this reflects the employment prospects for graduating social workers, the majority of whom do not take up posts with the title of 'social worker' (Hawkins et al., 2000), although many in fact are employed in the human services sector. Furthermore, the principles of student selection in higher education require universities to take into account equal opportunities legislation which imposes a duty on them not to discriminate against students according to age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation or criminal background (Shardlow, 2000). Indeed there have long been voices within Australian social work education that have argued for the inclusion in social work courses of students who are not necessarily destined for direct practice (eg, Coleman, 1967).

Even if persons with convictions can be prevented from commencing social work education, there is still the potential for offending behaviour to occur prior to graduation. Any criteria for refusing progression of students already enrolled in a course of social work education, should, as far as possible, be clearly articulated (Cole, 1991). However, it tends to be easier for universities to terminate students for failing to meet academic criteria than for behaviours outside the university. Yet there may nevertheless be an expectation that

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programmes of social work education will not credential practitioners whose personal conduct is considered unethical and hence unsuitable for a social worker (Cole and Lewis, 1993). In most Australian schools of social work, academic grounds are the only reason that a university may terminate a student's training, although 'unsuitable' students (an issue for which there is no consensus) may be encouraged to drop out (Ryan, Habibis and Craft, 1997). Consequently, although one can be sure that holders of the BSW have completed the requirements for the degree, it is ultimately left to prospective employers to determine the professional suitability of new graduates. To this extent, social work education in Australia is more akin to many places in North America, where social work educators may consider it more appropriate for employers or professional associations (or registration bodies where these exist) to determine whether or not a graduate with a criminal record is suitable for employment as a professional social worker (Born and Carroll, 1989). This stance also recognises that in some settings, a prior criminal record is not a barrier to being an effective service provider (Abram and Hoge, 2003).

In conclusion, the question I leave with you is whether it is the role of social work educators to play a leading role in gatekeeping to ensure that 'unsuitable' candidates are denied access to courses leading to a professional qualification in social work. Alternatively, should social work educators not only be teaching a programme of social work education in which overcoming social exclusion underpins the taught content, but also be re-examining their own beliefs and practices concerning both the provision of social work education and who is deemed fit to graduate with a social work degree? I'm not convinced that a straightforward answer is universally applicable and, equally, we cannot ignore our own national cultures when seeking to resolve such a dilemma. Nevertheless, considering the practices in countries other than our own may just help us clarify our own beliefs as to what role we believe schools of social work have in deciding who is fit and proper to be a social worker.

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