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Comment on Lessons from American Social Work Education: Caution Ahead

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Australian social work education has undergone considerable change in the past few years and Karger usefully raises a number of important issues for the profession and higher education providers to consider. However, it is difficult when engaging with an article such as this to distinguish between arguments based on evidence and those that appear to be based on self interest. I am a long-time admirer of UQ's social work school and its staff (having been a student there and having worked there twice), but it's hard not to ask the question: 'are some of the arguments put forward in this paper fear-mongering designed to protect the interests of a sandstone university which enjoyed a monopoly over social work education for 50 years?' The fact that I now work at a university which is one of the seven starting up a new social work program in south-east Queensland may inevitably lead others, and probably me too, to question my own self interest in the matter. Nevertheless, it is important to examine some of Karger's (2012) arguments to tease apart what seems reasonable and what, perhaps in a lesson from Australia to America, might be considered 'furfy'. My main argument here is that there is a lack of evidence, a lack of data, on which to make many of the claims. Karger also agrees that the lack of data is a major problem, although unfortunately he continues to argue his position as if it were based in fact.

The basis of Karger's concerns for Australian social work is found in the growth of the number of social work programs in the United States and the argued consequential growth in the number of qualified social workers: 'The unregulated growth in the number of [US] social work education programs has led to an oversupply of social workers, especially in highly desirable urban areas' (Karger 2012, p. x). While this *may* be true, there is no evidence of this in the paper. The fact that US social work salaries are low and have grown little does not in itself demonstrate that wages have been kept down due to an oversupply of social workers. There may be a wide range of factors impacting on social work salaries in a country that is notorious for its inadequate resourcing of social services. While the Bureau of Labor Statistics data – suggesting increasing labour market demand for social workers – may be flawed, this does not necessarily mean the reverse is correct. What might be useful in demonstrating an oversupply of social workers would be rates of unemployment or under-employment among BSW or MSW graduates. I'm not sure if such data is available, but in its absence it may be wise to hold off from assertive claims about an oversupply in social work. And certainly there is no basis for drawing implications for the Australian context.

In turning to the Australian situation, Karger (2012, p. x) argues that 'Similar to the US, Australia is following the model of a "big" social work profession as opposed to a smaller, more highly trained and specialised workforce'. While the last part of this claim may be correct, can Australia really be seen to be pursuing a 'big' social work profession? If we assume that in 2009 Australia had 22 million inhabitants and there were 17,000 social workers (Healy and Lonne, 2010), then social workers comprised approximately 0.077% of the population, or 77 social workers per 100,000 people. This compares with 350 medical doctors (AIHW, 2001a), 1105 nurses (AIHW, 2011b), and 296 welfare workers per 100,000 (the latter based on the grouping of welfare, recreation and community arts workers and welfare support workers by Healy and Lonne, 2010). This further compares with 148 social workers per 100,000 in the United States (based on Karger's reporting of the Bureau of Labor

Statistics and assuming a US population of 310 million). Even if the number of social workers in Australia has grown from 9,000 to 17,000 from 1996 to 2009, surely there is room to grow further yet?

Regarding social work education, while the distinction between the bachelor and masters level social work qualifications may be clearer in the United States (Karger, 2012), the Australian masters qualifying route is still in its infancy. It may take the profession, higher education providers and the sector some time to adjust to this new award and its popularity among potential students. What is true though is that this type of award is not without precedent. There are many other professions (such as occupational therapy and physiotherapy) that have both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifying pathways, and indeed masters qualifying social work degrees (similar to those in Australia) have been offered alongside undergraduate social work degrees for many years in the UK. Further, the masters qualifying degree is identified as a legitimate pathway for entry to a profession in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the Australian government has long provided Commonwealth-supported postgraduate places to students enrolled in such degrees. What is noticeable in the AQF is the emphasis placed on the research component of this degree and this may be one area where a distinction is made between the postgraduate and undergraduate pathways. Indeed, it is common in the UK for masters qualifying programs, in contrast with undergraduate programs, to have a dissertation component. This may be something worth considering in the Australian context. Certainly if the aim is to increase the number of social workers in Australia (and as suggested I am an advocate of this) then the masters qualifying degree is a key tool in this endeavour.

Some of Karger's (2012) arguments in relation to the growth of social work education programs in certain parts of the country are undeniable. But how much evidence is there of over-saturation? While there has certainly been a growth in social work programs in south-east Queensland, a number of these draw students from outside this region. Three of the universities offer distance education programs, and my own university, Southern Cross University, covers, as well as the Gold Coast, the Mid-North Coast and Northern Rivers regions of NSW, which themselves comprise approximately 500,000 people (ABS, 2012). Further, do declining student numbers and admission standards in undergraduate social work – and this is specifically what Healy and Lonne (2010) were referring to – signify 'oversaturation'? I would argue that there are other factors impacting on undergraduate enrolments, including in recent years high rates of employment, which lead people to consider the opportunity costs of participating in higher education. And this is also in the context of the exponential growth in the number of students enrolled in the masters qualifying programs (Healy and Lonne 2010).

I am concerned also that Karger (2012) focuses so much on the lowered admission standards of undergraduate social work degrees as a threat to the integrity of the profession. Personally, I don't see anything wrong with social work having the same admission standard as social science. Do we really want to only be taking students who were in the top decile at high school? What about all those students, myself included, who were not so good at maths and science when they were 16 but found their feet at university studying the things they were passionate about? And where is the evidence that social workers who achieved excellent scores in high school produce better outcomes for social work clients? If we want to improve the quality of social work, perhaps we should look more at what happens on social work programs – and the extent to which people are failed or deemed unsuitable for practice – rather than focusing too much on admission standards based on high school performance?

And then there is the argument about the 'entrepreneurial university administrators' setting up dodgy programs to make a buck. Again, while Karger (2012) highlights the lack of evidence from the AASW about the extent to which social work programs meet and maintain the accreditation standards, he nonetheless suggests that a whole host of standards are being breached. There is also no evidence provided that some social work programs are underfunded and 'thus there is a likely significant variation in the quality of social work education programs across Australia' (Karger, 2012, p. x). While not said outright, it is not hard to imagine that the universities being targeted here are the newer, smaller and probably regional universities. Certainly not those universities that are members of the Group of Eight. If regional universities are being targeted, then this is sad given the need for more social workers in regional and rural areas (DEEWR, 2011), and the lower higher education participation rates in many regional centres (DEEWR, 2010). With regard to my own university, I can say that we will meet all of the AASW accreditation standards, including a minimum of five full-time equivalent social work qualified staff teaching on the program and a Level D academic position. There is no particular reason why my university, or any other university, would be underfunded compared to another university delivering social work education. (Although, as highlighted in the recent Higher Education Base Funding Review, it is recognised that all social work programs are underfunded in comparison with other disciplines (DEEWR, 2011)). Each of the Australian universities receives the same amount of money per EFTSL, although, granted, how this is distributed by the University to social work programs may vary. Arguably though it may be small regional universities that value social work and the role social work programs play in the university, more than large GO8 universities where social work runs the risk of being marginalised in institutions that value the 'hard sciences' above all.

If some universities – including the newer and smaller regional universities – are having difficulty meeting the AASW accreditation standards, then perhaps we need to look at those standards and whether they make sense in all contexts. Or, as Karger (2012) usefully suggests, develop collaborative strategies to share resources and expertise. Karger makes this point in relation to better funded universities supporting less well resourced universities. With respect to small regional universities, I would suggest that a network of regional universities could also provide a basis for expanding capacity in social work education and research in regional areas. There are also other structures available, such as the Australian Council for the Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW) and the Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE), which can also facilitate such collaboration.

It's a shame that Karger (2012) sees the developments in social work and social work education in Australia as a 'race to the bottom'. That may be an accurate view of what is happening in the United States, but I just don't see the evidence of it in this country, and certainly Karger does not provide it. Not that there aren't challenges of course. We have a complex and diverse health and community services sector with many varied professions and occupations playing a host of roles. Social workers comprise only a very small proportion of the employees in this sector and, as argued earlier, in no way is this comparable to the proportion of other professions per head of population or indeed to the proportion of social workers per head of the United States population. That the wider community and universities are identifying social work as a valued activity – with more people wanting to become social workers and more universities wanting to offer social work programs – is a cause for celebration. And, I would argue, we need a diversity of people entering social work programs, not only those who were academically gifted in high school. What is critical though, and this is where I do agree

with Karger, is better mechanisms in place at a program level and within the AASW (or possibly another regulating body) to ensure that the quality and resourcing of social work education in this country is high and that all graduating social workers are able to perform at the appropriate level in relation to our practice standards.

All things considered, I don't think Karger (2012) is operating solely in terms of the immediate interests of his institution. It is very understandable that he would be concerned that mistakes that he sees as having been made in the United States do not occur in Australia. However, we are operating in a different environment and we are not experiencing the same kind of impact from the GFC as in the United States. There certainly are more players in terms Australian social work education now than in the past and no doubt competition amongst higher education providers has increased considerably. However, Karger has provided no evidence in his paper that the quality of Australian social work education or the competence of social work graduates has been negatively impacted by these changes. While I'm not usually a proponent of laissez-faire economics, the competitive nature of the social work education 'market-place' is very much reflective of the wider higher education sector given the changes that have occurred in the last ten to twenty years. And arguably, this is better than having large elite universities exercising a monopoly over social work education. Nonetheless, as Karger suggests, there is considerable scope for moving beyond the competitive climate to enable greater collaboration between higher education providers to ensure high quality social work programs across the whole country.

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