

# Becoming a social work student : A complex story of loss and gain

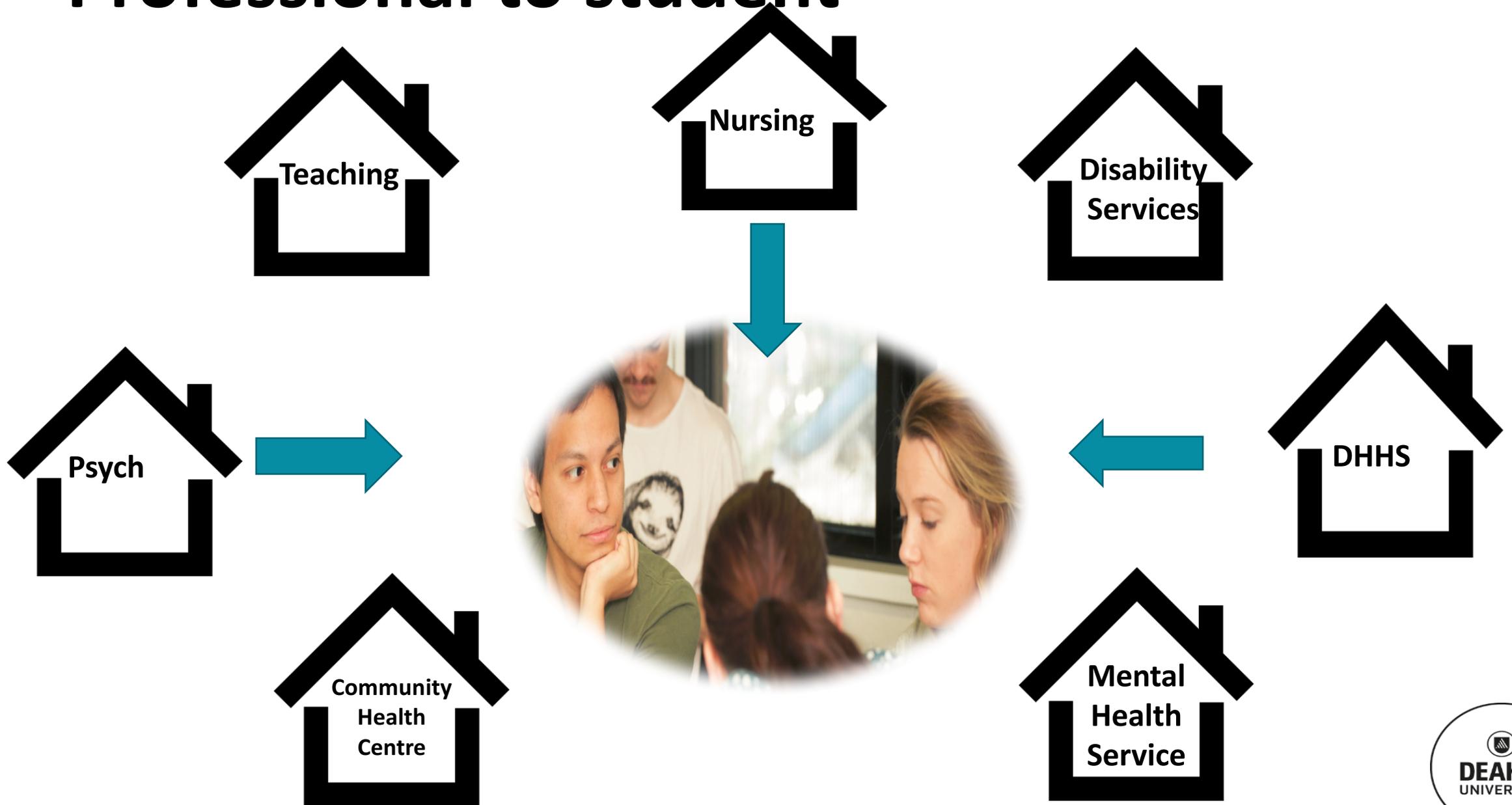
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# Professional to student



# What we wanted to know:

- How the process of developing a student identity occurs for post graduate students who have already been in a professional role
- What are the implications for social work educators of responding to differences in how students process this transition?
- How can we ensure the best outcome for students and the profession with respect to making the most of the student role?

# Literature has extensively described

- Transition to competence in academic skills (e.g. Devlin 2013, Goldingay et al., 2014; Kift 2009)
- Transition from being a student to joining the workforce (e.g. Aglias 2010, Smith & Pilling 2008)

# What has not been covered

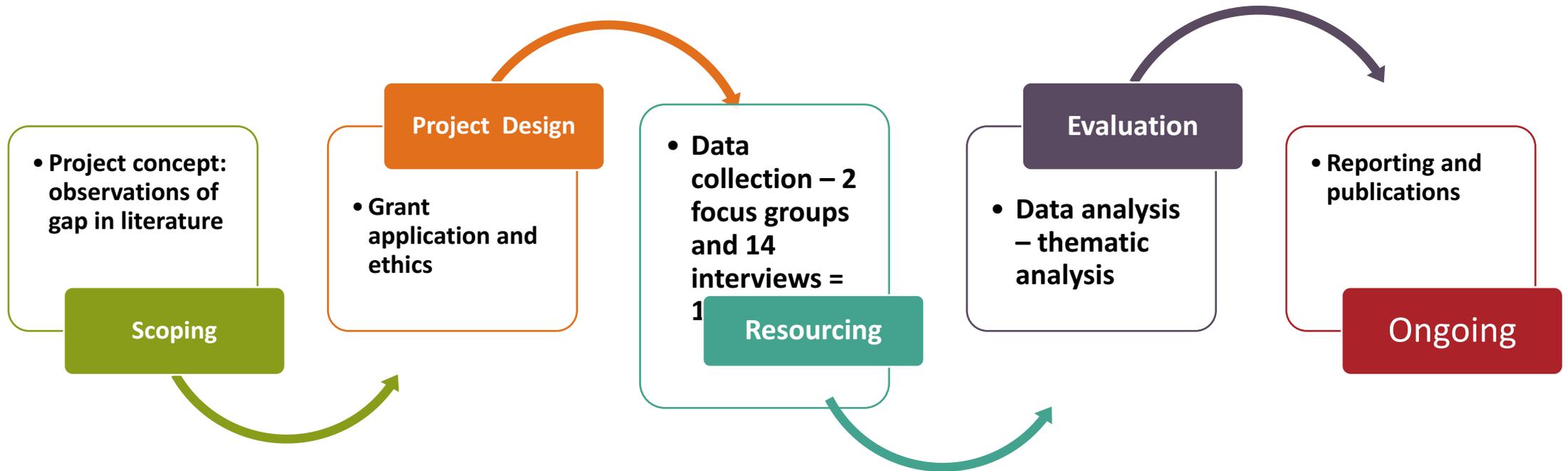
- How do people who have worked in the field for a long time learn to adopt a student identity?
- What does/should a student identity look like?
- How can educators support them in this transition in order to ensure the best outcome for students and for the profession?

# Students with professional experience

- Resisted the role of student and did not perceive themselves in need of learning new skills (Crisp and Maidment 2009).
- ‘ . . .more resistant to learning and have more fixed attitudes and beliefs than students without prior experience (Fox, 2004; Pollard, Miers, & Gilchrist, 2004).



# Method



# Gain

if anything it is liberating. Because it's an opportunity to let me change my life personally yeah and work towards a new goal.

## Liberated

I actually find it quite enjoyable to take a break from being the expert in things,

Patient notes, for instance, I can naturally notice the quality probably increasing a little bit, as a result of having done an hour before on an assignment. I'm in that zone of thinking really critically and broadly.

## Validated, skill growth and opportunities

## Refreshed

I think it's refreshing to be a student again where you're in a place of learning and you're open-minded and you're there to learn and improve your skills'

. . . those sorts of jobs, I will either put my hand up for or they will be given to me, based on I'm the student, I'm doing my masters in social work

# Loss

. .bit of a **reluctance to participate** sometimes because you wonder about the power thing

But then now that I'm studying and when I'm a student, I'm **not really in control**

I feel like it **lessens me a little bit** by being a student. People, they look at you like, "Oh you're just a student."

## Lessened, not valued

You're used to being more of a consult role and people sort of **valuing your opinion** . . .

I would go so far as to say that there've been moments where I've actually felt **violated** as a professional with skill and experience

## Hesitant Violated

so its that **questioning yourself** again rather than saying I'm quite confident.

I don't let other people know I'm integrating the two, it's just something that I do personally and **secretly**

Going back to being a student you can feel a bit **vulnerable**

I'm very **careful** about who I choose to tell that I'm studying . . .

## Under Confident

## Shamed, vulnerable

# STIGMATISED, DEMORALISED, IN A STATE OF FLUX

I guess I feel like I'm not as in the rise at much and then that kind of creeps into work.

...having to do that work all over again for free can be quite, almost demoralising I think in a way.

I suppose my identity's in a state of flux, I suppose you could say; good in some respects but it could be better.

little bit of stigma with saying that you are a student that can sometimes evoke a bit of internal anxiety.

So my complaint, I suppose, is having to push me through all of these 101 first year out tasks, whilst I was functioning as a senior professional

## Challenging the dominant discourse:

### ‘You are either a learner or an expert’

- How to support the development of a positive professional identity where you are learning as well as you are an ‘expert’?
- This identity is essential for competent social work practice yet it is so difficult to adopt due to our tendency to polarize these positions

# THE SELF AND IDENTITY – FOR DISCUSSION

**For many of these students, it seemed cultural context often only allowed for experts or novice identities**

**This limits the type of identities available for those who are experts in the field but who choose to become students**

**How can we support students to develop meaningful constructions of the self as ‘expert as learner’?**

**Further research: How might age, ethnic background, gender, and other aspects of social location influence how this happens?**



# Findings: Competing discourses?

## Student positionality: University promises

- Student aims and hopes for the future
- Education as a right or privilege?
- Employment
- Access for all?
- Poverty vs Education (fees, placement costs, unable to work etc.)
- Inclusive of diversity? Ability, sexuality, ethnicity etc.
- University attracting students – a competitive business
- High fees and costs of attending University
- Promises of jobs for the future
- Ability and disability access; LGBTQI support, racism and other exclusions?

# SUMMARY:

## EXPERT AS LEARNER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Supporting students and new graduates to adopt an '**expert as learner**' identity will further enrich the social work profession

It means being comfortable with the vulnerability and uncertainty of 'not knowing' despite being in the field for a long time

This enables us to more effectively embody social work values of client as expert and respond better to a diverse client group



A woman with dark hair and glasses is sitting at a desk, writing in a notebook. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. The desk is lit by a blue desk lamp. There is a green pen holder on the desk. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

We need new ways of thinking about supporting professionals to become students

New ways to challenge the discourse that you are either a learner or an expert - .

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