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The eco-social approach to social work curricula – a live example

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Abstract

Social work curricula and education is undertaking a transformation. Eco-social models of practice that encompass environmental and sustainability issues can no longer be ignored, especially in a dominant capitalist society. This paper will present insight into the journey and challenges undertaken in delivering environmental social work and sustainability curricula and education for practice. In 2016 Charles Sturt University was the first university in Australia to be certified as carbon neutral and recognised as being 'green'. This is not only reflected in the footprint of the University, but also in the curricula and education perspectives for social work education and practice. In 2016 key decisions were undertaken by the Course Director to build core and elective components into both the undergraduate and postgraduate social work course structures that were dedicated to eco-social and environmental social work. This encompassed governance, policy and practice for future practitioners in a range of areas including mental health, vulnerable populations, climate change, eco refugees, disaster recovery, and community resilience. The revision also integrated core curricula reflecting Indigenous Australian practice for human service workers that views sustainability and eco-social work through the lenses of our traditional custodians. This journey is taking social work in the right direction.

Introduction

- In 2016 Charles Sturt University was the first university in Australia to be certified as carbon neutral and recognised as being ‘green’.
- This is not only reflected in the footprint of the University, but also in the curricula and education perspectives for social work education and practice.

Transformation – why?

- Policy and governance
- Response to broader of impact of globalisation, capitalism on the environment
- Impact on the readiness and practice of social workers
- Curricula proactiveness not responsiveness

(ACOSS, 2013; Boetto, 2017; Boetto & Bell, 2015; Dominelli, 2012; Navi, Pisaniello, Hansen, & Nitschke, 2017)

Eco-social models of practice

- Encompass environmental and sustainability issues
- Challenging Dominant Discourses
- Duality of neoliberalism and the welfare state – discourse of conflict (Boetto, 2017)
- Practice - individual, family, community and environment

Insight into the journey

- Not straight forward! An understatement!
- Commenced in 2014
- Identifying the nexus of what needed to stay and what needed to go in an already packed and accredited degree
- Modification approved in 2017 for introduction in 2018

Key decision points

1. Social Work Board of Studies – a proposal
2. Green and eco-social social work research within CSU
3. Industry partners – TAFE, FaCS and others
4. Accreditation processes – a proposal
5. Undergraduate and postgraduate courses committees with School
6. Faculty Courses Committees

Integrated curricula

1. Build core and elective components
2. Undergraduate and post graduate
3. Encompass Indigenous practice and wisdom
4. Encompassed governance, policy and practice for future practitioners in a range of areas including:

Integrated curricula

- ✓ mental health,
- ✓ vulnerable populations,
- ✓ climate change,
- ✓ eco refugees,
- ✓ disaster recovery,
- ✓ community resilience, and
- ✓ Indigenous Australian practice for human service workers that views sustainability and eco-social work through the lenses of our traditional custodians

Challenges within and outside

- Bringing the discipline forward as one
- Identifying industry need
- Researching the current political, policy and practice issues e.g. defence report, ACOSS, and key others Boetto, Dominelli, Gray

Courageous conversations and action!

- Key subjects needed to be changed
- Traditional subjects needed to be merged with other subjects to make room – very courageous conversations!!
- Reduction in electives to add new subjects
- Review of all electives
- Changes to course structure and service teaching arrangements
- The subject development team .. Take the lead!

Conclusion

- Necessary and hard conversations resulted in contemporary, responsive social work and social welfare degrees
- Sustainability, eco-social models developed in curricula for education and practice
- Indigenous practice and wisdom including decolonisation and sustainability captured in a stand alone compulsory subject
- A journey worthwhile for social work!

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