



The right level on a level playing field

Considerable confusion exists in this country about the level of formal education at which counsellors should be trained. Some thirty years ago, much-quoted research from the U.S. (summarised in Carkuff, 1969, p. 3–18) suggested that ordinary people with no special training could be perceived by clients as more helpful than highly qualified professionals. Although the idea of the ‘lay helper’ with some basic training is still around, and research still points to the lack of correlation between years of university training and better client outcomes, it is now generally accepted that credible counsellors should possess a degree. Many employing organisations insist on that degree being in a recognised helping profession—usually psychology or social work. This is felt to be some kind of a guarantee that the employee has been properly prepared, with a grasp of ethical principles and exposure to a range of models of helping. Whether such training actually leads to greater competence is debatable, but the belief is too entrenched to ignore.

Simultaneously, counselling has tried to establish itself in the perception of governments and the general public as an alternative to psychology and social work. To have counselling degree programs offered by, or sponsored by, universities has been viewed naturally enough as part of that route to a distinct professional status. This shift has been accelerated by the fact that both major political parties have, ever since the Dawkins reforms, opened university education to much larger numbers of students (including many who would once have had no chance of gaining admission) and, simultaneously, made universities themselves responsible for earning part of their ‘keep’ by charging fees. Further reforms have ‘levelled the playing field’ by making it possible for private providers of higher education to offer accredited degree programs in direct competition with publicly funded universities. And if that wasn’t enough, the old distinctions between levels of qualification (diploma, bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, doctorate) have been considerably eroded. Now, a student with no first degree can even (in some circumstances) enter a university Master’s course; a student holding a TAFE diploma can gain credit for a year or more towards a three year bachelor’s degree at university. It is even possible for some students to complete first year university subjects while still at high school!

Under the economic rationalist imperative, both universities and private institutes have been under pressure to inflate the names of their programs in order to lure students into them—quite apart from pandering shamelessly to narcissism in their marketing (*‘Study your way’; ‘A degree as unique as you are’*). A Master’s degree sounds better than a Bachelor’s degree—and better by far than a mere ‘Graduate Diploma’. The master’s degree by research has almost vanished. Twenty-two year olds who are perceived as potential researchers are persuaded to go straight into Ph.D. programs—for which, incidentally, many of them are not remotely ready—because Ph.D. completions earn valuable points for the Department.

Coursework master’s degrees in professional disciplines, which would once have been seen as requiring a level of prior knowledge and skill in that discipline, are now offered to absolute beginners. Bachelor’s degrees, once regarded as offering a broad-based introductory knowledge of the humanities, the social sciences, or the sciences, with students ‘majoring’ in one (occasionally two) disciplines of their choice, have lost ground to discipline-specific first degrees. Hence a ‘Bachelor of Counselling’ program at undergraduate level is not only possible, but is

actually being offered in some institutions. In this climate, students have, not surprisingly, opted for qualifications that sound more prestigious. Having interviewed students for Master of Counselling degrees at two different universities, and taught them at three, I have been perplexed and concerned to find people applying for a Masters level program with lower levels of self knowledge and clinical sensitivity than those who I interviewed for admission to an entry-level Graduate Diploma—but with a good deal less humility!

Some of these changes have been beneficial. We can more easily admit mature aged students with no formal education beyond high school, but who in other respects show evidence of intelligence and dedication, and (as every tertiary teacher knows) many of these become highly rewarding students to work with. Many fine people in their thirties, forties and fifties have graduated with distinction as a result, and given the importance of maturity and life experience in the counselling and

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psychotherapy profession, this is a significant gain. But there have been substantial losses as well. Standards have been eroded, hierarchies of knowledge and skill blurred, and confusion created in the minds of both students and the general public. A ‘level playing field’ has resulted in a muddle of levels and a loss of clarity as to what they mean.

Where should we in the counselling and psychotherapy profession position ourselves in this brave new world? Let me offer my own opinion. It will not please everyone, but it is based on twenty years’ experience, across a number of different institutions.

I do not believe that we should be offering degrees in counselling at undergraduate level. While I agree that there is ‘counselling-specific knowledge’, I do not think this is sufficient justification for the offering of an entire degree program or even an undergraduate major, in counselling. The competent practitioner in counselling or psychotherapy is an emotionally mature individual, with self knowledge, life experience, and a well-developed sensitivity to others. The average school leaver is not this person, nor, I fear, is the average new graduate in her or his early twenties.

At the University of Western Sydney, a ‘Counselling sub-major’ (4 units/subjects) was until 2009 offered to undergraduate students, most of whom were majoring in psychology, social work or social welfare, with a few studying health and criminology. Only a small minority of these students were emotionally mature enough to take something worthwhile from the subjects they studied with us. In skills practice sessions, student ‘clients’ would stay obstinately away from anything painful, while student ‘counsellors’ would complain about how tedious it was to practice empathic paraphrasing when they wanted to ask clever questions. Video demonstrations by famous therapists were greeted with yawns (*“He’s so slow! They’re not getting anywhere!”*). In Yalom-model group work, the majority stayed at the level of trivial self-disclosure, attempts to ‘counsel’ others, and positives-only feedback. During lectures of high personal

relevance, some students preferred to text their boyfriends, or whisper to each other in the back row. And these students had chosen to study counselling! Some months after she commenced her first job (in Child Protection) one young social worker emailed me, "Now I realise why you wanted us to do those things. We thought it was a bit of a joke—but you were actually giving us what we were going to need for the work." Such honest admissions are rare!

Of course, we could attempt to restrict entry to an undergraduate counselling program to mature-age students, admitting only the handful of 18 year-olds who, at interview, showed the potential to handle the demands of the program (of course, the mature-age student would need to be interviewed as well, since mere age is no guarantee of emotional stability or resilience). But any such program is likely to be flooded with applicants ("We thought it was a cruisy option", grinned one undergraduate), and no university today would tolerate apparent discrimination on the basis of age, let alone on the basis of 'emotional maturity'. Nor would most universities tolerate the staff-intensive, time-consuming process of interviewing a large body of applicants at undergraduate level. So no, I don't think that the setting up of undergraduate counselling programs is a good idea—even if, as some suggest, supervised practice forms part of the curriculum only in second or third year. How many agencies would want their clients to be counselled by twenty year-old beginners?

Instead, let's continue (as many institutions now do) to offer entry-level programs for counselling at graduate level only. Those who do not possess a first degree should be encouraged to complete one—three years of arts or social science should offer would-be counsellors a broadly based education, maybe train them in critical thinking, and (though this seems less and less likely in these days of 'everybody must pass') teach them to read and write at university level. As Deborah Luepnitz pointed out some years ago, subjects like philosophy and literature are just as relevant to the enterprise of counselling and psychotherapy—which share much with the humanities—as social sciences like sociology, psychology and social anthropology.

Completion of an undergraduate degree might also be some kind of measure (admittedly a pretty rough one) of intelligence, and (as my next column will argue) counsellors do need to be intelligent, however politically incorrect it may be to say so. Finally, insistence on completion of an undergraduate degree gives younger applicants three or four more years of crucial life experience.

So no, we should not be offering counselling as a discipline at undergraduate level, and if there are counselling or counselling-related units (subjects) available as electives at undergraduate level, students should not receive academic credit for them towards higher, counselling-specific qualifications. Entry-level clinical training should start at graduate level, as it does in the US, and as it does in Psychology in this country. In the older way of thinking about tertiary awards, 'Graduate Diploma' would be an appropriate title for such a qualification. Realistically, however, degree inflation has created pressure to see a Master's degree as an entry-level qualification.

My suggested compromise is to create a three year, part time Master's program. A part-time program is easier to contemplate for older, employed applicants who seek a career transition to counselling. Part-time study is also appropriate because the learning of process (see my last column) cannot be compressed into 'short courses' and 'intensives' as (it is assumed) content-based programs can.

There would be two exit points from the full three year program: successful completion of the first year would confer a Graduate Certificate in Counselling. It would not involve work with real clients, or be a license to practice; however, it would serve the needs of many newly-

qualified psychologists and social workers, now employed in the industry. The year would offer counselling-specific skills and knowledge (as more than one young Psychology graduate has remarked, "I learned more in one semester of Counselling than in three years of Psychology!"). It would also require self-reflection, interpersonal awareness and receiving constructive feedback from staff and peers (see my last column). Such students would also be seeing clients under supervision from social workers and psychologists within their workplace, and most would opt to continue their training within those professions.

For students without a psychology, social work or social welfare background, the Graduate Certificate year would simply form the foundational year of their entry-level qualification as a counsellor. Assuming they had demonstrated a satisfactory level of skills competence and self-awareness, they would progress to the second year. This year would contain supervised practice with real clients in an agency placement, and would lead to a Graduate Diploma. This qualification would permit the graduate to work under supervision in direct service delivery. These students would need to accumulate supervised clinical practice hours with 'real' clients (as opposed to simulated counselling with fellow students or volunteer clients) to be credible in applying for non-Psychology, non-Social Work jobs in the sector.

Ideally, students would then work for a year or two full-time as counsellors before completing the third and final year for their Master's award. As I shall argue in a future column, even the 'content' knowledge specific to counselling and psychotherapy only makes real sense to students who have sat with enough clients, over enough hours. Teaching it to those who are really just beginners with a tiny minimum of clinical hours is largely wasted. Advanced skills, more challenging supervision, and particular areas of specialised knowledge (e.g., the details of how to approach particular client populations, particular therapeutic models, or particular personality types) will be welcomed and fully appreciated by students who have done four or five sessions a day over a couple of years, and have begun to feel comfortable with the process—and, probably, to question some of what they earlier learned. Thus, at the end of a three-to-five year period, our students will be three or four years older and wiser. They will also be fully qualified in a real sense.

To my way of thinking, such a program would restore some meaning and credibility to the Master's award (which in the medieval university meant a 'license to practise') in the context of training for a 'relational art'. While Psychology will always be a science, and rightly so, Counselling should be proud to describe itself as an 'art'—an art informed by continuing clinical wisdom as well as by outcome studies, by personal awareness and sensitivity as well as by scientific knowledge of human beings, how they think, how they develop, and why they experience conflict and pain.

Carkuff, R. (1969). *Helping and human relations: A primer for lay and professional helpers*, Vol. 1. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.



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