

ARTICLES

# Shaping the Profession: Australian Counselling Educators' Perspectives on Professional Identity, Values, and Education

Nathan Beel<sup>a</sup>, Sharyn Taylor<sup>b</sup>, Christine Chinchin<sup>c</sup>

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Counselling educators play a major role in shaping the profession by socialising the future generations of counsellors; however, they have been subject to little research. This study explores the views and perceptions of Australian counselling educators about the counselling profession's values, identity, and educational practices. For this qualitative study, we interviewed eight counselling educators and applied thematic analysis to develop themes. Three primary themes were developed, namely, the emphasis on the person of the therapist, the importance of quality counselling education, and the distinctiveness and credibility of the counselling profession. The counselling educators expressed core values in alignment with contemporary Australian counselling scholarship, while also noting potential threats to counsellor education and, downstream, the reputation of the profession. These threats included training institution agendas that undermined educator attempts to maintain the quality of counsellor preparation. Given the threats to quality arising from the training institutions' own conflicts of interest, professional bodies may need to consider additional gatekeeping mechanisms for graduates entering the profession.

Counselling educators play a pivotal part in preparing counselling students for the counselling profession. The preparation requires an introduction to and socialisation into the history, values, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and culture of the profession (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2008). The teaching and role-modelling of counselling educators contribute towards the formation of a professional identity as counsellors or psychotherapists (Dollarhide et al.,

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<sup>a</sup> Nathan Beel (PhD, MCoun) is a registered counsellor and clinical supervisor with the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA). He is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology and Wellbeing, University of Southern Queensland, and a sessional educator with the Australian College of Applied Professions. Nathan has publications in counsellor education, telehealth, and male-friendly counselling. He can be contacted at [Nathan.Beel@UniSQ.edu.au](mailto:Nathan.Beel@UniSQ.edu.au)

<sup>b</sup> Sharyn Taylor is a registered counsellor with over 10 years' experience working at community-based organisations in the alcohol and other drugs treatment sector in Australia. She supports clients in both individual counselling and group settings to address their substance use issues. Sharyn's special interests include supporting the professional development of counsellors and the transformative role of counselling in recovery. She holds a Bachelor of Human Services (Counselling Major), a Graduate Certificate in Alcohol and Drug Studies, and will complete a Master of Counselling at the University of Southern Queensland in 2026, after which she plans to commence a counselling supervision practice.

<sup>c</sup> Christine Chinchin (PhD, MEd) has been involved in counselling education since the 1990s. This has been both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Christine's PhD focused on learning in tertiary education and she proposed that counselling is a specific form of learning. Her lengthy experience provides a unique historical perspective of the issues faced by counselling educators and the profession within Australia.

2023; Hamilton, 2019). Counselling educators themselves, however, may or may not have been socialised into the counselling profession (Beel, 2023; Calley & Hawley, 2008) and since counselling is a relatively young profession in Australia, striving to demarcate itself from more established similar helping professions (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015), it is important to understand the counselling educators' own views about the counselling profession and its values. Given the potential professional diversity of Australian counselling educators, this study seeks to understand the views and perspectives of a sample of those socialising the next generation of members of the counselling profession.

### **The Counselling Profession in Australia**

The Australian counselling<sup>1</sup> profession was formally founded at a national level in the late 1990s with the formation of two distinct and independent associations—the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA) as noted by Beel et al. (2022). At present, the profession is self-regulated and recognition has advanced. For example, counsellors are accepted as providers for employee assistance programs, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and private health funds (Armstrong, 2006; PACFA, 2018, 2021). Like counselling professions internationally (Eissenstat & Bohecker, 2018), Australian counselling as a profession has struggled to gain governmental recognition (O'Hara, 2023; Pelling & Sullivan, 2006). The counselling profession's primary strategies for recognition have been developing professional association structures that stipulate specific requirements for membership and regulation (Schofield, 2008) via ethical codes (ACA, 2022; PACFA, 2017), consumer complaint processes, training standards (ACA, 2012; PACFA, 2022), scope of practice documents (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018), and a shared online practitioner registry (<https://www.arcapregister.com.au/>).

### **Counselling Identity**

One of the marks of the development of a profession is a sense of unique and unified identity shared among its members (Weinrach et al., 2001; Woo et al., 2014). A strong sense of identity is believed to be an essential aspect of counselling professionalisation (Montgomery et al., 2018). The development of a clearly demarcated, united, and cohesive collective identity, recognised internally and externally, has been challenging for the Australian counselling profession for several reasons. These include the existence of two competing peak bodies (O'Hara, 2023) which differ in their training standards, registration, ethics, and attitudes towards minimum standards (Armstrong, 2006; Platt & Pelling, 2021); confusion resulting from the adoption and centralisation of skills and knowledge shared by, drawn from,

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<sup>1</sup> The term counselling is used in this paper inclusively to represent counselling, psychotherapy, and Indigenous healing practices.

and similar to those used by other professions (Eissenstat & Bohecker, 2018); terminology ambiguity (Beel, 2017); internal debates between counsellor and psychotherapist identities (O'Hara, 2023); and the profession's lack of governmental recognition (Lewis, 2015). A legitimate and distinct counsellor identity, both internal and external, is supported by professional associations, membership requirements, ethical codes, training standards, and dedicated counselling qualifications (Platt & Pelling, 2021).

### **Counselling Values**

One of the core tasks of establishing a new profession is clearly demarcating it from existing cognate professions (Weinrach et al., 2001); for students, part of identifying and adopting a professional identity is to connect with the guiding beliefs and values of their profession (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Counselling values can be identified in the codes of ethics (ACA, 2022; PACFA, 2017), scopes of practice (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018), and various association statements on the peak body websites (PACFA, n.d.-c). The distinguishing core values between counselling and cognate professions are more difficult to isolate.

Various scholars have suggested values with which counsellors in Australia should align. Examples of such values are inclusiveness (Schofield, 2015), client centredness (ACA, 2020; Beel et al., 2023; PACFA, 2018), a wellbeing focus (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015), a humanistic approach (Beel et al., 2022), professionalism (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015), prioritising the therapeutic relationship (Day, 2015), client empowerment (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015), and emphasising the person of the counsellor (Moir-Bussey et al., 2016). Day (2015) argued for values from a philosophical paradigmatic difference, suggesting that the counselling profession should commit to its common factors, those being the centrality of the client, the therapeutic relationship, reflective practice, a biopsychosocial paradigm, subjectivity, and a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes evidence of therapeutic measurement and legitimacy. Day contrasted these factors against those of the more socially dominant medical model, namely, pathology-orientated and evidence-based approaches, each being comparatively reductionist. Australia does not have an authoritative guide to professional values across the profession, contrary to the United States, which has clearly elucidated its core values into a single concise definition (Kaplan et al., 2014). Because of the lack of universally agreed upon and articulated values, educators must decide which values they believe represent the profession of counselling.

### **Counselling Educators**

Counselling education in Australia is well established. University offerings were first delivered in the 1980s (Brear & Dorrian, 2010a; Schofield, 2013) and are currently estimated to number over 80 courses from the diploma level onwards (Abkhezr & Bath, 2023). Contributing to these are more than 330 academics (Beel & Purvis, 2024a), many of whom are accredited with at least one of the two peak bodies. Professional course accreditation requires training

providers to demonstrate to ACA and/or PACFA that their courses meet the respective accreditation training standards. Once approved, the courses may be listed as approved professional counselling training pathways. This enables training institutes to promote their courses to prospective students and guarantee that by completing the training, the student will meet the educational requirements for membership.

Counselling educators have been instrumental in the formation of one of the peak bodies, PACFA. They contributed significantly by providing leadership, committee membership, and guidance in developing training standards, ethical codes, and other regulatory mechanisms (Schofield et al., 2006). Counselling educators instil the theory, practice, and values of counselling into their students, which, in turn, influences the profession and society in general. They develop the students' professional counselling identity by designing curricula, learning objectives, and learning resources (Calley & Hawley, 2008). Counselling educators role model and shape students' attitudes, skills, and knowledge through their teaching, supervision, and mentoring (Woo et al., 2016). In addition, counselling educators play pivotal roles in introducing students to knowledge about the profession including its organisation, registration, and philosophy (Puglia, 2008). This is deemed an important aspect in developing the counsellor's professional identity (Granello & Gunawan, 2023).

Not only are counselling educators commonly involved in counselling education, but they may also be practitioners or clinical supervisors and hold active positions in associations representing professional counsellors. They make a significant contribution to the counselling profession and its identity and were chosen for this study because of their capacity to provide a rich set of data on the themes and narratives existing in counselling education. Their insights are expected to make a valuable contribution to reaching a unified identity of the counselling profession and its increased recognition in Australia.

Although the profession has clearly defined itself structurally, little discourse has been devoted to its underpinning philosophy and values. Scholars have emphasised the importance of a core set of philosophical assumptions to be adopted by counselling professional associations (Woo et al., 2014) which would become a foundation on which students and practitioners could build their core professional counselling. This would serve to contextualise and guide students' practice and help them clearly demarcate their practice from those of other professions who use counselling (Remley & Herlihy, 2020; Woo et al., 2014). While there has been an attempt to identify common foundational spheres of knowledge by the National Heads of Counselling and Psychotherapy Education (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015) representing counsellor educator leadership, this has fallen short of identifying specific values across the profession of counselling and it is unclear to what extent the attempt may have represented counselling educators themselves.

There has been limited research surveying counselling educators in Australia. The earliest study was conducted by Richardson et al. (2009) who surveyed 102 training providers using a qualitative design to discover their viewpoints on a range of topics related to frequent questions students have about a career in counselling. Topics identified included differentiating psychotherapy from counselling, prior life experience, desirable parameters of training, desirable counselling qualities, and what educators thought students should think about. It was unclear what proportion of participants had a professional background in counselling. While 65% were not from counselling (i.e., they were from psychology, social work, and medicine), the remaining 35% came from the backgrounds of counselling, social science, education, leadership, and management (Richardson et al., 2009). In the following year, two studies were published on the viewpoints of counselling faculty on gatekeeping (Brear & Dorrian, 2010a, 2010b) and the challenges counselling educators experience when encountering unsuitable students. Both studies revealed values that educators believed were important for counsellors to operate according to, yet focused on a limited scope of inquiry (e.g., student suitability, gatekeeping concerns). What has not been studied to date is how educators perceive the profession and counselling education more broadly.

## Method

In this study, we aimed to explore the views and perceptions of counselling educators about the Australian profession of counselling, namely, its values, identity, and future. To address this aim, we needed a qualitative approach that could identify themes across interviewees to develop an understanding of collective views. This was achieved using thematic analysis which is a flexible, structured, and rigorous method to identify and analyse patterns from within and across the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2018).

## Sample

The key question in qualitative research, when making sampling decisions, is whether the sample provides access to sufficient data and can address the research question (Liamputtong, 2016). Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure recruited participants fitted within the target demographic of the study and possessed in-depth knowledge and experience of the topic to be explored (Ennals & Howie, 2017). In this case, the sample was counselling educators teaching counselling at a tertiary institution at an Australian Qualifications Framework level 5 or higher (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

The counselling educators interviewed all had a minimum of a master's degree, and six of the eight respondents possessed doctoral qualifications, five of those PhDs and the remaining a professional doctorate. The educators had a strong practice background in terms of years of experience. Seven out of eight respondents claimed over 10 years of clinical practice experience and half the total number claimed more than 20 years. Of the sample, many had

multiple professional identities: three participants identified as counsellors, three as psychotherapists, three as psychologists, and five as academics. Five of the eight counselling educators identified primarily as a counsellor ( $n = 2$ ) or psychotherapist ( $n = 3$ ). Five had memberships with ACA, four with PACFA, and two with both. Three were registered with the Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (ARCAP) as practising members and two were academic members of ACA. Two were registered psychologists, one of these also being a registered counsellor outside Australia and holding academic membership with ACA. From a practice perspective, the majority identified as psychotherapists or counsellors, although a minority from the entire sample were currently registered as practising members of the profession, identified through ARCAP.

### Data Collection

Permission was received from the management committee of the National Heads of Counselling and Psychotherapy Education to circulate an advertisement to their counselling educators via their mailing list of more than 40 heads. This group was chosen because it is an independent representative group of heads of counselling education throughout Australia with direct contact with counselling educators within their respective institutions. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics committee (Approval number: ETH2023-0387). An initial email inviting counselling educators to participate in the study was then sent to the National Heads of Counselling and Psychotherapy Education. Respondents were provided with a link to a site offering information about the study where they could provide informed consent via an online survey question. A total of 11 responses were received, and of those, eight people agreed to be interviewed. Interview times were negotiated. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom with the second author and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviewees are identified in this paper by their professional identity most relevant to this study and a number. Table 1 below summarises the demographic features of the participants. To ensure the anonymity of all educators, we have been careful to de-identify them in the table.

Semi-structured interviewing was used to elicit the views and perceptions of the participants and understand their values related to teaching counselling students and the profession. Interview questions focused on the values, goals, and best practices involved in training counselling students, as well as the distinctiveness, values, roles, public perceptions, and areas for improvement of the counselling profession.

Video recording was chosen to capture non-verbal communication such as silences, body language, and demeanour (Serry & Liamputtong, 2016). Zoom and Panopto were used to record and transcribe the interviews. Each transcript was checked for accuracy by the second author, then sent to the

Table 1. *Demographics of Participating Counselling Educators*

<i>Primary professional identity</i>	<i># of educators</i>
Academic	3
Psychologist	2
Community services	1
Counsellor	2
Psychotherapist	3
<i>Secondary professional identity</i>	<i># of educators</i>
Academic	4
Psychologist	1
Sociologist	1
Writer	1
<i>Professional membership</i>	<i># of educators</i>
ACA	5
PACFA	4
APS or equivalent	2
Registered on ARCAP	3
<i>Years in practice</i>	<i># of educators</i>
> 5	1
10+	3
20+	3
30+	1
<i>Practice-related fields of study</i>	<i># of educators</i>
Psychotherapy	2
Counselling	6
Counselling education	1
Psychology	5
Sociology	1
<i>Practice-related qualification level earned</i>	<i># of educators</i>
Doctorate	6
Master's	8
Graduate Diploma	1
Bachelor's	4
<i>Teaching level</i>	<i># of educators</i>
Postgraduate	3
Undergraduate	2
Both	3
<i>Subjects teaching</i>	<i># of educators</i>
Counselling/psychotherapy	8
Cultural diversity	1
Ethics	1
Placement	2
Research supervision	1

*Note.* ACA = Australian Counselling Association; PACFA = Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia; APS = Australian Psychological Society; ARCAP = Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists. The subsections of the table labelled *Secondary professional identity*, *Years in practice*, and *Teaching level* have one count for each educator. The remaining subsections may have more than one count for each educator. For instance, an educator might teach counselling/psychotherapy and research supervision.

participants for approval to be used in the study. Once approval had been obtained, transcripts were uploaded to NVivo and coded to prepare for analysis.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is extensively used in counselling research (Clarke & Braun, 2018) and is appropriate for analysing subjective data collected from interviews (Braun et al., 2022). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process was used in this study to conduct a thematic analysis. The second author initially read and reread the transcripts to become familiar with the content before beginning the process of coding. Anything that struck the author as important was coded (Spiers & Smith, 2020). Research diary entries and



Figure 1. *Results: Themes and Subthemes*

notes were made during each step of the process to address researcher bias and facilitate reflexivity (Neubauer et al., 2019). After coding the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021), possible themes were developed across cases from codes. The first author separately coded the articles. Themes were developed in discussion after both had completed coding.

## Results

From the study's dataset, three themes and eight subthemes were identified, as presented in [Figure 1](#). The counselling educators' answers fluctuated between, on the one hand, their teaching values and perceptions and, on the other, those they perceived to relate to the profession. These aspects were logically intertwined given they were preparing the next generation of counsellors for entry into the profession. The counselling educators' transcripts quoted in this article are labelled according to their primary identity related to their therapeutic work and the order of the interview. For instance, the first interviewed identified as a psychotherapist so the identity is given as Psychotherapist 1.

### Theme 1: Emphasis on the Person of the Therapist

Counselling educators described a range of values and actions that collectively emphasised the importance of the person of not only the counsellor but also how counsellors connect with and treat clients. Subthemes for this comprised the preparation and qualities of the person of the therapist, the importance of socialising students into the virtues required for practice, and instilling a practice orientation that supports client dignity and welfare.



### ***Subtheme 1.1: The Preparation and Qualities of the Person of the Therapist***

All eight educators emphasised the importance of the person of the therapist. They expressed the importance of counsellors being committed to self-awareness and the need for personal and professional development throughout training and their career as part of a commitment to lifelong learning. This may include undertaking personal therapy, group therapy, and self-reflection generally and as part of their practice. This theme is supported by the following quotes.

I think the other thing I do is make sure that students are aware that this is a lifelong learning as a counsellor and that you don't ... stop. In fact, you only start when you've graduated, basically, and you will carry on learning. (Psychologist 8)

But I think probably as an educator, because the reflective practice of counsellors is so important ... So, I think about reflective practice in how an individual that's training to become a counsellor does that really deep reflective practice work themselves. (Psychologist-Counsellor 6)

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Virtues***

Five of the eight counselling educators discussed ethically and professionally virtuous behaviour that they attempted to instil in counselling students for their future practice. Reasons offered for doing so included to support the best interests of the client and the therapeutic relationship, to contribute to the counsellor's own professional development, and to protect clients from harm. They also discussed virtues of humility, integrity, honesty, compassion, commitment to beneficence, and working within appropriate professional boundaries: "So, it's kind of those larger values, but then also just the core values of honesty and integrity, and compassion and kindness" (Counsellor 4).

### ***Subtheme 1.3: Practice That Supports Client Dignity and Welfare***

Clients were of central importance to all the counselling educators who stated that everything the counsellor does must support client welfare and dignity. Counsellors are to show clients unconditional positive regard, be non-judgemental, demonstrate empathy and respect, and ensure their practice is ethical. This was at a client and a societal level. Counsellor 4 encapsulated this, noting the "belief that drives us that human beings are all equally valuable and people should have access to all kinds of health care and particularly counselling".

Some of the points noted by the educators were that counsellors have a responsibility to be client-oriented and promote empowerment through creating space, listening, supporting autonomy, respecting the clients'

expertise, working with diversity, and providing an egalitarian and facilitative relationship. "By having better listening and communication skills, we actually create a better world," said Psychologist 8.

One psychotherapist highlighted their belief that these practices and goals are one of the differentiating marks of the profession of counselling:

There's something ... in counselling that's different to other professions that's about ... a parity or a lack of hierarchy or expertise that ... it's a facilitation role rather than a directional kind of profession. And I think counselling has also a value of, I guess, what I might call transformational change or a commitment to, you know, that this is a transformational process that cannot just change a person, but relationships, families ... There is also something about empowerment and autonomy that separates it from psychology and social work in terms of valuing the person, empowering the person, as opposed to either diagnosing them or fighting for them. (Psychotherapist 2)

## **Theme 2: Importance of Quality Counsellor Education**

The counselling profession is known for its diversity of practice. Theme 2 captures the diversity of how counselling educators understood the challenges and proposed solutions in relation to counselling education in Australia. The counselling educators spoke about a broad range of factors associated with quality in key domains, including research, educational institutions, training, and students. No universal issues or solutions were mentioned across the participants; however, there was broad agreement that there was room for improvement in the training and research areas, that institutions threatened quality, that educators played an important role, and that student profiles had changed and this required more emphasis on gatekeeping.

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Room for Improvement in Research and Research***

#### ***Training***

Although counselling was deemed distinct from other disciplines, such as psychology, it was also noted that, unlike psychology, the counselling profession lacks an extensive body of research. Concern was expressed that this lack of research means the counselling profession is not taken as seriously as other helping professions: "A body of research would help enhance the standing of the profession. I think we need more research in the profession. I think we need more research feeding into academics in the profession" (Psychotherapist 1).

This was believed to be partly due to a lack of research preparation and pathways available to students preparing for the profession.

I think, though, too, what's happened is that, you know, you're doing research, you're doing a master's thesis. There are hardly any of those left. Most courses are coursework as opposed to thesis. And that's really changed in the profession. And that's really meant that counselling doesn't have a research presence. So, it's almost like it doesn't exist as a discipline. (Psychotherapist 2)

Participants suggested that while students were often reluctant to learn about or undertake research, consideration might be given to how research training was delivered.

I don't know how you feel, but lots of people feel intimidated by that ... I think, you know, in terms of kind of training, I think to really not just put research back in, but to make it an everyday thing that we are not afraid of, that we might do every day with our clients or, you know, in our work in agencies to not just kind of build that research base, but to build our confidence in that space. (Psychotherapist 2)

### *Subtheme 2.2: Threats to Quality From Educational Institutions*

It was observed that the priorities of some educational institutions did not always align with counselling values. Two counselling educators expressed concern that counselling education is not a good fit for the higher education context. Issues raised included low academic entry requirements, having insufficient life experience, having disabilities that might lead to impaired practice, training institutions undermining attendance requirements, too few assessments testing the practical skills, and institutions pressuring staff into reducing the number of students receiving fail grades. Counselling educators spoke of a tension between the pressure to satisfy and pass students and maintain the integrity and quality of the training.

The problem with the for-profit model is it will never fully align with the values of counselling. One of the problems of the industry is that we're dealing with adult students, we're dealing with people who are paying a lot of money for their degrees. And there is the expectation that I'm paying for this degree, therefore I will get a degree. And we're up against, on occasions, both universities and the private tertiary for-profit colleges who want students in class paying fees. (Psychotherapist 1)

One participant questioned the robustness of the accreditation process after raising concerns at the accreditation site visit:

We have just had the program ... [go] through an external review and I told them everything I've told you today and about things like attendance and we still got accreditation. So,

I don't understand. I thought I was blowing the whistle, but, you know, no one seems to have been particularly bothered.  
(Counsellor 4)

### *Subtheme 2.3: Student Quality and the Importance of Gatekeeping*

Counselling educators were passionate about counselling students being the right fit for the counselling profession. They expressed concerns that some students' values do not align with the values of the counselling profession and described some students as entitled and demanding, poorly skilled, academically inadequate, and lacking the appropriate temperament to undertake the work of counselling. Despite these students passing their courses and graduating, some had not been seen by their counselling educators. "And that's a big problem, in terms of gatekeeping, those students who are demanding and who think they can do a half-arsed job and then be responsible for the emotional and physical safety of complete strangers" (Psychotherapist 1).

But because it's a non-regulated industry, I do have a sense of responsibility that goes beyond getting someone a qualification, but that there is a sense of which, and we have talked about this as staff, that the university, I think, is seen by the peak bodies to have a responsibility to ensure that the people who practise are going to be appropriate people for the profession. (Psychologist 5)

### *Subtheme 2.4: Educators—Right People, Right Support*

Respondents suggested several criteria to qualify staff for preparing counselling students including ensuring they have the appropriate level of qualification, professional credentials, and currency of practice; be a competent educator and therapist; and contribute to research and the profession. One counselling educator felt strongly that the background of the counselling educator should align with the counselling profession:

And in a lot of the settings I've worked in Australia, they have people with lower degrees and lower training, actually teaching into and tutoring and affecting those courses ... I think we really need to strengthen who our educators are, how they're learning, what their research is, what they're contributing to the field. Because I still think sometimes the courses I've been around or involved in, even kind of teach in a way that doesn't have the academic strength it should have ... And again, the research stream, and I think our educators really need to be accredited educators because I think what I also encounter is that we allow social workers, psychologists, counsellors, kind of a little bit of a

who's who to teach our students and a who's who to supervise our students. So, I don't think that we're really claiming our identity with that. (Psychologist/Counsellor 6)

### **Theme 3: The Distinctiveness and Credibility of Counsellors**

The counselling educators emphasised both the value of counsellors and the importance of establishing credibility. Counsellors were regarded as an integral part of the mental health workforce, occupying a range of positions including working in counselling, relationship therapy, chaplaincy, welfare, education, domestic violence, community mental health, private practice, and non-government organisations. They were portrayed as playing a vital role in the workforce and private practice and offering a distinctly nuanced relational approach to working with clients.

Counsellors were described as performing similar work to cognate professions, yet also different. Counsellors were regarded as more focused on the person and the therapeutic alliance than were other professions. They were differentiated from psychologists in that some counselling educators viewed psychologists as, on average, less personal, more diagnostic, and more restricted in the way they worked, while social workers were portrayed as more focused on social justice and case management than on counselling.

We're potentially not hemmed in by, you know, for example, the social justice model of social work. And we're not hemmed in by, I think, the aspiration of psychology to be a medicalised scientific model fundamentally, whereas I think counselling recognises that, yes, there is a science to validate those things that show that counselling works, but counselling in itself is, at its core, to actually counsel people. (Community Services Worker 3)

#### ***Subtheme 3.1: Threats to the Profession***

The counselling educators expressed a range of concerns associated with threats to counselling's professional credibility. Untrained, undertrained, or unsuitable counsellors are problematic and may feed into a perception that counsellors lack sufficient training, competency, and regulation. Counselling was also perceived as having comparatively lower professional status than similar professions. "I think for counsellors, part of that professional identity is as second-class citizens, as less important, as less trained, as less valued, so a lot of it is embedded in the counselling identity" (Psychotherapist 2).

Concerns were expressed about the counselling profession seeking credibility in Medicare's Better Access initiative (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2025). The main concern was the risk of abandoning core priorities that make counselling unique. Psychologist/Counsellor 6 noted that pursuing Medicare's Better Access initiative may risk aligning the

counselling profession with the medical model, thereby limiting the profession to cognitive behavioural therapy and other short-term approaches, essentially attempting to recast counsellors as pseudo-psychologists.

Five participants argued for tighter regulation of the profession, four of whom stated that they believed the profession was currently unregulated. Participants suggested that regulation would ensure higher minimum entry requirements, counsellor title protection, more consistency across training, and reduced likelihood of unreputable therapies being used by graduates. However, participants were also concerned about regulation that leads to exclusiveness, resulting in some minorities being locked out. Counsellor 4 expanded on this, flagging that while First Nations counsellors practising traditional counselling are essential and effective, they do not fit the “white model” of counselling and should not be excluded because of this. Tension was apparent between the need for more stringent regulatory requirements and counselling’s inclusive history and values.

One participant recommended that the profession should have a single regulatory body to strengthen the accreditation process: “I think it should be regulated by a national body and really strengthen what our credentials ... and what our accrediting should be” (Psychologist/Counsellor 6).

However, participants raised frustration with the two accrediting bodies, PACFA and ACA. The presence of two different bodies with two different sets of standards was viewed as embarrassing for the profession and was believed to make communicating with the government more complex and problematic in relation to courses that had to undergo two sets of accreditation processes: “I think there’s a lot of frustrations with all the work we have to do to manage two different professional memberships, accrediting bodies and things like that” (Psychologist/Counsellor 6).

## Discussion

This study sought to clarify the views and perceptions of Australian counselling educators, focusing particularly on understanding their perspectives about the values underpinning the counselling profession. Before discussing the findings, we briefly discuss the characteristics of the educators themselves. Australian counselling educators come from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, some having counselling and psychotherapy qualifications and membership, and others having cognate qualifications and membership (Beel & Purvis, 2024a) such as in psychology or social work. Therefore, the varied professional heritage and connection to the counselling profession status may influence individual educator perceptions and values.

### The Educators

The majority of counselling educators in this sample identified primarily as a psychotherapist or counsellor. The two accrediting bodies enable academics to become non-practising members of their associations via an academic membership. PACFA requires a minimum experience and load as an academic, certified copies of qualifications, an employer letter, and evidence

of contribution to the field (PACFA, n.d.-a), while the ACA academic membership is available for non-practising academics associated with an ACA-accredited program (ACA, 2024b). All interviewees claimed membership with ACA or PACFA, while only three of the eight were listed on ARCAP as practising members of the profession. Six of the eight had a graduate diploma or above qualification, specifically in counselling or psychotherapy.

As expected, most interviewees identified as academics, given this was the target group recruited. However, two participants adopted the counselling identity, while one of these equally identified as a psychologist. More claimed identities as psychotherapists ( $n = 3$ ) and psychologists ( $n = 3$ ). In Australia, psychotherapists share the same organisation as counsellors (i.e., PACFA), whereas psychologists are a distinct profession from counselling and psychotherapy. That psychologists teach counselling may be partly owing to individual staff members' possible greater affiliation to values more commonly associated with counselling and psychotherapy or to other reasons, such as employment opportunities. In this study, no noticeable differences were observed in responses across counsellors, psychotherapists, or psychologists. Interestingly, while the community services worker possessed two master's degrees and a professional doctorate, all in counselling, and was a member of both counselling peak bodies, the educator did not identify as a counsellor in either their primary or secondary identity.

### **The Viewpoints of Australian Counselling Educators**

The counselling educators emphasised values that prioritised the personal development of the therapist and the person of the client through adherence to core principles that support client dignity and wellbeing. Such humanising of the therapist and the client philosophically aligns with the humanistic tradition rather than the mental health medical model (Cooper, 2007; Joseph et al., 2018). The educators largely appeared to align with the underpinning values found in the Australian counselling literature (Day, 2015). This tendency may reflect the self-selection process to participate in this study and therefore may not express broader trends, particularly of counselling academics, many of whom were socialised in other professions (Beel & Purvis, 2024a). This caution with generalisability reflects one of the limitations of qualitative research.

It could be summarised that counselling academics consider themselves to belong to a personal profession and have obligations to be a self-aware, skilful, and ethical practitioner, committed to growth and prioritising the client above other agendas. The person of the counsellor, their qualities, and values were emphasised by these trainers, and aligned with the profession's own literature (Noble & Day, 2016; Perron et al., 2023; Schirmer et al., 2024). The professional bodies' own documents associated with training and membership have highlighted the importance of the person of the counsellor (PACFA, 2022), the therapeutic relationship (PACFA, 2018, 2022), self-awareness and personal development (ACA, 2012; PACFA, 2022),

professional development (ACA, 2020; PACFA, 2018), and compliance with the ethical codes (ACA, 2012, 2020; PACFA, 2018, 2022). The emphasis on prioritising the client and their care is central to both ACA's and PACFA's codes of ethics (ACA, 2022; PACFA, 2017) and underscores supportive yet professional relational qualities.

Reflective practice has been highlighted as critical in the Australian counselling literature (Day, 2015; Noble & Day, 2016). It is viewed as a means of continual improvement (PACFA, 2018), enhancing self-awareness, and tempering flaws such as arrogance (Moir-Bussey et al., 2016). In a study of Australian counselling academics, Richardson et al. (2009) reported that 59.5% of 37 academics emphasised personal self-awareness and ongoing commitment to professional and personal development as essential qualities of effective counsellors.

### **Importance of Research and Quality Education**

Some participants highlighted that research training and productivity was lacking in the counselling profession. Counselling is primarily a practice-based profession and research is not necessarily prioritised by practitioners (Stevens, 2021) because counsellors do not always understand its relevance or importance; in addition, they have low confidence in their ability to consume or conduct research owing to insufficient research training (Benishek & Gordon, 1998).

ACA's (2012) training standards are silent on research expectations relating to academic staff, while PACFA's (2022) training standards mention an expectation that academic staff are supported in their research. Apart from asking for institutions to list academic research outputs on PACFA's course accreditation application, no active engagement with research appears required of counselling academics by the profession. In addition to this, counselling academics can be disadvantaged by publishing in Australian counselling journals given their comparatively absent or low ranking compared with higher ranked journals outside of the profession (Hunter et al., 2018), or working in academic departments in which counselling educators are a minority (Joseph et al., 2018).

ACA's training standards require students to use research skills and justify concepts by citing research (ACA, 2012). PACFA's training standards require students to be taught basic research fundamentals and an ability to critique research literature and write a basic literature review or conduct part of a research project (PACFA, 2022). Comparatively, international counselling training standards appear more prescriptive and comprehensive, requiring students to learn research design and program evaluation knowledge and skills (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2024). Requiring more specificity in research training standards has also recently been called for in the United Kingdom (Cooper et al., 2024). In a study seeking descriptions of the Australian counselling profession from



practising counsellors, participants indicated as a point of differentiation that research was associated with the psychology profession (Moir-Bussey et al., 2016).

It is of little surprise that counselling educators participating in this study recognised as a vulnerability the lack of specific requirements for staff to maintain research activity or prepare students to undertake research. A desktop review of Australian accredited counselling courses found a wide degree of variability in research preparation: only 46% of courses contained any named research methodology subjects, and fewer contained research project work (Beel & Purvis, 2024b). If the perceptions of Psychotherapist 2 are correct—that research training opportunities for counselling students are shrinking over time—this may negatively affect the development of a culture of research in counselling.

### **Conflicts of Interest: Student Quality and Gatekeeping**

The higher education sector in Australia has been influenced by government aims to increase higher education participation and in particular increase participation by under-represented groups such as low socio-economic-status students and others who may experience lower confidence and academic performance (Dobson, 2001). It achieved this by removing caps on places, enabling more private providers to offer higher education qualifications, and enabling interest-free student loans (Welch, 2023). Higher education institutions in Australia have adopted academic capitalism, educational commodification, and marketisation. They seek and compete for larger student enrolments, emphasise student retention, treat students as consumers by prioritising their experiences and satisfaction, and employ a managerial class whose priorities can be at odds with the priorities of the academics delivering the education (Croucher & Lacy, 2022). Counselling educators and the courses they deliver are not immune from the broader educational trends of higher education (Okech & Rubel, 2019) and concerns exist about a deleterious effect from prioritising student volume over the quality of the training delivered (Gale, 2024).

The concerns of the academics participating in this study appear to be consequences of the marketisation and commodification of the higher education sector, and the government's aims to prioritise increased equity and participation. Academics are pressured to enrol and retain students who they deem may be a risk for the profession. Moreover, staff assessments on student satisfactory engagement have been replaced by students' anonymous assessments on the satisfactory performance of the staff member in providing the learning experience.

Some student attitudes that concerned counselling educators might be described as student consumerism. Student consumerism is the label describing students who feel entitled to high-quality service as a result of the perceived expensiveness of education, are more likely to attempt to evaluate education providers critically on their responsibility to provide service to the student's own expectations, are concerned that higher education providers

are insufficiently accountable for quality, or may view their education as an investment for which they expect satisfactory returns (Tomlinson, 2017). Bunce et al. (2017) identified that students with higher levels of consumerist expectations tended to be lower performing students, have a lower learner identity (i.e., more interest in grades and acquiring a degree than learning), and feel entitled to more favourable academic results.

Subtheme 2.3 highlighted concerns about student quality and issues with gatekeeping. The definition of a problematic student varies across the research (Brear et al., 2008); however, it may include categories such as intrapersonal issues (e.g., personality disorders, mental health issues), interpersonal problems (e.g., including lack of self-reflective capacity), clinical competency deficits, ethical deficits, professional problems (e.g., unprofessionalism), academic deficiencies, supervisory concerns, physical issues, and failure to respond to remediation efforts (Brear et al., 2008). Australian counselling academics believe in the importance of gatekeeping for the protection of the profession from problematic students graduating into it; however, difficulty in collating clear evidence of unsuitability, institutional bias towards student lenience, and fear of student reprisal were raised as factors that discourage gatekeeping practices (Brear & Dorrian, 2010b).

Given the academics participating in this present study emphasised the importance of personal characteristics, the commitment of counsellors, and the implicit institutional support of student consumerism, their frustration is understandable. The triad of government representation targets, institutional market capitalism, and some students' own consumerist attitudes present difficult barriers. It is in this space that accreditation standards and their enforcement by accreditation bodies are critical to moderate the excesses and financial conflicts of interest between income generation and ensuring high quality educational practices aligned with professional standards are maintained. It is especially problematic if accreditation processes do not address concerns raised by staff whistleblowing about the institutions undermining the profession's accreditation requirements. However, given these risk factors, the question arises whether the academic qualification should be the key gatekeeping requirement that it currently is or whether other measures might be considered.

### **Staff Selection**

Participants noted that counselling educators should be appropriately qualified and experienced practitioners and academics; one emphasised the importance of the educator's professional identity. There is evidence, from a staff profile desktop review, that a significant number of accredited training courses have high proportions of staff who are not registered with the counselling profession in ARCAP (suggesting also a lack of practice currency for some), lack specific counselling qualifications, and do not identify as counsellors or psychotherapists (Beel & Purvis, 2024a). This appears to be enabled by either inadequate requirements in accreditation standards (ACA, 2012) or failing to comply with or enforce existing training standards

(PACFA, 2022). There are additional reasons that staffing profiles may be inadequate, including high academic workloads for full-time staff that reduce opportunities to maintain practice currency; the gaps in counsellor applicants' status, qualification, research, and experience compared with applicants from other professions (e.g., psychology); and a relative lack of protection from professional discrimination in existing training standards and/or accreditation processes that results in the preferencing of applicants from other professions.

While staff profiles may improve over time as the Australian profession grows, the profession still lacks the protection offered in other jurisdictions that require core counselling educators to be counsellor trained and registered in the profession (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2024). One interesting aside is that although the participants in this study varied in their own professional heritage, they appeared on the whole to align with the values of the profession. This might suggest that some staff from other professions that teach counselling may be attracted to the distinguishing values underpinning counselling education.

### **Professional Distinctiveness**

The counselling educators differentiated the counselling profession from other cognate professions by focusing primarily on differences in core values and scope. Distinguishing counselling from psychology emphasised and contrasted the personal and relational over the medical and impersonal (cf. Saywell et al., 2024). Counselling educators felt confident that counsellors were equally credible and equipped to work across a wide range of clients, issues, and contexts, and were distinguishable from other professionals because of their emphasis on the human dimension of engagement.

While the educators highlighted the legitimacy of counsellors, they noted that counselling continued to suffer from a credibility problem. This is partly due to a perception of insufficient regulation of the profession and practitioners, the lack of government recognition (most specifically, lack of Medicare inclusion), and the negative impacts of having competing professional peak bodies. Ambivalence was also noted over regulation and seeking credibility, particularly if tighter regulation meant compromising on the core values of the counselling profession, reduced diversity of practitioners, or restricted practice models.

Both professional bodies have been striving to increase credibility by demonstrating what skills, knowledge, and competencies counsellors should possess, and how these might fit with existing mental health workforces (ACA, 2012; PACFA, 2018). Counsellors are also equipped with the features, functions, and operations of a self-regulated profession, as administered via the two peak bodies. Scholars have been concerned about the fragmentation and division apparent in the Australian counselling profession (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015; Pelling & Sullivan, 2006). They have called for compulsory counselling registration, robust and agreed-upon standards across the

profession, greater education of the public, and unity and consistency across the wider profession (Beel, 2024; Moir-Bussey et al., 2016; Platt & Pelling, 2021).

### Recommendations

Accreditation standards can shape institutional behaviour; however, relying solely on institutions as the profession's gatekeepers renders the profession vulnerable to the diverse agendas within the education sector which may undermine the requirements of the counselling profession. Committed faculty may staff institutions, but these faculty have limited influence in relation to institutional priorities. Training standards are essential documents that empower faculty to require compliance, although even standards have limitations when institutions override them and if the accrediting bodies do not monitor, apply, or enforce them. However, this study queries whether training standards are sufficient.

Three options exist to enhance the maintenance of quality in counsellor education. The first is that the profession could explore additional mechanisms to support gatekeeping rather than outsourcing all requirements to educational institutions. These might include a post-qualifying national examination (for an example, see Psychology Board Ahpra, 2024), submission of a portfolio of samples of the applicant's learning accomplishments, or submission of a video sample of the graduate's role play.

Another strategy might focus on detection of educational compromises of quality, using whistleblowing mechanisms. Current complaints mechanisms are targeted towards registered practitioners and member associations (ACA, 2024a; PACFA, n.d.-b), while staff and some students are typically only given the opportunity to provide direct feedback at accreditation panel interviews in groups of their peers. The former mechanism rules out non-members and institutions, while the latter is problematic because both stakeholder groups may be selected by the institution itself, and the group format removes anonymity. Unethical and unprofessional practice is less likely to be reported in these contexts. Educational stakeholders do not appear to have any protected means of expressing confidential or anonymous concerns about education quality to accrediting bodies. The accrediting bodies might also consider anonymous whistleblowing policies, procedures, and mechanisms for students, faculty, and other stakeholders to report educational and ethical malpractice or patterns that violate accreditation requirements.

A third option is to use more specific direction in the ethics codes. Both ACA's and PACFA's codes of ethics require formal reporting or complaints against unethical registered members (ACA, 2022; PACFA, 2017) within their respective associations; however, such requirements do not extend to the behaviour of accredited training institutions or their staff. The accrediting bodies might consider including in their respective codes of ethics an obligation for registered members to report institutional malpractice and standards violations in accredited counsellor education. This could be supported by the whistleblowing mechanism previously mentioned.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, we used a sample size of eight which is a relatively small sample size and may limit generalisability of the findings. The study faced significant recruitment challenges owing to the niche nature of the participant pool and logistical constraints. Another limitation was that the educators opted into the study, which may not enable full representation of the scope of experience across educators. Finally, the viewpoints of the educators may have been limited in terms of the understanding on which their viewpoints were based. For instance, half of the participants spoke of the need for the profession to be regulated. It was unclear from the interviews whether these participants believed the counselling profession was unregulated, despite it being self-regulated (Schofield, 2008), or whether they believed that the profession needed additional governmental or external regulation. If the former, this would reveal a common yet significantly problematic understanding of the regulatory status of the profession.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study has provided insider views of the counselling educational sector about their perceptions of the Australian counselling profession and the education of counselling students. Counselling educators emphasised the importance of prioritising the person of the therapist, self-awareness, commitment to personal and professional development, and ethical and professional virtues. Counselling practice should be client centred and based on a belief of client dignity and empowerment. Participants stressed the importance of ensuring that neither counselling education quality nor student selection are compromised by educational institution agendas. Finally, they highlighted how the counselling profession is distinct from other professions and emphasised the importance of quality counsellors and the unity of the profession for credibility. While the counselling profession has done much to create structures for quality, such as membership criteria, ethics codes, scopes of practice, and course accreditation guidelines, this study suggests certain vulnerabilities may still exist for the profession moving forward, unless strategic steps are taken to help mitigate these.

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