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Research Preparation in Australian Accredited Counsellor Education: A Brief Report

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This study investigated the research training opportunities offered in accredited Australian counselling courses. A desktop review of 90 accredited counselling qualifications across 44 institutions was conducted, focusing on the inclusion of named research methodology and project subjects. Results indicate a wide variation of exposure to specific research methodology and project subjects, depending on the level of study and specific course chosen. Students who study courses offering insufficient research training and production may require additional bridging studies to be eligible for doctoral studies. Recommendations are provided.

In 2023, the National Heads of Counselling and Psychotherapy Education (NHCPE) network created a research subcommittee to explore how to enhance the profession's research capabilities (Beel, 2023). The formation of this subcommittee was prompted by a range of factors, including beliefs that accredited training programs may offer insufficient research preparation and that, owing to gradually expanding curricula, research preparation has declined over time. If this is an accurate perception, the implication may be reduced numbers of counselling graduates being eligible for entry into doctoral training, thus impeding the pipeline of counselling-trained, doctorate-qualified educators. This brief study surveyed the research training opportunities offered by accredited programs that prepare graduates for entry into the counselling[1] profession.

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1   In Australia, the counselling profession comprises three identities—counsellors, psychotherapists, and Indigenous healing practitioners. The term counsellor or counselling is used inclusively in this article to represent all three for terminological efficiency.

Literature Review

Society has shifted towards a more research-oriented emphasis, which prioritises evidence-based practice (Cooper, 2010) and may prioritise funding for professionals from professions widely perceived to be research literate (Dryden et al., 2000). While counsellors may not align ideologically with research that they deem as reductionist and tending towards pathologisation, proceduralism, and manualisation, they draw on and produce research that helps establish the effectiveness and benefits of counselling practice, thus legitimising counselling to various stakeholders (McLeod, 2001, 2022). In addition, counsellors need to be able to understand and consume research, which can then inform and enhance their practice, maintain knowledge currency, and support professional development (McLeod, 2001; Woo et al., 2014).

The counselling profession in the United States actively encourages interest in the promotion and expansion of research for counsellors (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011), and internationally in counselling, research support and promotion are considered a vital ingredient in counselling's professionalisation (Montgomery et al., 2018). Research production can strengthen counsellor advocacy (Reiner et al., 2013) and credibility (Moir-Bussy et al., 2016; Pelling & Sullivan, 2006; Spurgeon, 2012) and contributes to the profession and wider society (Moir-Bussy et al., 2016; Pelling & Sullivan, 2006; Puglia, 2008; Reiner et al., 2013; Spurgeon, 2012). Moreover, counselling research contributes both to the profession's knowledge, often from values closely aligned with the counselling profession, and to other professions that draw on the research (Moorhead et al., 2023).

The profession of counselling in Australia and internationally is intricately associated with the practice of counselling, and, as such, research has not always been a priority (Hanna & Bemak, 1997). Research is not associated with the counselling profession by some counselling students (Saywell et al., 2024) and practitioners (Moir-Bussy et al., 2016), it has been practised by a relatively low number of counsellors (Pelling, 2005; Pelling et al., 2006), and it is not always clearly described in training standards (Cooper et al., 2024).

Although the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia's (PACFA's) original founding goals noted research as a core activity for advancing the profession (Schofield, 2008), little is known about the extent to which this foundational aspiration has translated over time. The profession as a whole has demonstrated a commitment to supporting research in each peak body via maintaining academic peer-reviewed journals (e.g., the *Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia* and the *Australian Counselling Research Journal*), periodically funding research projects, hosting conferences, and, for PACFA, maintaining a research-focused committee. However, questions remain regarding the extent to which research is viewed as integral to counselling's identity by both counsellors and graduates.

PACFA's (2022) and the Australian Counselling Association's (ACA's, 2012) training standards include requirements for students to develop basic research literacy skills as part of their training, although neither offers guidance regarding what volume of learning about research literacy is expected. Neither requires research production, and both are anaemic in detail compared with the United States' Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2023). The expectations of both PACFA and ACA are for basic research literacy, which would likely be insufficient for entry to most doctoral programs without additional research preparation and experience. PACFA's (2018) *Scope of Practice for Registered Counsellors* suggests counsellors should have research literacy and have been trained in research design, while ACA's (2020) *Scope of Practice for Registered Counsellors* requires an ability to participate in research and development.

Given the importance of counsellors possessing sufficient research knowledge and skills, both for their own professionalism and for the profession, and given that both accreditation requirements are relatively ambiguous, what volume of training in research literacy and research production do counselling students receive in their accredited training courses? This study surveyed current Australian accredited counsellor training courses to identify subjects that specifically named research as a focus. While research knowledge and skills may be integrated into other subjects, and therefore be less visible, identifying clearly named research subjects may prove a starting point to establish the potential volume of research preparation offered in Australian accredited counsellor training courses.

Methodology

This study used a desktop review process to identify accredited courses listed on the ACA and PACFA websites and then located publicly available information on the training institutions' websites according to the subject listings for each accredited course. Institutions consisted of universities, university colleges, and colleges. Two categories of institution were generated for comparison, those being universities and colleges; the former category included university colleges.

Non-accredited courses, including Master of Counselling (research stream) courses that explicitly stated their non-accreditation, were excluded. The subject list of each course was scanned to identify mandatory subjects on research, research methodology, and research projects. The researcher opened the subject outline where available to crosscheck the learning objectives and focus of the subject. Methodology research subjects were units that taught research methods only, and for which students did not undertake an independent research project, although they were permitted to undertake a literature review. Subjects that demonstrated insufficient research methodology coverage, in scope or volume of attention, were not counted. For instance, one subject in an institution appeared to offer only one hour

of lecture for the whole subject to address the topic of research methodology. Other subjects were omitted because they focused solely on one research methodology (e.g., practitioner action research) which would be insufficient to prepare students for general research literacy. Research project subjects were identified if they emphasised the production of a partial or full piece of research. Small projects were defined as those equivalent to one subject within the qualification, whereas large projects were defined as those subjects larger than a single subject (such as double-weighted or multiple associated subjects) that resulted in a thesis or comparable output.

The search was undertaken on June 23–24, 2024, by the first author, and the results were individually checked on September 19–22, 2024, by the second author. Areas of difference were discussed until consensus was reached. On one occasion, in which research was named but ambiguity existed regarding whether the subject was a dedicated research subject, the first author contacted the institution for more information. No ethics application was required because all information was publicly available and data collection presented no identifiable risks.

Results

A total of 92 accredited qualifications were identified across 46 institutions. This figure is lower than the 99 qualifications from 49 institutions listed in an earlier desktop review (Beel, 2024) because the current study did not include courses and institutions no longer operating at the time of data collection. Two courses were excluded from the data because the researchers were unable to access a subject list online. Of the 90 remaining courses, 83 were accredited with ACA, 34 were accredited with PACFA, and 27 were accredited with both ACA and PACFA.

Qualifications recognised by the profession as entry points included diplomas (ACA only), advanced diplomas (ACA only), bachelor's degrees, graduate diplomas, and master's degrees. Neither peak body recognised honours or doctoral degrees, both of which are traditional research pathways. The majority of accredited courses were offered at the master's level, and each level below that offered fewer courses (with the exception of the diploma).

Under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF; Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013), training in research is not required in qualifications at or below AQF Level 8 (with the exception of the bachelor honours degree[2]). Courses below honours can optionally train students in research. Being at the most basic level of training listed, no accredited diplomas included subjects on research methodology (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that of 84 degree and above qualifications, 42 (50%) offered a research methodology subject, 14 (16.66%) offered a small project, and only seven (8.33%) offered a large project. The table shows master's courses

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2 For reference, diplomas are AQF Level 5, advanced diplomas AQF Level 6, bachelor's degrees AQF Level 7, honours degrees, graduate certificates, and graduate diplomas Level 8, and master's degrees Level 9.

Table 1. Research preparation by qualification

Qualification	# Courses	Methodology	Small project	Large project	No named research subjects
Diploma	5	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (100%)
Advanced diploma	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
Bachelor	17	5 (29.41%)	2 (13.33%)	0 (0%)	11 (64.70%)
Graduate diploma	24	6 (25%)	1 (4.16%)	1 (4.16%)	17 (70.83%)
Master	43	31 (72.09%)	11 (25.58%)	6 (13.95%)	8 (18.60%)
All	**90**	**42 (46.66%)**	**14 (15.55%)**	**7 (7.77%)**	**42 (46.66%)**

Note: Some individual subjects may be counted in more than one column. For instance, an institution delivering a master's degree may have a methodology subject and a project, or alternatively may only have a methodology subject or only have a project subject.

Table 2. Research training by institution type

Qualification	# Courses	Methodology	Small project	Large project	No named research subjects
Colleges	30	11 (36.66%)	4 (13.33%)	2 (6.66%)	16 (53.33%)
University	54	31 (57.40%)	10 (18.51%)	5 (9.25%)	20 (37.03%)

Note: Some qualifications may have more than one type of named research subject.

offered the highest proportion of research subjects, which aligns with AQF Level 9 expectations, although eight (18.60%) of the 43 master's qualifications did not include any subjects dedicated to research literacy or production. Research literacy skills in these qualifications were likely taught according to AQF expectations; however, the absence of named subjects may imply the volume and scope may be comparatively less. Eighteen (41.86%) master's qualifications offered a methodology subject taught without any additional subjects devoted to a project.

Graduate diploma courses demonstrated a lower percentage of methodology subjects taught than did bachelor's degrees. This might be because some graduate diplomas are only 12 months full-time in duration, which may provide insufficient space in the curriculum for an entire subject on research methodology. Other graduate diplomas are two years in duration, like most master's courses.

Table 2 and Table 3 do not include data from diplomas and advanced diplomas because they typically do not provide research training. Regarding the five diplomas and one advanced diploma, none contained subjects on research. Diplomas in counselling are still recognised by ACA as a pathway into its membership and thereby the profession. However, PACFA does not recognise sub-degrees as meeting its training standards.

Table 2 lists degree-and-above training qualifications by institution type. University-registered providers outscored colleges on all three measures in total percentage for methodology, small project, and large project. One explanation for the differences is that colleges have traditionally been regarded as teaching institutions, whereas universities traditionally have a stronger research emphasis and are therefore more likely to prioritise employing educators with research skills.

Table 3. Research training by peak body accreditation

Accreditation	# Courses	Methodology	Small Project	Large Project	No named research subjects
PACFA	34	22 (64.70%)	4 (11.76%)	4 (11.76%)	10 (29.41%)
ACA	77	39 (50.64%)	12 (15.58%)	6 (7.79%)	33 (42.85%)

Note: Some qualifications may have more than one type of named research subject.

Table 3 presents a comparative listing of research training in degree-and-above courses accredited by ACA and PACFA. The data reveal that, overall, 29.41% *(n = 10 of 34)* of PACFA-accredited degrees had no designated research subjects, in contrast with 42.85% *(n = 33 of 77)* of ACA-accredited degrees.

While this study focused on accredited courses and research subjects taught as a core component of the curriculum, we identified additional options that some providers offered to support research opportunities. We found that three institutions offered non-accredited research streams whereby students could undertake a non-accredited counselling master's course that devoted a significant portion of the curriculum to research. This option might be appropriate for already registered members of the counselling profession seeking a pathway to a doctorate and a future academic role. Another option was offered by six institutions which provided research opportunities through elective research subjects (sometimes including projects). Whether the intention was for interested students either to select the subjects as basic training or to progress from methodology training to producer of research, this option enabled students to increase their exposure to research training.

In summary, of the courses reviewed, a higher percentage of named research subjects were offered in the master's level, compared to all other qualifications. From degree level and above, universities and PACFA-accredited courses were more likely than colleges and ACA-accredited courses to require students to undertake named research subjects. Some institutions offered named research subjects as optional electives or offered dedicated research streams that were not professionally accredited.

Discussion

While strong research support exists for the effectiveness of counselling as a discipline (Day, 2015; Smith & Glass, 1977), this has not always translated to prioritising research within the culture of the counselling profession (Reisetter et al., 2004). The results suggest (if named research subjects are deemed proxies for research training) that receiving counselling training may be a hit-or-miss affair for students depending on whether they are offered the opportunity (either required or not required) to receive research training and experience. In a survey of 99 master's-qualified counsellors in Illinois exploring constraints in their own research, most participants indicated constraints were due to deficits in their training (Ruby, 2013). Participants' recommendations included increasing research classes, improving research instruction, and increasing opportunities to conduct research with faculty.

Course coordinators who design counsellor training have limited scope regarding what can be included in the curriculum, how much coverage is given to each topic, and what study areas are excluded. This presents a dilemma since the priority of trainers and students is the development of knowledge and skills to support direct practice. Research might be flagged as important for the profession (O'Hara & O'Hara, 2015), yet in counsellor education, it may be deprioritised by some accredited training. This study shows that many institutions offer discrete research training, and a small number also include a major research project. Moreover, the study demonstrates that courses can offer research training and large projects and still find space in the curriculum to meet all the accreditation requirements for the profession.

Results from the data reveal that no accredited training at the honours or doctoral levels exists for counsellors. In addition, many students studying counselling may not gain an opportunity to undertake a named research methodology subject or conduct a research project. One of the downstream impacts of engaging in less research preparation is that students will receive fewer opportunities to enter doctoral studies. In turn, this may reduce the prospects for counsellors to transition from clinical practice into educational roles, or to occupy dual roles. Students in such a situation may need to undertake additional research training courses to access these opportunities.

Another implication of receiving insufficient research training and experience is the effect this may have on the pipeline of future counselling academics and researchers. Scholarship from the United States has emphasised the importance of counselling students being trained by counsellor-trained faculty rather than by staff identified with other professions (e.g., psychology and social work) as essential to the development of the counsellor identity individually and collectively (Emerson, 2010; Mascari & Webber, 2013). Without an adequate pipeline of counselling graduates progressing to doctoral studies, this may reduce the future availability of doctoral-qualified, counselling-trained counsellor educators and limit the research productivity of the Australian counselling profession.

Not all subjects with the word "research" in the title were counted. Some subjects that identified themselves by using the word "research" in the title appeared to offer a narrow introduction to research, primarily centred on reflective practitioner research. In one instance, the research training was limited to one one-hour lecture in the entire subject (although students may have had access to additional asynchronous courseware on the topic). The strength of the earlier mentioned reflective practitioner approach to learning and conducting research is that it demonstrates a research integration approach to practice as usual (Reisetter et al., 2004), thereby linking research relevance to practice (McLeod, 1999). The weakness, if it is not accompanied by more traditional or diverse research training, is that it may be too narrow in scope and may truncate students' development of research literacies.

Recommendations

This study conducted a brief review of accredited training programs to identify those that provided training in research methodology and offered opportunities to engage in research projects. Future studies might conduct a more comprehensive study across the curriculum to examine how research is taught, the scope of knowledge and skills covered, and the volume provided. This would enable a clearer understanding of the state of research training.

This research has identified that research training and opportunities differ depending on where and what one studies. Given prospective counselling students might be research shy, offering more evident research subjects in the course structure may deter some students rather than attract them. To ensure greater consistency, we recommend more specific guidance about research in the training standards (Cooper et al., 2024) to establish a clear baseline of research literacy that all graduating students should possess. For instance, psychology undergraduate degrees require students be taught research methods (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2019), even though this requirement is above the minimum AQF expectations (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). In addition, we recognise that not all counselling students will be interested in or capable of higher-level research. Offering a research stream or electives in courses so that interested students can elect to undertake projects is one way of creating opportunities for future researchers to develop, without imposing research projects on all students. The likelihood of offering such possibilities could be strengthened by wording in the training standards encouraging courses to recommend and include project electives when these are not part of the core curriculum.

Another option is to survey Australian counsellors, counselling faculty, and counselling students on their attitudes and feelings about research, their motivation for research, their identity in relation to research, and their use and/or production of research. Some related research has been conducted in the United States (Jorgensen & Duncan, 2015; Stevens, 2021; Umstead, 2019); however, it is unclear what findings are transferable to the Australian context. The results of our paper may inform accreditation guidance on the minimum research training required to produce counsellors who are sufficiently prepared to consume, apply, and produce research.

Limitations

The results of this current study should be treated with caution given that we did not search for research training that might be offered in subjects that were not named as research subjects. However, given the sparsity of attention to research in the course accreditation documents, the inclusion of dedicated research subjects may be a proxy for measuring the relative emphasis and importance of research preparation for students.

Conclusion

Counselling research has been identified by the NHCPE as a vulnerable area for the counselling profession in Australia. Academic scholarship has consistently emphasised the importance of preparing counselling students with sufficient research literacy to support their own counselling practice and to enhance the credibility of the profession. While research training is required in the accreditation standards of both peak bodies, the requirement is relatively vague, leaving it to education providers to determine how much is included in the curriculum. This study has identified an apparent variation of research emphasis across institutions and qualifications, as estimated by the number of named research subjects and projects within course structures. We recommend more studies be conducted within an Australian context to identify the current levels of research interest, motivation, confidence, and activity of counselling students, faculty, and registered counsellors.

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