

Should social work become a registered profession? An examination of the views of 15 Australian social workers

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Abstract

In contrast to most Western jurisdictions, social work in Australia is not currently a registered profession. However, in late 2021, the South Australian Parliament passed a Bill to register social workers in that state. This follows a long-standing but previously unsuccessful campaign by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) to attain social work registration at a national level. Yet, to date, there has been no empirical research on the views of social workers—whether members or the AASW or not—concerning the merits of registration. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study of the views of 15 social workers regarding registration. The findings suggest that the profession holds diverse views concerning the potential benefits or harms emanating from registration. Some conclusions are drawn regarding priorities for future research including particularly the impact of registration on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers and service users.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), registration, social workers, South Australian Bill

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Social work is a helping profession, which uniquely adopts what is called a person in their social environment approach that focuses on both treating individual problems and attacking structural inequalities (Rank, 2020). According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), social work

is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people... Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being.

(IFSW, 2014)

In many countries around the world including most English-speaking countries (e.g. the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom and Aotearoa New Zealand), social work is a registered profession which means that a formal government body oversees an approved list of practitioners in order to ensure that services are delivered safely (Fotheringham, 2018; Healy, 2016; Kirwan & Melaugh, 2015; Worsley et al., 2019). In Australia, a social worker is required to have completed a university degree accredited by the professional body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), which is usually either a Bachelor of Social Work or a Master of Social Work (Qualifying), or an approved equivalent overseas qualification. But social work is not a registered profession in Australia, and qualified social workers do not need to join the AASW in order to practice. Additionally, there is no protection of the social work title, so unqualified practitioners can and do work in social work positions.

Consequently, the AASW has very limited power to censure unethical practice. The only penalty the AASW can impose on members who are found by their Ethics Committee to be guilty of misconduct is exclusion from eligibility for membership, and the Association accordingly publishes an annual list of social workers suspended from membership (AASW, 2021d). However, membership is voluntary, and the AASW has no authority to respond to complaints concerning non-members. In fact, about one quarter of complaints during 2018–19 were made against social workers who did not have AASW membership, and hence could not be progressed (Parliament of South Australia, 2020).

However, in late 2021, the South Australian (SA) Parliament passed a Bill to register social workers in that state alone. The Bill was a response to a long-standing campaign by the AASW to attain social work registration at a national level. The AASW campaign has rested on a number of core arguments: that registration would raise the professional standing and opportunities of social workers in a manner commensurate with other regulated professions; ensure the accountability of social workers to the wider community; and help to protect service users from harmful practice by incompetent or untrained practitioners (AASW, 2019; Healy, 2016). The campaign also implies that Australian social workers overwhelmingly support the case for registration although a former AASW President (and strong registration advocate) acknowledged that there was a diversity of views amongst social workers (Healy, 2016). Yet to date, there has been no empirical research as to whether most Australian social workers estimated at 30,000 (Australian Government, 2022), or even most AASW members totalling just over 15,400 (AASW, 2021a), support registration and/or their grounds for holding that perspective.

The existing academic commentary suggests a diverse range of arguments for and against registration of social workers in Australia that largely coincides with wider debates around the merits of professional discourse, procedures and power. There is an implied divide between social workers prioritising professional aspirations or alternatively social justice advocacy, although arguably many social workers pursue both objectives (Rank, 2020).

Some of the arguments in favour of registration include the following: it would enable protection of the social work title so that non-qualified practitioners could not call themselves social workers as is currently the case; it would give social workers parity compared to members of other health professions in terms of accessing a range of career opportunities that are available only to registered groups; it would advance higher professional standards including improved supervision training by mandating ongoing professional development; it would protect service users from harmful practice by enforcing fitness to practice requirements so that problematic practitioners could be disciplined; and it would raise public confidence in the quality and competence of social workers (Fotheringham, 2018; Hallahan & Wendt, 2020; Healy, 2016; Lonne & Duke, 2009; McCurdy et al., 2020).

Conversely, criticisms of registration include the following: it would reduce the autonomy of the profession with control over education and training standards possibly being taken over by decision makers lacking social work expertise; it could place a significant financial burden on participants; it would divide social workers from the much larger group of non-social work-trained human service practitioners; it could undermine the commitment of social workers to policy activism; it could highlight the skill limitations of individual social workers at the expense of addressing systemic problems around service access and resourcing; and it might provoke unnecessary child protection removals by over-zealous social workers employed in child protection (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Fotheringham, 2018; Healy, 2016; Lonne & Duke, 2009; McCurdy et al., 2020). It might also ironically erode the membership numbers of the AASW given that many social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand have prioritised registration at the expense of joining the professional association given the high cost of dual membership fees (Randal, 2018).

A further concern is that registration could lead to tighter gatekeeping processes that would exclude applicants with lived experience of disadvantage including welfare service use due to criminal history screening (Young et al., 2019). In particular, tighter regulations for entry into social work practice might restrict rather than advance the inclusion of higher numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians into the social work profession, which is needed to enhance culturally responsive and indeed decolonised practice (Healy, 2018; Young, 2019). Although the AASW has taken major steps to improve its engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Bennett & Green, 2019), to date only 2.52 per cent or 391 of the 15,466 AASW members identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (AASW, 2022). A similar concern has been expressed regarding the adverse impact of registration in New Zealand on the entry of Māori and other Indigenous peoples into social work (McNabb, 2020).

Any additional barriers to access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers would be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, there is evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders historically were denied access to social work degrees because of difficulties in accessing higher education (Fejo-King, 2013). Secondly, ongoing tensions exist between social work and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders due to the perceived major role played by social workers both historically and today in large-scale child protection removals of Indigenous children from their families and communities (Mendes, 2015). As noted by one prominent Aboriginal social work academic,

social workers entering an Aboriginal community are often met with wariness, distrust and cynicism. Consequently, social workers generally do not have a very good reputation in Aboriginal communities, and this makes it difficult for them to build sustaining and cooperative relationships.

(Bennett, 2019: 4)

An earlier review of international research—drawn mostly from studies of social work registration in New Zealand and England—found sparse evidence that registration had advanced

key stated aims such as promoting professional recognition and status, lifting practice standards or enhancing public safety (McCurdy et al., 2020). There is a strong case for discrete research to ascertain the likely benefits and disadvantages of registration for Australian social work practice and service users including particularly the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (Fotheringham, 2018; Hallahan & Wendt, 2020; McCurdy et al., 2020).

2 | THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY AND BILL, 2018–2022

In 2010, the Australian Government introduced a National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) for health professions. The NRAS is administered by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and was expanded further in 2012 and 2018 so that AHPRA now regulates the health workforce in partnership with 15 National Boards (AHPRA, 2022).

Social workers appear to have been excluded from the NRAS on several grounds including the financial cost to government of registration, a perception of minimal risk of harm to service users (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Fotheringham, 2018; Healy, 2015), and contention around whether their broad scope of practice properly fits within a health classification. Many social workers work in health and mental health settings, but equally many others work in fields such as homelessness, family violence, schools, refugees, child protection, disability and aged care. Indeed, the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) identifies social workers as “legal, social and welfare professionals” rather than “health professionals” (ABS, 2019).

The AASW has employed a number of strategies to overcome these objections. For example, they have published evidence of harm caused by social workers both in Australia and overseas including a case study of a social worker charged and convicted with the possession of child pornography who was expelled from AASW membership, but nevertheless, could still continue to work in private practice given that no registration is required (AASW, 2013, 2014). Additionally, they commissioned Deloitte Access Economics to prepare a paper estimating the economic benefits of registration under AHPRA (AASW, 2021b). That paper argued that registration could occur with no net cost to government given it would arguably reduce the burden on healthcare systems and prevent incidences of child death and child abuse (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). From 2017, however, given limited progress with lobbying for national regulation, the AASW's registration advocacy shifted to the state and territory level.

In the state of South Australia (SA), a number of coronial inquests (e.g. Johns, 2015; Schapel, 2016) into the deaths of children known to child protection services highlighted poor practice by social workers as a contributing factor, and recommended registration of social workers as a preferred solution. This policy was adopted by the South Australian Liberal Party who won government in the state election held in March 2018 (Parliament of South Australia, 2020).

In September 2018, the Social Workers Registration Bill 2018 was introduced into the SA Legislative Council by Greens MLC Tammy Franks. The aim of the Bill was to establish a statutory Social Workers' Board holding powers to enforce penalties for social workers in SA who breach competency and ethical standards, and to investigate complaints (Parliament of South Australia, 2020). In November 2018, the Bill was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee to enable wider community consultation (Franks, 2018).

The seven person Joint Committee was chaired by Franks and also included three representatives of the Labor Party, two from the governing Liberal Party and one from the SA-Best

party. The Committee received nine written submissions and heard oral evidence from 11 groups. Those who contributed evidence included social work academics, the state government Department for Child Protection, the state public sector trade union, the peak body of state child and welfare providers, the peak body of the community welfare sector, the AASW whose perspective seems to have significantly influenced the views of the Committee, and a number of non-government and government service providers.

Two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders representing Reconciliation SA (Shona Reid) and the state Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (April Lawrie) presented evidence. They warned that the proposed scheme could have a negative impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers (e.g. there are 40 Aboriginal Family Practitioners employed in child protection) who have extensive practice experience and lived experience, but no formal social work qualifications. They emphasised the broader social, health and economic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities connected to historical experiences of racism and trauma, and the important role played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners in ensuring culturally responsive practice. There was also a specific consultation with the Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Social Workers given that New Zealand had recently introduced mandatory registration of social workers (Parliament of South Australia, 2020).

Overall, the evidence presented by participants was largely supportive of registration, suggesting that it would enhance public safety, advance continuing professional development (CPD) and education, lift practice standards and progress suitable frameworks for handling complaints and disciplinary processes. The submissions expressed a preference for a national regulation scheme on the grounds that state-based legislation would still allow deregistered social workers to move interstate and practice in another jurisdiction. However, given the stated refusal of the Commonwealth government to introduce national registration of social workers, a state-based scheme was affirmed “as an important first step” (Parliament of South Australia, 2020: 17).

The Committee released their final report in December 2020, which included 20 recommendations for amendments to the draft Bill. Most significantly, they proposed a revised composition of the Registration Board so that a majority (4/7) rather than only 3/7 would need to be social work trained. The final Bill also added a transitional provision enabling an experienced-based pathway to registration for a small group of professionals with long-standing employment and practical experience in the public sector who may lack formal qualifications (Franks, 2021a).

Tammy Franks reintroduced the Social Workers Registration Bill in the Upper House of the SA Parliament in October 2021, outlining four key objectives: (1) to establish and maintain a registration system for social workers; (2) to safeguard the public interest by ensuring that only suitably trained and qualified persons are able to practice as social workers; (3) to encourage the maintenance of high professional standards of both competence and conduct by registered social workers; (4) and to ensure that registered social workers are held accountable professionally for the conduct of their practice (Franks, 2021b).

After some cross-party negotiations, the Social Workers Registration Bill was passed in the Upper House of the SA Parliament on the 17th of November, and in the Lower House of Parliament (introduced by Labor Party MP Nat Cook) on the 30th of November 2021. The Bill will affect the estimated 4200 social workers currently located in South Australia of whom less than half (approximately 1600) are current AASW members (AASW, 2021c).

The AASW welcomed the passage of the Bill, opining that it will help to prevent child death tragedies in the future (Smith, 2021). But as noted above, the SA legislation has an obvious limitation in that a state-based Bill does not preclude a deregistered practitioner from seeking employment as a social worker in another jurisdiction (Hallahan & Wendt, 2020).

3 | RESEARCH STUDY AIMS, SIGNIFICANCE, METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative study undertaken for a minor Masters Thesis at Monash University that examined the views of 15 social workers regarding registration. The study aimed to answer the research question: What are the current views of social workers regarding the proposed mandatory registration of social workers in Australia?

Given the absence of existing empirical research, an exploratory research design utilising qualitative methods of inquiry was identified as the preferred approach. Recruitment was achieved through purposive and snowball sampling, seeking “maximum variation” (Flynn & McDermott, 2016: 108) across participant characteristics such as geographical location, fields of practice and length of social work career. Each participant was either contacted by the student researcher via email, or alternatively contacted the student researcher via email in response to an advertisement on the AASW’s “Opportunities for research participation” webpage (AASW, 2021e).

A total of 15 participants were interviewed in this research study via semi-structured interviews completed during August and September 2021 (See Table 1 for demographic details). Participants were provided with basic information about the Registration Bill and its aims, and were invited to complete a demographic questionnaire. The interviews covered the following areas: views on the Registration Bill (positive, negative or both) or on the registration of social workers in general; benefits for the general public and for service users; benefits for social workers; the impact of registration on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers or communities; limitations or drawbacks for social workers, service users, or the general community; particular impact on specific fields of practice such as child protection, mental health, or health and hospital social work; and discrete impact on their social work practice or career.

Thematic and content analyses were applied to the qualitative dataset using NVIVO software. Initial deductive coding began using pre-determined codes drawn from relevant literature (e.g. Fotheringham, 2018; Hallahan & Wendt, 2020; Healy, 2016, 2018), with additional subthemes and inductive codes added throughout the process of analysis. The overall viewpoint of each participant was identified (i.e., pro/anti-registration), the perceived benefits and limitations suggested by participants were organised across primary themes present in the data, and additional topics related to social work registration and its possible impacts were organised into inductive subthemes.

This study followed guidelines set by Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee which approved the study. The AASW National Research Committee granted permission to advertise. Interview participants were provided with an explanatory statement outlining the research aims and possible risks, and an informed consent form which participants signed and returned to the student researcher by email. Participants were also provided the interview schedule in advance. Participation was voluntary. No incentive or compensation was provided. The subject matter discussed was non-confronting and unlikely to cause distress. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw participation and gave permission for interviews to be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription. Participants chose an interview time which suited them and could join a phone or video-conference call from any location. Face-to-face interview sessions were not an option due to COVID-19.

There were some methodological limitations. Whilst the small sample of 15 participants generated detailed qualitative data, the findings should not be seen as representative of all Australian social workers' views on professional registration. The time restraints imposed on the student thesis were a significant contributing factor to limiting the breadth of the sample given that the participants had to be interviewed within a 2-month timeframe. Additionally, despite attempts to achieve maximum variation in the sample set, most of

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics

Years of social work experience	1 participant: under 3 years 1 participant: 5–10 years 6 participants: 10–15 years 2 participants: 15–20 years 5 participants: over 20 years
Setting	12 participants: Metro area 1 participant: Rural area 1 participant: Rural and remote areas 1 participant: Metro, rural, and remote areas
Location	1 participant: Australian Capital Territory 1 participant: New South Wales 1 participant: Queensland 2 participants: South Australia 10 participants: Victoria
AASW membership	5 participants: Currently AASW members 4 participants: Were previously, but are not currently AASW members 6 participants: Have never been AASW members
Length of AASW membership	1 participant: 3 years 1 participant: 10 years 1 participant: 20 years 1 participant: 25 years 11 participants: Not applicable or No answer
Age	3 participants: 25–35 years 3 participants: 35–45 years 3 participants: 45–55 years 4 participants: 55–65 years 1 participant: 65–75 years 1 participant: No answer
Gender	10 participants: Woman/Female 3 participants: Man/Male 1 participant: Man/Male and Non-binary 1 participant: Non-binary
Cultural Identity	2 participants: Aboriginal 13 participants: Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander

the participants (10/15) practice social work in Victoria where the researchers maintain their key networks and contacts. Ideally, it would have been beneficial to have more than two participants from South Australia where the Social Workers Registration Bill has been passed.

Other groups under-represented in the sample include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers (only 2/15), and social workers practising in rural or remote areas (only 3/15). Further given the specific emphasis on examining the views of social workers, the study does not include the voices of service users.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Pro-registration

Three of the participants expressed full support for the registration of social workers.

I am aware that they want registration, and I support it 100%.

I've supported it ever since I started as a social worker.

I think that's a wonderful thing.

4.2 | Pro-registration with some reservations

Six participants expressed general or overall support for registration, despite some reservations or concerns about how registration may be implemented. For example, several participants expressed opinions that a national approach is preferable to a state-based registration model.

I do question whether doing state-based registration is the right approach.

I do not think it is the next best thing. I think we should be advocating more strongly for national registration as part of AHPRA.

4.3 | Anti-registration

Three participants indicated that they do not support, or are opposed to, the statutory registration of social workers.

I actually do not believe that social work should be registered.

I do not [support the Bill], not at all.

I think I understand what they are trying to achieve by bringing registration in there. I do not think it's going to do anything at all... there's no chance that it could be used for good ... no potential for it to be a force for good.

4.4 | Ambivalent/Mixed feelings

Three participants expressed ambivalence or mixed feelings regarding registration.

I think for some of the kind of political government type settings, it could work. It could be seen as very beneficial. But I think for a lot of other settings, it could be a disadvantage.

I'm probably a little ambivalent about it, rather than being fully opposed to it, but I'm not convinced enough that it's worth going down that road.

4.5 | Perceived benefits and pro-registration sentiments

All participants, including those who opposed registration, identified some perceived benefit for either individual social workers or for the social work profession. Participants spoke of higher professional status resulting in increased respect amongst other professions, improved public perceptions, strengthened professional identity and possible financial benefits. They also identified greater clarity of the role and scope of social work practice, beneficial impacts of CPD and supervision, and greater status and power leading to more effective advocacy.

I think the benefit of registration for social work in clinical settings would be that we would probably be taken a little bit more seriously.

Give [social work] more of a collective basis for things like EBAs (Enterprise Bargaining Agreements), opinions in the sector, that sort of thing.

Strengthen people's perceptions of what we do...not just the general public, but other professionals that we work closely with, especially in hospitals, because we work with such a large multidisciplinary team...having us get a little bit more respect and acknowledgment. And hopefully that could translate to better remuneration as well.

I think it'll help increase our credibility...which helps us have power to advocate...the profession will have a higher standing. It gives the individual more standing when they are advocating.

The majority of participants also identified potential benefits for service users or the general public. These included increased public safety as in protecting vulnerable people or groups, improved public confidence in social workers, creating or improving complaints processes, and possibility of improved service quality as a result of currency of practice requirements and shifts toward evidence informed practice.

Our service users are going to get a better service based on more current evidence-based sort of practice.

It provides some accountability to the people they are supposedly representing, the clients...particularly in the child protection space our decisions affect children's lives, and we need to be accountable for those decisions.

The bare minimum that a national system should have, is this national 'strike off list' where if you have violated these pretty clear, pretty serious boundaries, you know, you cannot practice as a social worker anymore.

Additionally, social workers in the study stated that some of the benefits to social workers may also benefit service users. This was particularly true for the social workers who spoke of CPD and supervision requirements.

[If] increased supervision and CPD requirements means that it is easier for social workers or, you know, there's more of an impetus for us to look after ourselves, and

if we are better managing our stress, our vicarious trauma, our risk of burnout, that sort of thing, then the better the services that we provide...more people will be bringing a continually improved service to service users.

Title protection to prevent unqualified persons from claiming to be social workers was also discussed by several participants as a perceived benefit for both social workers and service users.

A lot of people will refer to themselves as social workers in my experience who don't have any formal qualifications or training...You couldn't refer to yourself as a psychologist [without formal qualifications] because they're registered.

The classic was when I was watching a program on gambling and the New South Wales service clubs said they were social workers because they allowed community groups to have their AGMs and their meetings at low cost. And they provided the coffee and tea and biscuits. So they said that was the social work aspect they were doing. And that's New South Wales pokie clubs, the guys that were claiming to be social workers. And there's nothing you can say to challenge that.

4.6 | Perceived limitations and anti-registration sentiments

The majority of interviewees identified some limitations, which might be experienced by social workers. For example, participants suggested individual social workers may be impacted by financial burdens associated with registration fees, time investments involved, limitations to or complications around interstate mobility, and the narrowing of career opportunities along with narrowed definitions of social work roles or scope of practice. Most prevalent amongst these concerns was the anticipated financial impact.

There are cost considerations that will impact other social workers or people that will find that a barrier. I would have found that a barrier, you know, when my kids were little and I was starting back into work.

I'd be really pissed off actually, being a sole parent, coming from a low socio-economic background, having a huge HECS (student loan) bill imposed on me, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, I really begrudge having to pay any money to [do] my job.

Limitations to social work as a professional group was also identified by several participants who made note of the possibility that registration could lead to decreased practice autonomy and increased governmental control and/or political influence in social work. This included social workers who expressed concerns registration might limit or restrain advocacy efforts.

It could be a way to harness social work as a profession, to be more compliant. And that's problematic.

Will it sort of muzzle us and make us more, you know, like, less likely to speak up or to criticise people in positions of power, if you know there's a possibility that doing so puts our registration at risk and therefore our livelihood?

I see so many social workers are actually frightened, absolutely frightened to protest or make statements of any purpose.

If you went and chained yourself to some coal mining equipment for the sake of, you know, trying to take direct action on climate change and stuff, and it's like, 'oh, that person's a social worker, we're striking you off'.

Similarly, most of the participants also made note of possible negatives for service users. These include the concerns stated above in regards to possible restrictions on systemic advocacy. Furthermore, participants commented on the possibility that clients may "miss out" due to individuals with lived experience of substance use or addiction, sex work, the criminal justice system, etc., being prevented from practising social work or from speaking publicly about their experiences.

When people have, for example, lived experiences around offending, they're not going to get registered.

It didn't mean that they weren't going to be great social workers. It just meant that some things had happened in their lives beforehand.

There's appropriate boundaries around your work, but it shouldn't mean that if you've done or might do sex work again in the future that that intrinsically puts you at risk of being deregistered.

Some of the social workers in the study identified additional influences they believe to be harmful or problematic, namely conservatism, neoliberalism and/or elitism in social work, and the risk of perpetuating harmful power imbalances between professionals and those whom they serve.

And once we're bringing in neoliberalist tools, we cannot be fooling ourselves that we're actually going to get anything else, but neoliberalist managerialism... you see it in the weakness of the AASW...there's no hard push. There's no, "I'm going to take on these structures" because they're part of it, and they're not going to bite the hand that feeds them...I have huge respect, absolutely huge respect for some of the players in the AASW. Yeah, absolute[ly] huge, but they're individual sparks.

Finally, some participants felt there may be a false sense of security placed in registered professionals

I fear that the fact that a social worker is registered would give a false security to people, clients, organisations or whatever that the social worker is competent.

If there were any people that did poor practice that they would hopefully get their registration removed. But, as I said, like, I don't actually think they do get to that risk, because I see a lot of really dodgy registered practitioners.

4.7 | Related topics and anticipated impacts of registration

The study participants also spoke about the possible impact of registration on:

- Social work employers, managers and service sectors
- The AASW and AASW membership
- Students and new graduates
- Experience-based pathways to registration
- Workforce recruitment and retention

A major theme was the anticipated impact of registration on cultural responsiveness and issues of diversity within social work. Participants held varying opinions.

They're not going to get rid of people who are perpetuating colonialist structures of oppression. Right? So. And this is not how you do that, either, you don't get rid of those people by having a national regulation.

The lack of expectations around cultural responsiveness and those skills is missing, which I think's really concerning. That really concerns me and really surprises me.

Like the assessments that they do for beginning practitioners getting licensed [in the United States], it is based on educated, white, middle-class, American families. Well, I'm sorry, young CALD [individuals from an] asylum-seeker family background are not going to pass that test... [if we are] using these very flawed systems that are very, very culturally and socially biased, what are we going to do with our protectionist practitioners?

It's still about a social worker working to the principles and ethics, whether you're someone of Aboriginal descent, whether you're someone of Chinese descent, it's about a social worker working correctly as a social worker...it's about a social worker doing their job properly. We should be doing that irrelevant to who we're working with, we should be working to a certain standard.

4.8 | Potential for positive impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers

The researchers specifically asked participants about the potential impact of registration on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who may consider social work as a career. The interviewees responded with a mix of possible benefits, significant limitations and/or uncertainties.

We have an affirmative action recruitment process to try and increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. I have one person I've appointed in social work, which is great, but there's not [high] numbers of people who are even applying for positions we have so that might be something that we'd have to discuss with the universities about who they're leading into the courses that at that point... anything that would encourage more people from that cultural group to be social workers would be a wonderful thing.

I think, in the long-term though, is that that having that registration, mind you, that's if that registration was to include cultural responsiveness, I actually think what would happen is it would be a safer workplace for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers. So actually, I think it in the long run it will help us retain Indigenous social workers. If those skills were improved, but that's if that was included in the registration.

4.9 | Barriers or potential for harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers

Some concerns about possible adverse impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were identified.

Look, particularly where fees are concerned. I think that would really serve as a deterrent. I mean, I think social work, as far as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are concerned, is already behind the 8-ball because of the history of involvement that social workers have had with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. So, if there were additional fees or a lot of hoops to jump through, I think that's just one more roadblock for any young people wanting to go down that road.

I think on balance, social work has caused a lot more harm than good in Aboriginal communities, particularly if you take a long view over the last century, but continues to obviously cause more harm than good and, yeah, I think, I think on balance, it's just an extra layer of colonialist nonsense. And it kind of perpetuates, you know, underlying the idea that we should have more Aboriginal people in social work perpetuates the nonsense that that's going to do something about it, whereas what we need to do is hand sovereignty and autonomy back to Aboriginal people and communities and decolonise the structures that we're imposing on them.

I don't know, I think a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a very ambivalent relationship with social work anyway because of our professional history in removing children. And that's our history and that's our current practice. You know, we're involved in removing more Aboriginal children today than we were during the Stolen Generations period. So I don't know, I'd be very curious to know what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers think about registration and whether it actually mattered or they'd be more concerned with other things about social work.

The AASW has made such huge move moves towards improving cultural responsiveness, to omit that from the registration, for that to be omitted from the registration really concerns me and shows a real lack of consultation or any sort of co-design or collaboration around that work.

4.10 | Comments on the process of implementation and the perceived practical challenges

Practical challenges were identified by many of the participants. Some of these related to concerns about the practicality of a state-based registration scheme as opposed to a national approach.

Common sense will tell you it has to be a national scheme because people are very mobile now. So, I would think it has to be national, that if you're registered here in South Australia, you can also work in WA.

If we have registration in South Australia, the South Australian curriculum for social work may become that it has to make sure that it's tailors to that... so it might mean that we move and we are not eligible for registration in that state.

Another significant practical barrier raised by interviewees questioned the effectiveness of social work registration in the context of multi- or inter-disciplinary workplaces.

I think the main one is figuring out how we register, because obviously, like I said, social work, the jobs that are out there at the moment, for example, it's not just all social work titled jobs. There's so many jobs that we can do that are not social work specific. And we share those jobs with like, psychologists, speech pathologists, OTs... So how do we register social workers as a profession when their role is so incredibly broad and they're working in roles that aren't specific to social work? ... I don't know how it would work in that respect.

And if we look at roles that social workers fill, we don't own a role anymore. You know, social workers are the significant minority in child protection, but we don't form a majority, and we don't form a majority in any particular field of practice, you know, we're in the helping professions. So, should they be a helping profession registrar/registration? Because I work in roles where I'm working with, you know, OTs, physios, all the rest of it, psychologists or... At one point, one position I had, I was managed by a car salesman, an ex-car salesman with no social work qualifications.

[In] not for profit areas like homelessness, out-of-home care, again, because these are often jobs that aren't targeted or designated as social work positions, I do not know what it is that registration would do in those areas.

Defining the precise scope of social work practice was also identified as a practical challenge.

Social work has this long history of not being so great at being able to articulate what it does.

There's no other field where we claim a professional hegemony that is as broad and diverse as social work. I could do, you and I could both call ourselves social workers and do two jobs that are completely unrelated, completely no relationship between the two. That's for sure, like social work is such a broad church. Yeah, so we are not going to, it's impossible, we are not going to cohere. What we could do is stop calling ourselves social workers and we can have a clear definitive, you are a counsellor, or you are a child protection worker, ok cool—we can do that. Child protection is discrete discipline, we can do that. All right, community work, we can say that, mental health social work. And mental health social work shares lot of overlap with things like homelessness work, and those sorts of things, but as a field, [social work is] too broad a circle.

5 | DISCUSSION

Our study captured the views of a small number of Australian social workers on the merits of mandatory registration. Our findings confirm that there is a diverse range of views on whether or not registration is a good idea, and equally the practical challenges that would need to be addressed for a scheme to be effective.

Participants agreed with previous commentary (Fotheringham, 2018; Hallahan & Wendt, 2020; Healy, 2016; Lonne & Duke, 2009; McCurdy et al., 2020), suggesting that registration could have a number of benefits for social workers and service users including enhancing

public awareness of the strengths of social work, lifting the practice and supervision standards of social workers and improving the formal protection of social work clients from incompetent or harmful practice particularly in terms of preventing unqualified workers from using the social work title.

They also agreed with earlier literature (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Fotheringham, 2018; Healy, 2016; Lonne & Duke, 2009; McCurdy et al., 2020) that registration has a number of potential challenges or limitations including the prohibitive cost of registration fees for social workers who work in part-time or casual roles, the potential for increased government control and regulation of social work practice and the possible inhibition of social work involvement in policy advocacy. Additionally, the general public might wrongly assume that registration in isolation would improve practice standards. A further concern (as earlier expressed by Young et al., 2019) was that registration could make it harder for people with lived experience of services (who may have criminal records) to enter the profession.

A number of participants identified concerns around possible adverse impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, whether in social work roles, or as service users. They questioned whether registration might limit rather than advance progress toward culturally responsive and decolonised practice, and raised the possibility that additional fees or hoops could discourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers from entering the profession. They also targeted the limited level of consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a deficit in the South Australian Bill.

Additionally, participants identified a number of practical questions regarding the existing legislation that remain to be answered. They include whether or not a state-based scheme can work given the mobility of many social workers, and the extent to which discrete registration can be effectively applied given that most social workers are based in multidisciplinary teams and often perform the same roles as other disciplines.

In conclusion, Australia is an outlier in terms of the lack of regulation of social work practice. The AASW has presented a major case in favour of registration for decades which finally achieved success via the passage of the South Australian Registration Bill in late 2021. But to date, little is known about the views of most social workers concerning registration.

Our study suggests there may be significant support amongst social workers for registration in principle, but equally that a number of practical questions about the merits of the South Australian Bill remain. One substantive concern relates to whether the registration may have an adverse impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in terms of excluding them from the social work profession and/or reducing rather than advancing progress toward culturally responsive practice. It is also arguable that at least one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander should be appointed to the Social Work Registration Board.

Further research is required with a much wider cross-section of social workers (covering, for example, all states and territories including rural and remote areas, AASW members and non-members, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers) to develop a more detailed understanding of social work perspectives on registration. Additionally, it would be useful to ascertain the views of major employers of social workers in government and non-government services as to whether they would support a registration scheme, or alternatively attempt to evade requirements by altering job titles. Most importantly, research should be undertaken with service users, particularly children and parents in contentious areas such as child protection (Fotheringham, 2018), to examine their views of whether and how registration might improve their experience of service provision.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest exist.

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