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Meeting the training needs of a child-protection workforce: perspectives on professional certificates in understanding, assessing, and responding to childhood trauma

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ABSTRACT

There is a well-established need to ensure that practitioners who work directly with children and young people impacted by abuse are well-equipped to support them. This need is coupled with a lack of evidence-based practice models and specialized responses to abuse-related trauma within the child protection/family support sectors. This study examines the outcomes of a suite of Professional Certificates that aim to support nonspecialist practitioners in developing their capacity to provide trauma-specific therapeutic interventions to children who have experienced child abuse and neglect. A mixed-methods design including both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis was used to evaluate the impact of the Professional Certificates on participants' practices and development of competencies applicable to their field of work. Findings suggest that the Professional Certificates may help students develop relevant skills and knowledge applicable to a child protection workforce, and allow them to apply their learning in practice. The results of this study have important implications for the training and development of the child protection workforce. They suggest that interventions such as the Professional Certificates may be an effective way to equip graduates with the requisite skills and knowledge to foster a sense of preparedness in their practice.

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Introduction

There is a well-established need to ensure that practitioners who work directly with children and young people impacted by abuse are well-equipped to support them, by providing access to high-quality training in evidence-based practices (Bromfield & Ryan, 2006; Cortis & Blaxland, 2017; Healy & Lonne, 2010; Lonne et al., 2013; Russ et al., 2022).

In the Australian context, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse reported a lack of evidence-based practice models and specialized responses to abuse related trauma within the child protection/family support sectors. The number of workers in Australia engaged in frontline child welfare work is steadily

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increasing (Russ et al., 2022, p. 11). This workforce plays a potential role in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Therefore, it must be equipped with the knowledge and skills that enable them to respond effectively (Russ et al., 2022, p. 45). Despite this, staff across this field of work 'are underqualified for the complex and skilled work required to recognise and assess risk of harm of child abuse and neglect' (Russ et al., 2022, p. 64).

Further, Aboriginal children are overrepresented in the Australian child protection and out-of-home care system, with 1 in 6 Aboriginal children receiving child protection services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). This stems from complex and underlying historical and systemic factors, including the ongoing impacts of colonial genocide, part of which was the forced removals of Aboriginal children (Atkinson, 2002; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; O'Donnell et al., 2019), any training of the child protection workforce must include Aboriginal worldviews, be culturally meaningful and trauma informed (Cleland & Masocha, 2020; Krakouer et al., 2021; Menzies & Grace, 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2019).

In developing training for this workforce, there is a need to understand the perceived effectiveness of the chosen model of training in equipping graduates with the requisite skills and knowledge to foster a sense of preparedness in their practice (Allen et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2011; Layne et al., 2011; Palfrey et al., 2019; Russ et al., 2022; Szilassy et al., 2013).

Professional certificate design

The Professional Certificates in Childhood Trauma (henceforth: the Professional Certificates) are a suite of three short courses offered by the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia through the Pursuit of Excellence in Responding to Child Abuse and Neglect Project (PERCAN).

There are three courses in the short course package: (a) Understanding Childhood Trauma ('Understanding'), (b) Assessing Childhood Trauma ('Assessing'), and (c) Responding to Childhood Trauma ('Responding'). The three professional certificates support nonspecialist practitioners in community settings to develop their capacity (i.e. knowledge, skills, application of knowledge and skills) to provide trauma-specific therapeutic interventions to children who have experienced child abuse and neglect, with a focus on child sexual abuse. Taken in sequence, each Professional Certificate aims to build on the knowledge and skills developed in the preceding course.

Students may complete only 'Understanding', both 'Understanding' and 'Assessing', or all three courses. Each has been developed as a standalone professional certificate.

The Professional Certificates are delivered entirely online. The first course ('Understanding') contains five topics which should take up to 30 hours to complete. This course is self-paced and to be completed over a 6–8 week period. The second course ('Assessing') runs over a 12-week period and includes independent study and six two-hour interactive, online Community of Practice (COP) seminars. The final course ('Responding') also runs over 12 weeks, with both independent study and six two-hour interactive, online COP seminars.

In their initial delivery (2021–2022), the Professional Certificates were offered via Lotterywest sponsored Scholarships to practitioners in Western Australia who work directly with children and young people impacted by abuse.

Study aims

The present study aims to understand the effectiveness of the suite of Professional Certificates offered by the Australian Centre for Child Protection in addressing the training requirements of a workforce that works directly with children and young people impacted by abuse. The study aims to understand (a) whether the Professional Certificates enable participants to develop competencies applicable to their field of work, and (b) explore concrete instances where participants have integrated the knowledge and competencies acquired from the Certificates into their professional practices.

Methods

This study took a mixed-methods approach, following Doyle et al. (2022) in their evaluation of international development scholarship programs. Data collection took place through (a) semi-structured interviews, (b) focus groups, and (c) surveys. Quantitative/qualitative survey data together with qualitative interview and focus group data from various perspectives were collected concurrently. This allowed the gathering of evidence on the nuances of the outcomes of the Professional Certificates and any impact on the professional practice of graduates.

There were 2 participant groups:

- (1) Graduates (graduated students who have completed their studies within the Professional Certificates)
- (2) University of South Australia staff involved in the development and delivery of the Professional Certificates

Graduates were invited to either complete a survey or participate in an interview. The survey and interview used the same question frame. University of South Australia Staff were invited to participate in a focus group or an interview per individual preference. Focus groups were selected as a method to access or elicit participant responses to differing perspectives on a particular aspect of the Professional Certificates.

The findings of this report are based on data from:

- 45 surveys completed by graduates of the Professional Certificates
- 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews with graduates
- Three focus groups with eight staff members involved in designing and delivering the Professional Certificates.

Data gathered was supplemented by data from the university holdings, including demographic data, enrollment data, and graduation rates.

The survey used 'closed option', multiple-choice and Likert scale items, and open text responses to capture additional information and examples linked to some closed option items. Surveys were hosted by the University of South Australia Qualtrics platform.

Interviews and focus groups were held via Zoom or telephone per participants' preference. A semi-structured interview guide was used for both individual interviews and focus groups.

Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Protocol 204818). The researchers involved in conducting interviews, focus groups and data analysis were independent of the development or delivery of the Professional Certificates. The Research Team consulted with members of the Cultural Oversight Group, which provides cultural governance to the development of the Professional Certificates.

In this study, special attention was given to ethical considerations and the management of potential conflicts of interest. At the time of the study, Author 1 and Author 3 were employees of the University that offers the Professional Certificates under investigation; however, they had no involvement in the delivery of the Professional Certificates nor did they work directly on any projects with any staff member involved in this. Author 1 was responsible for the management, design, conduct, and analysis of the research. Author 3 contributed to the study by providing inter-rater reliability for the interview and survey data, further ensuring the objectivity of the analysis. Author 2, serving as the program director of the Professional Certificates, played no role in participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, or interpretation for this project. Her involvement was confined to providing background information and contextual understanding of the Professional Certificates.

To address potential power dynamics and assure participants of their privacy, a rigorous consent process was implemented. Students participating in interviews were explicitly assured that their participation details and any information shared would remain confidential, accessible only to Author 1, and would not influence their relationship with the University. Similarly, Professional Certificate staff participants were guaranteed that their participation details would not be disclosed to the program director (Author 2), with only Author 1 and 3 having access to the full transcript of their focus groups and that their input would not affect their standing or relationship with the University. Staff were given the option of participating in a one-on-one interview or a focus group with colleagues per their preference. These measures were meticulously taken to mitigate any apprehensions about candidness, ensuring that the feedback and data collected were as unbiased and genuine as possible.

Analysis

Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups were transcribed and cleaned for analysis. The thematic analysis of the graduate interviews and staff focus groups, together with the qualitative data from open-text graduate survey responses, was assisted by using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). Transcripts were dual-coded by two researchers and checked for inter-rater reliability. A coding frame (one for graduate data and one for staff data) was developed against the broad research questions, with themes developed in response to common experiences emerging from interviews and focus groups (Boyatzis, 1998).

Understanding graduate application of skills and knowledge

Acknowledging the critique posed by Carpenter (2011) that relying solely on post-training feedback is inadequate for evaluation, this study sought to move beyond gathering post-course feedback for quality assurance purposes alone. Contrary to immediate post-course reflections gathered for quality assurance purposes, our focus is on in-depth participant accounts regarding the practical application and tangible impact of the knowledge and skills derived from the Professional Certificates. To achieve this, data was collated post-completion of their studies, allowing for reflection on the real-world integration of these skills.

Findings

Participant demographics

At the time of this evaluation (July 2022), students had graduated from all three Professional Certificates, which had been offered multiple times. ‘Understanding’ had been offered four times; ‘Assessing’ offered twice; and ‘Responding’ offered once. Note that during this study, the Professional Certificates in ‘Assessing’ and ‘Responding’ were offered one more time, respectively. These two offerings are not included in the reporting of demographics in this study.

Table 1 details the demographics of the Professional Certificates as at July 2022 using raw data demographics provided to the evaluation. As can be seen in this Table, there is a significant difference in total enrolled and total graduated.

In total, there were 511 unique graduates (individuals counted once regardless of the number of courses completed) from the Professional Certificates as at July 2022. The demographics of unique enrollments and graduations are shown in Table 2. All graduates

Table 1. Demographics of enrolled and graduated students in the professional certificates as at July 2022.

Professional Certificate	Total Enrolled	Total Graduated	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Enrolled)	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Graduated)
‘Understanding’ (offering 1)	148	113	11	7
‘Understanding’ (offering 2)	171	88	4	1
‘Understanding’ (offering 3)	199	174	11	5
‘Understanding’ (offering 4)	184	136	9	5
‘Assessing’ (Offering 1)	69	44	5	1
‘Assessing’ (Offering 2)	94	46	2	1
‘Responding’ (Offering 1)	36	25	0	0

Table 2. Unique enrollments and graduations from the professional certificates as at July 2022.

	Number
Unique students (Enrolled)	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	35
Total students	702
Unique students (Graduated)	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates	18
Total graduates	511

were approached for participation across the two different data collection modes—survey and interview.

All graduates of the Professional Certificates to date received Lotterywest sponsored PERCAN Scholarships.

Graduates

A survey for graduates of the Professional Certificates was open from 27 September until 1 November 2022. A link to the survey was sent to all 511 unique graduates from across the Professional Certificates. The survey gathered both quantitative and descriptive qualitative data.

Eighty graduates (15.7% response rate) accessed the survey. Twenty-five were screened out (either had not completed any of the Professional Certificates [$n = 1$] or were intending further study [$n = 24$]). Ten graduates elected not to answer any questions beyond the screening questions. Forty-five graduates continued the survey attempt.

Of the forty-five graduates who continued the survey attempt:

- Twenty-six (58%) had completed only ‘Understanding’.
- Fourteen (31%) had completed ‘Understanding’ and ‘Assessing’.
- Five participants (11%) had completed all three Professional Certificates (‘Understanding’, ‘Assessing’, and ‘Responding’).

This study interviewed a total of 12 graduates of the Professional Certificates. Interviews took place between 3 October and 1 November 2022. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and telephone and were audio-recorded. Transcriptions of the audio-recordings were then analyzed using NVivo.

Of the 12 graduates who participated in an interview:

- Six participants (50%) had completed only ‘Understanding’
- Three participants (25%) who had completed ‘Understanding’ had partially completed ‘Assessing’¹
- One participant (8%) had completed both ‘Understanding’ and ‘Assessing’
- Five participants (42%) had completed all three Professional Certificates

While the surveys were anonymous, participant identifiers are used to protect the identity of the interview participants, while allowing the reader to understand which Professional Certificate each participant has completed. These identifiers are used in attributing quotes to participants so that the reader can understand the quote in the broader context of which of the Professional Certificates that participant has completed. The participant identifiers of the 12 graduates who participated in interviews are presented in [Table 3](#).

Note that while the total graduates participating in this study ($n = 12$ interviews; $n = 45$ surveys) represents only a small sample size of the total unique graduates of the Professional certificates ($n = 511$), given the specialized nature of the group under study and the demanding high-pressure work in which they are engaged, smaller sample sizes are often expected and can still provide rich, context-specific insights (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016).

Table 3. Participant identifiers of 12 graduates who participated in interviews.

Participant Identifier used in this paper	Professional Certificates completed
Graduate 1	'Understanding'
Graduate 2	'Understanding'
Graduate 3	'Understanding'
Graduate 4	'Understanding' and partially completed 'Assessing'
Graduate 5	'Understanding' and partially completed 'Assessing'
Graduate 6	'Understanding' and partially completed 'Assessing'
Graduate 7	'Understanding' and 'Assessing'
Graduate 8	'Understanding', 'Assessing', and 'Responding'
Graduate 9	'Understanding', 'Assessing', and 'Responding'
Graduate 10	'Understanding', 'Assessing', and 'Responding'
Graduate 11	'Understanding', 'Assessing', and 'Responding'
Graduate 12	'Understanding', 'Assessing', and 'Responding'

Participants in the surveys and interviews were engaged in various fields of employment. These are described in Table 4 that shows that participants were mainly from justice, healthcare, police and child protection.

Ninety-three percent of 45 survey participants worked directly with children and young people and/or families in their work. Survey participants were engaged in work including the direct delivery of services, case management, and the management of staff or teams engaged in frontline work with children and young people. Survey participants both worked directly on issues of child abuse and neglect or in supporting child health and wellbeing.

Eleven (92%) of the 12 graduates participating in interviews worked directly with children and with children who had experienced child abuse and neglect. Four participants worked specifically with Aboriginal children and families. At the time of their studies, interview participants were engaged in work including working with complex needs and trauma, working on multi-agency or multidisciplinary teams, policy development, case management, clinical psychology or therapy, health services and referrals. Eight participants worked in metropolitan locations, two participants worked for state-wide services, and two participants lived and worked in rural and remote parts of Western Australia.

University of South Australia staff

Focus groups were conducted with University of South Australia staff members involved in designing and delivering the Professional Certificates. Two focus groups were

Table 4. Fields of employment of graduate interview ($n = 12$) and graduate survey ($n = 45$) participants.

Field of employment	Surveys (frequency)	Interviews (frequency)	Totals (frequency)	Totals (percent)
Child protection	8	0	8	14.04%
Community/NGO/ACCO	3	1	4	7.02%
Counselling/Social Work	2	2	4	7.02%
Early childhood	2	0	2	3.51%
Education/training	0	2	2	3.51%
Healthcare	10	3	13	22.81%
Justice	6	0	6	1.53%
Out-of-home care	2	1	3	5.26%
Police	9	1	10	17.54%
Psychology	3	2	5	8.77%

conducted with five staff members involved in the delivery and/or design. One focus group was conducted with three staff members involved in the design of the Professional Certificates.

Themes

During the data analysis of survey data and interview/focus group transcripts, three main themes emerged that responded to the study aims of understanding (a) whether the Professional Certificates enable participants to develop competencies applicable to their field of work, and (b) the extent to which the Professional Certificates impact the practices of the participants. These themes are:

- (1) Relevance and reflection of the course content
- (2) Ability to apply what was learned
- (3) Interprofessional collaboration and observation

Themes and subthemes are presented with exemplar quotes from the surveys, interviews and focus groups for illustration.

Relevance and reflection of the course content

Relevance of skills, knowledge, practices and tools learned

Survey participants were asked how relevant the course content of each of the Professional Certificates was to their work. With the exception of graduates from 'Assessing', a majority of survey participants indicated that it was 'entirely relevant' (55% 'Understanding'; 47% 'Assessing'; 75% 'Responding'). None of the survey respondents indicated that the Professional Certificates were not relevant to their work in some way.

Ensuring relevance of content to students was iterated by staff involved in the development and delivery of the Professional Certificates. One staff member captured how the aims of the Professional Certificates underpinned content that would be relevant to a wide cohort of students:

Our overall aim is for workers to have a trauma informed lens on what they're being presented with or what they're observing. And so a lot of that comes from that 'Understanding' course. But to be trauma informed as well, you're actually needing to gather multiple sources of information to reduce bias so that you are actually being able to be really considered in your understanding and approach with a young person as well. For example, the style of assessment that we've, we've suggested is particular and specific, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you can't apply that to other forms. It's mainly about saying, 'Have you considered all of the facts, all of the contributing factors here?'; 'Have you looked at the child as a whole?' It's really the question of, whatever kind of assessment that you're completing, having an awareness of what information is missing. I feel like it's a lot of transferable stuff. (*Staff Participant*)

The majority of graduates participating in the survey, to a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree), agreed (47.7%) or strongly agreed (47.7%) that they had gained competencies (skills and knowledge) in the

Professional Certificates that applied to their work. The only students who either disagreed or strongly disagreed were graduates of the first course ('Understanding'). Responses are shown in Table 5.

Survey respondents were also asked whether there were any particular competencies needed for working with childhood trauma that they did not learn in the Professional Certificates. While 44% indicated that there was not, and 44% were unsure, 12% indicated that a particular skill or knowledge was needed but not learned. These respondents suggested content relevant to working with culturally diverse communities and with specific diagnoses (e.g. FASD or ADHD). These respondents were all graduates of 'Understanding' only.

Graduates participating in interviews found that the practices and tools demonstrated in the Professional Certificates were practices and tools that could have application in their work. For example, one graduate who had partially completed 'Assessing' found the demonstration of assessment tools very relevant to their work:

There's a lot of videos around all those initial interviews and how to really get all that early information, which is really relevant to what we do (. . .). Within my work, my very first meeting is to sit with the family and work out what's happening, what's happened, what's happening, and what are your goals, what are the barriers and really work through that with families (. . .). So that can be overwhelming when you're sitting with a family because there's often quite a lot of emotion [and] all the information being thrown at me. So I found the assessment tool, the gathering information tool, really great because it helps you reflect on what was covered and what were the key points. (*Graduate 6*)

Another graduate who had partially completed 'Assessing' found one of the assignments particularly applicable to validating their work as a counselor:

The initial assessment assignment is very similar to what we do in practice here (. . .). It's been good to see that alignment. I think, for me, it's probably reassuring me that I'm going okay. And that I do know some things. (*Graduate 5*)

Others found that the course content provided the research base or approach to support or offer a new angle on their practice. For example, one graduate of 'Understanding' described how this supported their work: 'that introductory course just shone a spotlight on things that some things I almost felt that I might have known instinctively. But really, with that research base to back that up.' While another graduate of 'Understanding', who had partially completed 'Assessing', found the trauma informed approach supported their practice:

Table 5. Graduate ($n = 44$) response to likert scale question 'I gained skills and knowledge that were applicable to my work'.

	Prof Cert Understanding		Prof Cert Assessing		Prof Cert Responding		Overall	
	n	%(n _{Understanding} = 26)	n	%(n _{Assessing} = 14)	n	%(n _{Responding} = 4)	n	%(n _{Total} = 44)
Strongly disagree	1	4%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2.3%
Disagree	1	4%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2.3%
Agree	12	46%	9	64%	0	0%	21	47.7%
Strongly agree	12	46%	5	36%	4	100.0%	21	47.7%

The pace is slightly different, but really just enhances what I already know. So the tenets of trauma informed practice and child protection fit neatly with positive behaviour support, and the pace approach fits really neatly in terms of assessment. (*Graduate 4*)

Another graduate who had completed 'Responding' described how the course content had helped them to understand the purpose of one aspect of their work:

We have a lot of paperwork that we have to do. It's quite frustrating and I suppose I was just doing it because that's the way things were done and that's just what I had to do. And I think through doing the Assessing Childhood Trauma, it really helped me to understand why I was doing it and what I was doing. (*Graduate 11*)

Despite the overall positive perception of the applicability of the course content to the work of students, staff involved in the focus groups highlighted some of the challenges of designing a course that would apply to a range of professionals in the child protection workforce:

I think we were very aware that we were writing with quite a heavy psych lens and that our audience wasn't necessarily going to be pure psychologists, and we didn't want to seem to value one discipline's perspective or expertise more than another. And so that was actually quite tricky as part of the process, trying to find readings that might resonate with a broader audience or didn't say, 'this is the one and only way of approaching case formulation'. So from my point of view, we definitely gave consideration to trying to make the content as relevant as possible and also value the insights that different disciplinary perspectives and methods and knowledge bases and all of that can bring as well to understanding the issues we were talking about. (*Staff Participant*)

Indeed, some graduates participating in interviews reported that they did not find the practice approaches included in the course content applicable to their work roles and positions. For example, some participants who were working in professions including social work, education and training, police, healthcare, and out-of-home care found that the approach to working with children and families provided by the Professional Certificates was not relevant to their work. This is captured by two participants, the first, an out of home care worker who had completed 'Responding', and the second, a healthcare worker who had completed 'Understanding':

I guess one reflection would be that sometimes, and speaking with some of my other colleagues because they are social workers, sometimes we did find some of the bits seemed more directed towards a psychologist than maybe a social worker, just because we work very differently (. . .). I know the session base was one thing that a couple of us were kind of like 'oh, that's probably not so relevant to us,' because our work does fluctuate between day-to-day stuff and what's going on for the families. (*Graduate 10*)

It's pretty clearly, as far as I know, out of scope in my role. But that doesn't mean that the learning wasn't useful. Because I do work with families with trauma, the kids have trauma and the families have trauma. And it's just so it was good for me to have more knowledge and insight into that. (. . .). But what am I supposed to do? Even if I did a degree in psychology, I'd still be acting out of scope. I'd have to get another job (*Graduate 4*)

Additionally, ensuring that content was culturally competent and trauma-informed in its presentation of Aboriginal families and children was reported as a particular challenge by staff involved in the focus groups. This was reflected on

Table 6. Graduate ($n = 44$) response to likert scale question ‘the examples provided in the course were reflective of the context I work in’.

	Prof Cert Understanding		Prof Cert Assessing		Prof Cert Responding		Overall	
	n	%(n _{Understanding} = 26)	n	%(n _{Assessing} = 14)	n	%(n _{Responding} = 4)	n	%(n _{Total} = 44)
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0%	0	0.0%
Disagree	1	3.8%	1	7.1%	0	0%	2	4.5%
Agree	18	69.2%	7	50.0%	1	25%	26	59.1%
Strongly agree	6	23.1%	6	42.9%	3	75%	15	34.1%
Unsure	1	3.8%	0	0.0%	0	0%	1	2.3%

the challenges of including the necessary culturally competent, trauma-informed content:

I think one of the other things that came through from our conversation with [Aboriginal academics involved in cultural content evaluation] was the whole sort of psychological lens is not culturally friendly, and it’s a very white-centric kind of approach (. . .). So [cultural content evaluators] were like, ‘let’s make this as good as you can using the frame you’ve chosen. But keep in mind, this is so completely a white medicalised model’. (*Staff Participant*)

Indeed, one graduate of ‘Responding’ who worked with Aboriginal families described the gaps in the presentation of cultural trauma experienced by Aboriginal communities in the COP seminars:

Probably in the COP, it would have been good to have somebody that’s versed in cultural trauma in Aboriginal communities. I felt like some of the community practice people were coming and still didn’t quite understand what that meant (. . .). I was given pretty much a very Western ideology on trauma, and even though the material was referenced, there’s still some gaps in terms of cultural trauma. (*Graduate 7*)

Reflection of context

When asked whether the course content was reflective of the contexts in which they worked, the majority of all graduates agreed (59%) or strongly agreed (34%) that course content was authentic to practice. These results are shown, broken down by Professional Certificate, in Table 6.

For most graduates participating in interviews ($n = 12$), the course content, including the families, children and scenarios described and demonstrated, were highly reflective of the contexts in which they worked. For example, one graduate, who had completed ‘Understanding’ and had partially completed ‘Assessing’, described the case studies provided in the Professional Certificates as reflecting families with experience of trauma:

These are the families we’re working with (. . .). I think the case studies are great because, I’m sure that anybody working with families, with trauma, those case studies would just be like, ‘oh yeah, I know that family. I’ve got that family’. (*Graduate 6*)

Another graduate, this time of ‘Responding’, also found the families they worked with reflected in the course content: ‘it was a complete parallel. It was very, very similar.’ For another, a graduate of ‘Understanding’ one example, in particular, was reflective of families they worked with: ‘There’s an example with the family, the multigenerational family, where that’s like, “Yep, that would be spot on.” Sadly, yeah’ (*Graduate 1*). Another

graduate of 'Understanding' found the course content about Aboriginal families reflected the reality of the families that they worked with: 'I was just really delighted to see how the Indigenous part of it was handled. It kind of confirmed the reality of the families that I'm seeing' (*Graduate 2*).

Nevertheless, three of the survey respondents described that the Professional Certificates might be improved by also including more content on the CALD families with which they worked. For example: 'Course limited to Australian Aboriginal context. Current location is very diverse with multiple immigrants' (*Survey Respondent 'Understanding'*); 'There could be increased info/strategies around cultural awareness and sensitivity' (*Survey Respondent 'Understanding'*).

Graduates differed on whether the complexity of the scenarios provided by the Professional Certificates reflected real cases. For one graduate of 'Responding,' the examples were sometimes not sufficiently complex. This participant explained that while this was perhaps necessary for teaching purposes, it was not what was likely to be experienced in reality: 'Look, they were reflective and showing particular behaviours. But some of them were maybe too clean or too neat (...) in reality and in practice, it's a lot more chaotic, and there are lots more things going on' (*Graduate 8*).

However, another participant who had partially completed 'Assessing', when asked whether the course content was reflective of the families with which they worked, responded:

But, well, in 'Understanding', [the examples given were] very, very, very complex. And that doesn't mean that that's not something that, in Western Australia, child protection doesn't see all the time. But I think for a first [course] we all just thought, wow, that's . . . you know, that's really difficult. (*Graduate 4*)

Ability to apply what was learned

Graduates who had applied what they learned

The majority of graduates participating in the survey agreed (52.3%) that they had been able to apply their new skills and knowledge in their work. The only students who either disagreed or strongly disagreed were graduates who only did the first course ('Understanding'). All graduates of the final course ('Responding') ($n = 4$) strongly agreed that they had been able to apply their new skills and knowledge in their work.

Thirty-four graduates (75.5%) who had completed the survey ($n = 45$) indicated that they had been able to apply the skills and knowledge gained through the Professional Certificates. Two respondents, both graduates of the second Professional Certificate, indicated that they had not yet been able to apply what they had learned. The remainder declined to answer. Those who indicated they had been able to apply what they had learned were asked to provide an example of how they had applied their knowledge and skills. Examples offered by survey respondents ranged from changes in approach, changes in individual practice, and changes in organizational practice. For example:

I have certainly become more inclined to look at the history of teenagers and young adults who commit crime and have developed more empathy regarding the way they behave being linked to early childhood and how they were brought up. (*Survey Respondent 'Understanding'*)

I can better identify and discuss the signs of trauma in a young person, in a safe and approachable manner. (*Survey Respondent 'Responding'*)

Changed the way [t]hat we assess families coming into the program. (*Survey Respondent 'Assessing'*)

Graduates participating in interviews were also asked about the impact of the Professional Certificates on their practice and approach to childhood trauma. Participants were asked whether they had been able to apply the skills and knowledge gained through the Professional Certificates. Participants reported that they had altered their approach or practice in responding to childhood trauma due to completing one or more Professional Certificates. This included applying new knowledge, methods, skills or tools gained through the Professional Certificates. For example:

So when I'm working with young people now, quite often I'll actually think about how that trauma might be impacting how they're engaging with me and how they're understanding what's happening around them. (*Graduate 6*)

I've got an initial assessment to do today for work, and I feel like I'm going in there with a bit more of a holistic pitch rather than a ticking-the-boxes process. So I'm looking forward to that. And I think that that's even reflecting on some of my caseload now. I'm like, 'well, what am I missing? What are the gaps?'. (*Graduate 5*)

I've already changed my clinical interview with children, and I was able to trial it with a nine-year-old last week. Not that he's interfacing with child protection, but I just thought there were some really useful aspects to the clinical interview. (*Graduate 4*)

Graduates who had not or could not apply what they had learned

Four participants in the interviews described being unable to apply what they had learned in the Professional Certificates due to their professional circumstances. For one participant, circumstances included organizational factors, which included high caseloads and time constraints. Other participants reported that it was out of the scope of their role to apply the skills and knowledge learned because they did not do direct trauma work. One graduate of 'Understanding' explained that 'we are not in a position to be really delving into trauma for young people.' Another participant, who had completed 'Understanding' and had been invited to apply for 'Assessing', gave further detail:

I would have liked to have done the ['Assessing' and 'Responding' Certificates], but it would only have got me into trouble if I tried to actually practice that. So it would have been dangerous knowledge to have. Like I couldn't have done the assignments because it needed case studies. So, you know, it's I can't play around with people who had these serious, serious traumas. You know, I can't practice out of my scope when I don't know what I'm doing with these families. (*Graduate 1*)

Staff participating in the focus groups emphasized that there was an expectation that students completing 'Assessing' and, to a greater extent, 'Responding' would have a client caseload:

That was always the intention that you'd have lots of people doing the first one because it's just a knowledge. And then a few to do the second one because you do need to have a client caseload there. And then the third one, you definitely do, or it's going to be really hard to be able to understand how to apply what you're learning to your direct work. (*Staff Participant*)

However, as some staff participants pointed out, this expectation was not necessarily reflected in some of the student cohort enrolled in 'Assessing' in particular, which made the Professional Certificate less applicable to the work of some students. Staff became aware of this in the delivery of the COP seminars:

Judging from who was in the Communities of Practice, I think what ended up happening is that there were some people [whose] organisation might have had a client facing client facing service, but the people who were doing the course at that point in time may not have had, or their role might have been in policy or might have been in managing a service. (*Staff Participant*)

One graduate of 'Understanding' also cautioned that the Professional Certificate was only an introduction to the subject and not necessarily going to transform practice:

I'd recommend the course, but, you know, it'd be like with this [caution of] having done this course, we're not suddenly in trauma informed practice, but it's an introductory course, so that's okay (...). I don't want 'trauma' and 'trauma informed' to become a tick box set as if that's something separate to what's happening when essentially it's much more complex than that. (*Graduate 3*)

Nonetheless, what was learned in the Professional Certificates did have the potential to impact practice even when the students did not have a caseload as a staff member points out:

It's those who [are] able to translate the information into their work practice directly (...) like I have a few managers, and I had a social worker from a day-care who sort of sat above all welfare issues for that particular day-care chain. (...) She felt like she could translate the information into her policy for her staff. (*Staff Participant*)

Interprofessional collaboration and observation

Some of the interview participants found that the course content, which included videos of simulated practice, was unique in its reflection of their practice. This was particularly so for graduates working in psychology, social work or counseling. For example, one graduate of 'Responding' who worked as a Counselor commented: 'The videos were really good because it's like real life. And we don't get to see that. You know, in counseling, it's so hard to be actually seeing another counselor in action. I think that was really helpful.' This was echoed by another graduate of 'Responding' who worked as a psychologist:

Sometimes it can be particularly tricky in this field because there's not enough or there's not much opportunity, of course, for observing other Psychs doing things, or working with clients, obviously because of confidentiality and everything. So those videos provided that. That was just awesome being able to see how Psychs actually implement things. (*Graduate 12*)

For those graduates who had participated in a COP seminar, additional interprofessional opportunities were reported. The opportunity to share and connect with others from the same broad field of work provided new angles and approaches that could be implemented in their own practice, as well as seeing the unique challenges of their work reflected. Participation in the COP seminars also offered validation of their practice and

understanding. These outcomes of COP seminars is captured in the following examples from three participants:

So listening to [another participant] and what best practice she was going to bring in, I found all of that so useful; to hear what everyone else does. And you would just take little bits from everyone and go, 'Oh, like that's a really cool way of thinking about doing it'. Some had very different skill sets so you could take different bits and then implement that into your own practice, which I thought was really good. And just seeing that there's others out there, you know, coming up to the same challenges sometimes too, which is helpful to know. (*Graduate 10*)

At the start I was really nervous by that, because I kind of still consider myself a graduate. And so I was nervous in terms of my responses, but I was also kind of excited to hear from [other students] because they've obviously been working in this field for a long time (...). But I also found that because of my experience, especially in [a remote region of WA], where there has been a lot of complex trauma, is that my knowledge was valid as well and I feel like I had enough to contribute in this space, and working with Aboriginal people and also working remote. It was good for me, because it just validated my knowledge but also the experiences I've had. So it's been really good. (*Graduate 5*)

I think it actually helps you either reaffirm what you're doing is the right thing, because quite often you're kind of flying solo in this profession and because trauma isn't necessarily equally understood by everyone. You don't always know if you're doing the right thing. So I think it's been really great to reaffirm: 'you've done a really good job in this case' or 'have you thought about this?'. And that's been really great to reflect on your practice in those conversations without judgement. (*Graduate 6*)

The graduates who had participated in COP seminars also described the benefit of talking to and learning from practitioners from a range of services. This included gaining an increased understanding of other services and practitioners and allowed for the practice continuum to be better understood. For example:

It helps you to understand how to best engage with other services and what barriers might be there. So we have to work with other services, but quite often, there's huge barriers there around understanding each other. That was really useful for me to see that, while we're all coming in from different places, which is obvious, it's just talking with people. You don't get to do that in day-to-day life. You don't get to sit down with someone from [the Government of Western Australia Department of] Communities and discuss, 'so what's your job like?'. (*Graduate 6*)

While talking to and learning from others during the COP seminars was of value during their studies, none of the participants reported that they had maintained contact with other practitioners encountered in the COP seminars. Though, one participant described the value of having made the connection with the possibility of future contact:

I think that knowing that I've got a connection there is beneficial. You never know. I mean, that's part of the work that we do, is that we value those connections with other agencies. It might lead on to valuable information or referrals, whatever the case may be, or information. (*Graduate 9*)

Survey participants echoed the overall positive reflection on the COP seminars. The graduates who had participated in a COP seminar ($n = 16$) were presented with six statements concerning their experience of the COP seminars and asked to rate the degree to which they agree with each statement on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging

Table 7. Graduate ($n = 16$) response to likert scale questions about COP seminars.

The COP Seminar ...	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Unsure	
Allowed me to consolidate my learning	5	31%	8	50%	1	6%	0	0%	2	13%
Allowed by to extend my learning	5	31%	6	38%	3	19%	0	0%	2	13%
Allowed me to share experiences	7	44%	7	44%	1	6%	0	0%	1	6%
Helped me to achieve better results in my assignments	5	31%	6	38%	3	19%	0	0%	2	13%
Helped me to connect learning to action	5	31%	7	44%	2	13%	0	0%	2	13%
Provided a welcome, sharing environment	9	56%	4	25%	1	6%	0	0%	2	13%

from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree. The statements, together with the results, are shown in Table 7.

As shown in Table 7, the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the COP seminars had allowed them to meet particular outcomes. Consonant with the reports of the interview participants, this included the sharing of experiences with other practitioners and professionals, the connection between learning and action, the consolidation and extension of learning, and the provision of a welcoming environment in which sharing was encouraged.

Discussion

Recent literature identifies both a need for practitioners who work directly with children and young people impacted by abuse to have access to high-quality training in evidence-based practices (Bromfield & Ryan, 2006; Cortis & Blaxland, 2017; Healy & Lonne, 2010; Lonne et al., 2013; Russ et al., 2022) and a need to understand the perceived effectiveness of the chosen model of training (Allen et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2011; Layne et al., 2011; Palfrey et al., 2019; Russ et al., 2022; Szilassy et al., 2013).

The results of this study confirm that a range of competencies are met by the Professional Certificates in Childhood Trauma offered by the Australian Centre for Child Protection. This includes providing the skills, knowledge, practices and tools to enable nonspecialist practitioners in community settings to develop their capacity to provide trauma-specific therapeutic interventions to children who have experienced child abuse and neglect. The graduate survey, graduate interviews and staff focus group data reported in this paper suggested that the Professional Certificates both enable students to develop competencies applicable to a child protection workforce and that the skills, knowledge, practices and tools acquired through their studies enable students to put into practice what they have learned.

Development of competencies applicable to a child protection workforce

The majority of graduates interviewed or surveyed by this study agreed that they had gained particular competencies (skills and knowledge) in the Professional Certificates that applied to their work. This included particular tools, assignments, and examples of practice that graduates identified as being applicable to their work. Others found that the evidence base provided in the Professional Certificates both reassured them and gave them the confidence that their practice was on the right track, while also illuminating the purpose of some aspects of practice.

However, for some graduates, some aspects of the course content did not directly align with their work. This was more the case for graduates who were not engaged in case management roles (e.g. psychology, counseling, therapy). For example, the practice approaches taught in the Professional Certificates did not always resonate with students. Some graduates described that the practice approaches suggested were out of the scope of their work, with therefore limited applicability, while for others the psychological lens of some of the practice approaches did not reflect the practice context of some graduates.

Of concern was the identification in the interviews and focus groups that the psychological lens through which the Professional Certificates were developed was not compatible with Aboriginal worldviews and culturally responsive, trauma informed content concerning Aboriginal families. While the cultural content of the Professional Certificates was evaluated by Aboriginal academics, staff reported that the psychological lens of the material was not always culturally friendly. One graduate also reported that an emphasis on Western ideologies of trauma was apparent in the COP seminars. This is of importance when considering that, in order to meet the training needs of a child protection workforce, the Australian service context, which includes an overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system as a result of complex and underlying historical and systemic factors, including colonial genocide and the forced removals of Aboriginal children must be reflected (Cleland & Masocha, 2020; Krakouer et al., 2021; Menzies & Grace, 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2019). Following Menzies and Grace (2022), rigorous evaluation of the Professional Certificates to ensure that they are meeting their aims in this regard should be recommended.

Further research into the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is also needed. As shown in Table 1, 51% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who enrolled in the Professional Certificates graduated. In comparison, while 73% of non-Aboriginal students enrolled in the Professional Certificates graduated. It is important to understand the reasons for the difference in student retention rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and to develop targeted strategies to improve retention for Aboriginal students. This should be the subject of further research.

A key strength of the Professional Certificates that did aid the development of competencies applicable to a child protection workforce was the reporting by the majority of graduates that the Professional Certificates provided realistic learning material that reflected the contexts in which graduates worked. In particular, graduates reported strongly that the practice examples shown in the videos used in the Professional Certificates reflected their work contexts and gave them a rare opportunity to observe other practitioners implementing actions. The value of realistic learning material is in line with social work and trauma-informed research findings that the use of realistic and plausible learning material that simulate the situations likely to be encountered by students can contextualize learning material and increase students' ability to apply what is learned (Eisenman et al., 2006; Layne et al., 2011; Lefevre, 2010; MacIntyre et al., 2011).

Impact on the practices and approach of students

As this study was unable to compare participant knowledge and skills prior to and following completion of the Professional Certificates, an evaluation of the success of

the Professional Certificates in teaching skills and knowledge around childhood trauma was not possible. Instead, what was gathered was data on the reported impact of the Professional Certificates on both practice and applied competencies.

Throughout this study, graduates and staff provided many examples of the ways in which what had been learned in the Professional Certificates had been applied in practice. This included applying new knowledge, methods, skills or tools gained through the Professional Certificates. Examples ranged from changes in approach, changes in individual practice, and changes in organizational practice.

The ability to apply what was learned in the Professional Certificates was, however, reliant on the scope of the student's role. For example, one graduate of 'Understanding' reported that to apply what they had learned would have been out of the scope of their role. This graduate had been invited to enroll in the subsequent Professional Certificates (though did not apply and was therefore not screened for suitability) and staff also reported students with no client caseload being able to enroll in 'Assessing' and 'Understanding'. Further research into the screening of students for training of this type is needed to ensure that training is accessed by and accessible to those students for whom the course material will have practical application.

A common theme reflected in the responses of the graduates who had participated in a COP seminar was the value of interprofessional collaboration. Graduates reported that they drew benefit from hearing about the approaches to practice of other practitioners working in the same context and deepening their knowledge of other services. The value of this type of collaboration in a learning environment provides support to Anderson-Carpenter et al. (2014); Cortis and Blaxland (2017) and others, who describe communities of practice in the community services context, as enabling the implementation of trauma-informed strategies.

Limitations

The conclusions of this study need to be qualified. Firstly, while all graduates of the Professional Certificates were invited to participate ($n = 511$), only a small number ($n = 57$) elected to participate. However, as already described, the population is highly specific and the study aims and related phenomenon are narrow (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016). Despite this, given the majority of graduates who participated in this study were, for the most part, positive about their experience of the Professional Certificates, it is worth considering that those who did not participate may have offered contradictory findings.

Secondly, the study did not have the time or resources to observe practice or to collect data from other stakeholders, including client groups or colleagues, and so relies only on the self-assessment of graduates of how they have applied what they have learned in the Professional Certificates together with the reports of teaching staff. As Tham and Lynch (2014) warn us, '(r)elying solely on the views of the [newly educated social work] students has its shortcomings' (Tham & Lynch, 2014, p. 705). However, it should be noted that the participants in the Professional Certificates are postgraduate members of a workforce working directly with children and young people impacted by abuse, some with many years of experience of

practice, as are the teaching staff. Whether this increases their ability to self-assess their training needs and outcomes in this field should be the subject of a separate study.

Finally, it was also beyond the scope of the study to gather any meaningful baseline information as described by Carpenter (2011). Further research within the Professional Certificates might be conducted, therefore, by conducting a time series design study, gathering information before and during their participation in the Professional Certificates as well as after their completion (Carpenter, 2011, pp. 134–135).

Conclusion

This study provides preliminary evidence that targeted training courses for professionals working in the child protection workforce can result in outcomes that equips graduates with the requisite skills and knowledge to foster a sense of preparedness in their practice. The delivery of quality education in this space is vitally important for the child protection workforce, for, as Lonne et al. remind us: ‘A workforce development strategy is but one of the dimensions, albeit a central one, that must be addressed as we accept past failures and engage with the possibilities for future reform’ (Lonne et al., 2013, 1644).

Note

1. While students currently enrolled in a Professional Certificate were not contacted for participation, delivery of ‘Assessing’ had commenced between the generation of the student contact list and the recruitment of participants. As a result, three graduates currently enrolled in ‘Assessing’ participated in an interview. They had been provided with a Participant Information Sheet in advance outlining eligibility, but their current enrollment status was only disclosed during the interview. These students were then reminded that their participation would have no bearing on their studies or on their relationship with the University. All consented to proceed.

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