

Teacher training in sexuality education in Australia: how well are teachers prepared for the job?

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Young people's sexual health is a major concern worldwide and in Australia. The sexual behaviour of young people has changed over the past 50 years – with a trend towards first sex at an earlier age,¹ and high rates of unprotected sexual intercourse among young women and men.² While an AIDS/HIV epidemic seems to have been prevented successfully in Australia, infection rates for sexually transmissible infections, such as chlamydia, have recently increased significantly among young people in Australia.³ At the same time, sources of information about sexuality and sexual behaviour are increasingly readily available to young people, yet these are extremely varied in their reliability.

In this context, school-based sexuality education is increasingly important in assisting young people to find reliable information, supporting their decision-making, reducing risky sexual behaviour and consequently preventing the increase in sexual infections.^{2,4–10} In fact, young Australians themselves nominate school programs as one of the sources they use most for information on sexual health.¹¹ While there has been some criticism that topics such as loving relationships and homosexuality are not routinely covered,¹² school education remains of primary importance in preparing young people for healthy and enjoyable sex lives.

Hence, we need to ask the question whether teachers are adequately trained to deliver effective sexual health education and to influence young people's sexual behaviour. Pre-service teacher training is clearly one important component of effective sexuality education in schools and is an opportunity to build a sound foundation for this work. It can help to reduce common barriers and challenges in the implementation of sexuality education at school level and improve teaching quality simply by making teachers feel more confident.^{13,14} Yet, very little is currently known about the pre- or in-service training delivered by universities and colleges to prospective teachers of sexuality education. Studies in this area are either out-dated or do not exist.^{15–17}

To better understand the current situation of sexuality education at school and the barriers for implementing effective programs, more research on educators and their experiences within the context of professional development is needed. Thus, we reviewed the broader curriculum and policy content for sex education in Australian tertiary teaching institutions, as well as the availability and content of pre-service teacher training.*

First, the review included desk research of internet resources identifying sexuality, health and physical education content listed by teacher registration institutions as well as universities and colleges. Second, 15-min phone interviews were conducted with key contacts at each participating teaching institution (mostly course coordinators or lecturers specialising in health education) to validate the inclusion and content of sexuality education topics, whether these were compulsory and how many hours were allocated to these in the teacher training curriculum. Following the interviews, the findings were cross-validated by investigating the participating universities' handbook for course and unit information. This cross-validation allowed for the categorisation of courses and units into *substantial*, *basic* and *general* inclusion of sexuality education.[†]

We found that of the 45 teacher training institutions nationally, 8 did not offer training in sexuality education anywhere in their curriculum. Across all states and territories in Australia, only 9% of relevant university courses had *substantial* inclusion in any core or elective units, 29% had *basic* inclusion and 11% had *general* inclusion of training in sexuality education. Interestingly, the majority (51%) of courses had *no inclusion* of training in sexuality education. Of those courses that included training in sexuality education, the majority dedicated only a few hours of course time to this topic.[‡]

In the 49% of courses that included some level of training in sexuality education, 74 specific units were taught. However, only 46 (62%) were compulsory or core units, while 28 (38%)

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[†]Substantial inclusion: sex education included as a major focus within a unit; basic inclusion: sex education included as a minimum of one or two teaching sessions or an essay topic within a unit; general inclusion: sex education covered more generally within a unit or group of units. Inclusion was defined as curriculum that addressed sexual development, sexual diversity, sexual relationships and sexual decision-making.

[‡]Note: most of these pre-service courses for secondary teacher training lead to Bachelor Degrees or Graduate Diplomas of Education and Teaching. Postgraduate courses were only included if they were course work rather than research-based.

were electives or only available to those students specialising in health and physical education. More than half of the compulsory units were at a basic level, while only 9 out of the 46 units had a substantial focus on training in sexuality education. Even within the elective and specialist units, merely 1 out of 10 units offered substantial coverage of sexuality education. Finally, sexuality education content was mostly taught within the context of other subjects rather than as a stand-alone topic.

During the phone interviews, university staff commented that whether and to what extent content related to sexuality education was offered largely depended on the expertise and interest of staff within the university or college. In some cases, outside institutions (e.g. family planning institutions) or academics from other institutions were approached to provide lectures on a guest basis. Although the importance and necessity of sexuality education within pre-service teacher training was generally acknowledged, concerns were raised that there were many competing demands for topics to be included in teacher training but only limited course time was available.

Another explanation for the lack of attention paid to sexuality education is the limited pressure on training institutions to provide training in this subject area, as there is no mandated national curriculum in sexuality education. Further there is no requirement from teacher registration bodies that teachers of health and physical education, or other subjects, must have any training in this area. While local state and territory curriculum frameworks are likely to influence training content, there is no formal mechanism to ensure inclusion. It is up to each tertiary institution to decide whether and to what degree sexuality education is included in their pre-service training curriculum.

A recent study of sex education teachers in Australia indicates that the majority of sexuality education teaching is, in fact, delivered by school-based staff rather than being outsourced to external organisations. It is therefore essential that teachers are adequately prepared to teach sexuality education confidently and effectively. According to the data presented in this recent study, teachers from a variety of different subject areas are involved in teaching sexuality education, e.g. health and physical education, science, SOSE (studies of society and environment), humanities, English and home economics, indicating that sexuality education may need to be a 'stand alone' part of teacher training.¹⁸ This study also revealed that 16% of participating sex education teachers had no training in this subject area and the majority of them relied on in-service training to help them prepare for their teaching.¹⁸ With in-service training being specialised on selected topics rather than holistic, and mostly provided by external organisations, quality control of training is almost impossible and a high degree of variation can be expected in teachers' knowledge about teaching sexuality education.

With effective teaching being linked to effective and adequate training of teachers,¹⁵ there are a number of key areas that need to be investigated further to develop incentives and programs that provide the support needed by teachers. First, more research with teachers of sexuality education must be done to gain a better understanding of their needs as educators. Information from this research will

build the foundation for addressing the second and third key areas. Second, incentives should be developed for more and better inclusion of sexuality education in pre-service teacher training. The lack of formal mechanisms needs to be addressed to encourage tertiary training institutions to include sexuality education in pre-service teacher training courses. Third, the establishment of a mandated national curriculum in the area of health and physical education, which explicitly includes sexuality education, would increase pressure on pre-service training institutions to cover sexuality education, and increase its profile and status as a teaching area across Australia. These approaches focus on a long term and continuous change in teaching sexuality education in Australia.

In order to encourage a short term response to this problem, it would be profitable to support those educators at the various tertiary institutions who are already providing significant and quality course content related to sexuality education. If this base of expertise can be identified then it could be drawn upon to develop and make courses available on a cross-campus or cross-institutional basis during semester or as an intensive summer school program. At a minimum, resources and support material could be provided to key faculty staff for distribution to student teachers. This material may assist in increasing the uptake of elective courses, units within a broader course, or any cross-campus or summer schools courses.

Fact is, we can no longer afford to let this critical area of health for young people be neglected or fail to thrive for lack of pre-service training of teachers.

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