

# Counsellor Education in the Future

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## Abstract

This article, based on a paper presented at the Counsellor Education Conference, contributes to the discussion of counsellor registration by discussing the implications of three potential scenarios for the future of counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand. What eventuates depends on whether or not a pathway will be available for counsellors to become registered, what form this will take, and what effects will flow from this; or whether the current situation will continue with no formal registration process but with NZAC acting as a “certifying” body. The levels of counsellor education likely to be required are indicated, and the content areas that are likely to be mandated are outlined.

**Keywords:** counsellor registration, counsellor education, curriculum, New Zealand Association of Counsellors, standards

Consideration of the implications of the registration debate must be part of any discussion about the future of counsellor education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Key questions at this time are:

- Will there be a pathway for counsellors to become registered, and if so, how and to what effect?
- Or, will the current situation of no formal registration process but NZAC increasingly acting as a “certifying” body continue?

This article looks at three possible scenarios and their likely outcomes.

## **Scenario 1. No formal registration scheme (the status quo)**

If there is no recognised registration scheme in place for practising counsellors (i.e., the status quo), then the matter of standardising and/or upgrading counsellor education nationally is not particularly pressing. The same diverse course levels,

standards, and content that currently exist across training providers could continue. However, in this scenario, NZAC could choose to tighten its membership criteria by demanding more extensive and/or rigorous training of its members. This action would assume that membership of NZAC continues to be highly desirable to counsellors in some practical ways, such as economically, professionally, prestige-wise, and offering protection from litigation by providing affordable insurance, a written code of ethics, as well as an open and fair complaints process.

The present diversity among training courses would become a concern when and if the public, government, and/or counsellors themselves wanted greater clarity and intra-profession coherence about what passes for counsellor training/education. Usually, the impetus for this would be:

- a. people outside the profession demanding to know what they could reasonably expect counsellors to have knowledge of and competence in, or
- b. counsellors themselves deciding that tightening their training requirements would enhance their status and/or employability in competition with other mental health providers.

## **Scenario 2. Registration under legislation**

NZAC now says that registration under the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act (HPCA Act) is “off the table” (President Jonathan Loan, address to the Christchurch/West Coast Branch Colloquium, 22 September 2011). Apparently, the government does not want any more groups registering under the Act and is instituting a review to determine how the Act has worked and what alterations to it are necessary. This review is unlikely to result in counsellors (or other similar groups deemed to use relatively non-high-risk, non-intrusive interventions with clients) lodging a successful registration bid.

Because this route to counsellor registration now seems to be closed, there is no real need to discuss how the Act would influence a review of counsellor education, except to say that it would have led to a total rethinking and a significant standardisation of courses, content, and educational process. The outcome would have brought—almost certainly—higher standards, and greater clarity, transparency, and cross-course coherence to counsellor education programmes that would have strengthened the registration application. The magnitude of these changes would be immense for current courses at all levels (as it was for psychologists, for example) by agreeing on and specifying, among other things:

- mandatory content areas;
- minimum professional experience levels for registration;
- supervision requirements both during training and post-training;
- minimum course levels and lengths (usually specified in hours or “credits”);
- standardised (and possibly external) procedures for assessing competence, and
- mandatory ongoing professional development requirements.

### **Scenario 3. A process of self-registration (the most likely)**

At present, NZAC is trying to “sell” the Ministry of Health (MoH) and its membership on the benefits of self-registration, sanctioned and promoted by the MoH, as a legitimate alternative to registration under legislation. Such a scheme would probably be set up and administered by NZAC, but approved by the government/MoH and audited regularly by an external body. The chances of this campaign being successful are not yet known, but the NZAC Executive seems to believe it to be more likely than not. If this option is successful, the implications for counsellor education are similar to those under Scenario 2: immense, immediate, and far-reaching.

The reasons for registration (in whatever form) remain as they always have:

- ostensibly to safeguard the public from unsafe and inadequately trained counsellors,
- but also to enhance counsellors’ status and employability in comparison with other registered mental health providers such as social workers, psychotherapists, and psychologists.

In order to achieve these aims, especially enhanced status, NZAC must convince government that self-registration, largely regulated by the Association itself, would deliver a process that was sufficiently rigorous and provided sufficient safeguards for the public. To do this, NZAC will have to adopt standard (read “mainstream”) educational and performance criteria for basic counsellor education and counsellor competency. Some members are sure to think that these more conservative criteria will be too restrictive of the profession. In return, NZAC would need assurance from the government that self-registration would be officially sanctioned and not be seen as a “second best” or inferior process to registration under legislation.

The implications of constructing an acceptable process of self-registration would almost certainly be that NZAC (or some MoH-appointed committee representing interested counselling groups) would set more specific and more rigorous educational

criteria for registration than exist across courses at present. This would mean reviewing and redefining acceptable levels/standards in the following areas at least:<sup>1</sup>

1. The minimum level (NZQA Level 6, 7, or higher) of both basic and advanced levels of training;
2. The acceptable title(s) of the qualification/s at each level (there would be considerable standardisation here);
3. Clear programme criteria for managing the assessment of prior learning, admissions, instruction, assessments, appeals, complaints, and practice;
4. The length of time or number of hours of study/practice involved in both basic and advanced qualifications (such as masters or PhD);
5. The curricula specifying essential knowledge and competence, for example:
  - The practice, process and management of the counselling relationship
  - Relationships with other human service professions and services
  - Essential skills and therapeutic competencies of counselling
  - Methods used for evaluating or assessing competence
  - The political and social context of counselling
  - Learning and working within an authentic partnership between Māori and non-Māori based on the implications of the Treaty of Waitangi
  - Social and cultural diversity in New Zealand and the implications for counselling
  - Human development across the lifespan
  - Human cognitive and emotional functioning under both normal and stressful conditions
  - Relationships among social, physical and psychological functioning
  - A working understanding of formal and informal methods of diagnosis and assessment of client functioning
  - Currently accepted theories and associated practices in counselling
  - Formulating an appropriate therapeutic strategy for/with each client
  - Client rights and counsellor responsibilities in the therapeutic process
  - Understanding the ethical and legal requirements surrounding counselling

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1. It is instructive to review the BACP, CACREP (American) and IRCEP (new, international arm of CACREP) models for accrediting counsellor education programmes. While each is different, they are all quite specific in what they believe to be the requisite processes, knowledge, and skills in entry-level counsellor education. (See BACP, 2011; CACREP, 2009; IRCEP, 2011.)

- Application of research-informed practices and processes in counselling
- Supervised field placements and practices (minimum number of hours)
- Supervision during and following training
- Additional areas of study such as family, careers, and educational counselling, and the requirements for each.

*My opinion regarding Scenario 3*

1. The minimum entry level for registration should be a four-year bachelor's degree in counselling, including a course covering how to search for and interpret current counselling research findings.
2. For those qualified to enter counsellor education at the masters level, entry to the two-year Master of Counselling degree would presuppose prior study in human development, cognitive functioning, and social and cultural diversity in New Zealand. Usually study at this level would go beyond bachelor's topics, and might include other more specialised areas of counselling, training in research skills, and the production of a thesis.
3. Qualification titles should be Bachelor of Counselling and Master of Counselling, with subspecialities in counselling added to those basic degrees (e.g., Career Counselling; Family Counselling; Addictions Counselling).
4. There should be clear programme criteria at each level for managing the assessment of prior learning, admissions, instruction, assessments, appeals, complaints and practicum experiences.
5. All of the knowledge and competencies listed under Scenario 3 should be required for registration.

**Postscript**

I realise that this view of counsellor education may seem at first glance to be overly prescriptive. However, if NZAC is determined to institute some form of registration that is acceptable to the MoH and other health practitioners, then counsellor education will almost certainly have to be "proven" as equal in detail and rigour to the educational requirements of other health professionals. Thus, what I have proposed is a list of areas of knowledge and instruction without prescribing a particular counselling theory or model as "best." What I hope would drive educational considerations would be the results of counselling research and critical commentary on best practices and effective interventions. There is scope within this literature for courses to present preferred approaches and models and still function within the broad term "currently accepted."

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