

THE FUTURE OF COUNSELLING: NATIONAL STANDARDS & WHAT COMES NEXT

Welcome back, everyone. Thanks for joining us.

This is the almost last session in our conference today, and I don't know how you're all feeling, but I am excited and inspired by all the members who have been speaking to you today.

I am joined by our president, Nigel. Thank you for coming in.

Hi everyone. Great to be here. Exciting times, and exciting to be part of this conversation, Johanna.

Yes, yes. And Nigel and I spend a lot of time talking about national standards, so it's a really good opportunity for us to go back to basics and talk more broadly about it for this audience.

We are taking questions in the Q&A, and we expect there to be lots of them. So we'll try and answer what we can as we go through and then have some questions at the end as well.

Now, we also have a bit of a slideshow, but we'll try and move through that reasonably quickly. So we'll just get started.

I think this is kind of the most important point. I know that when we talk about national standards, there's often a lot of anxiety, and that's understandable because it is a big change to the sector and a big change to how counselling and psychotherapy have been practised and regulated over the last couple of decades.

However, the government has been very clear in their commitment to support the current workforce. And all of you are in that current workforce by the fact that you have undertaken study in this area, preferably accredited study, and that you are engaging with PACFA in this way.

PACFA has been very fortunate in the fact that our standards align with the national standards very, very closely. That is not an accident. That is the result of hard work and lots of strategy.

You can see that there are three descriptors for career stages, and PACFA registration starts at level two. So by completing an accredited qualification in counselling at AQF level seven to nine, you are in alignment with the national standards.

Congratulations on that. That's a really exciting choice. It's a really exciting time, and that's a really significant choice.

We welcome you when the time comes to join our membership and to advance the profession.

I'll just add some historical context to the national standards discussion.

For those that don't know, PACFA was formed about 25 or 26 years ago because at that time psychology and psychologists were really looking to dominate the mental health landscape in Australia, and counsellors were concerned.

PACFA is a federation, the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia. So it's a federation of existing training programs and existing associations from right around the country. More than 40 groups came together essentially to achieve what we now have, which is national standards for counselling and psychotherapy.

What's happening right now is precisely what PACFA was formed and designed to make happen.

It's a very exciting time to be watching this take place in my time as president.

We have a board of elected and appointed directors, all of whom are clinical members. Through our strategic planning and strategic engagement with government, these processes are taking place.

The fact that the career descriptors at levels two and three match PACFA's existing registration standards is no accident. It's because we advocated effectively that we already had the right level of training and standards for counsellors and psychotherapists in Australia.

One of the really powerful things about today is that I hope people understand they are not alone in any of the challenges they are facing in getting started in their counselling career.

For some people it will be a smooth transition, and for some people it will not. There are many challenges facing the profession that make that harder than it could be.

They range from professional recognition, award recognition, and regulatory support, and none of them are new.

When I first joined PACFA, I spoke to a lot of members, well over 100 in my first few months, and many people were demoralised about how difficult the landscape could be.

The national standards are the best answer we have to many of those challenges.

The other key elements are things like title protection, the fact that anyone can call themselves a counsellor or psychotherapist, which makes it confusing for the community and employers.

Counsellors and psychotherapists also don't have GST exemption when other health professionals do, which makes private practice inequitable.

There are also conversations around licensing, certification and accreditation, which counselling has not historically used to showcase practice while other professions have.

The national standards are a government-funded project overseen by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.

It was triggered by a presentation that PACFA did in 2022 to the select inquiry into mental health and suicide prevention.

One of the key topics of that inquiry was the mental health workforce and why it was so hard for people to access psychology services.

In our presentation we were vocal about the fact that there was this really valuable workforce that wasn't being well utilised.

A recommendation that came out of that inquiry was that national standards across the counselling profession would aid confidence and increase workforce utilisation while addressing concerns around community safety.

Healthcare professionals, including counsellors and psychotherapists, are already under healthcare complaints commissioners nationally. There are clear processes for issues around clinical safety.

National standards started a whole lot of conversations. Over the last few years there has been a lot of work behind the scenes, consultations and reports.

We have worked hard to make sure the consultants and bureaucrats involved understood the value of PACFA's safeguard for the community around tertiary qualifications.

PACFA has always had the highest baseline for counselling and psychotherapy training in the country.

We are really excited to see that affirmed in the national standards.

The point here is that this is a long process. Working with government is never quick and easy, but this has actually moved very quickly compared to many other regulatory projects.

We have just completed a consultation around a regulatory model.

The consultation was open to everyone, and it was really important that we had lots of voices involved.

A report is due from the Nouse Group to the government in June, and there will be recommendations about what the optimal regulatory model is.

People frequently ask when implementation will happen, and that has not yet been entirely decided. The general sense has been three to five years.

That means for everyone in this room, this is something that is going to happen in your professional life.

The first phase finalised in October 2025 and focused on what the standards should be.

The second consultation asks how those standards should be implemented and what the regulatory model should be.

At the moment, PACFA is one of the self-regulatory organisations in the counselling space.

Other possible models include AHPRA-style statutory regulation.

There were four models presented in the consultation.

Self-regulation is basically what we have now.

Contract-based regulation is similar but with stronger incentives and requirements for registration.

Statutory regulation is effectively the AHPRA model.

The fourth option is co-regulation within statutory regulation.

This model says organisations like PACFA can do a very good job regulating the profession but require additional support and oversight from an organisation such as AHPRA.

PACFA encouraged the idea of statutory co-regulation, although we could work within any model.

We would prefer not to continue with purely voluntary regulation because people being able to opt in or out has created confusion and has not built community confidence.

The preferred model would ideally give us the benefits of AHPRA registration without overly tight regulation.

We retain control over what defines a counsellor and what a counsellor can do while opening up the opportunities that regulation brings.

There are lots of questions about title protection.

Eventually title protection is necessary.

The most important thing to remember is that these reforms are not being done purely for counsellors or PACFA. They are part of larger healthcare reforms aimed at improving access to quality services.

Title protection supports community safety and confidence.

There are also questions about Medicare rebates, diploma-level counsellors and employment opportunities.

This move toward regulation is designed to address those issues.

Counsellors and their jobs and roles in society will become more protected and expanded.

There are many jobs counsellors could and should be doing that have historically gone to other professions because counselling has not been regulated in the same way.

National standards will also likely improve access to funding, Medicare and GST exemption.

The diploma-level counsellors are included in the national standards and are not going to be excluded.

PACFA currently starts at bachelor level because the founders believed that a counsellor should have a bachelor degree to stand alongside other health professions.

However, if PACFA becomes the regulator for the industry, we may include diploma-level counsellors.

Level one practitioners in the standards are AQF five and six, the diploma and certificate counsellors.

They are expected to have a more limited scope of practice.

Part of the reason employers and the public have been confused is because there has never been clear differentiation between different training levels.

PACFA has been advocating strongly on your behalf.

We are talking to governments and major employers about how counsellors can be better utilised.

We have employed a consultant to work on employer liaison and advocacy.

We are developing projects to clearly explain the competencies and expertise of new graduates and how they can contribute to the mental health landscape.

PACFA believes all our registrants are national standards ready.

We encourage people to use PACFA networks and services to build their counselling career.

We provide a large amount of cost-effective CPD and encourage people to think long-term about advanced training, colleges and certifications.

Counselling is often a lifelong profession.

The government messaging has been reassuring and positive.

By working with PACFA, you are positioning yourself well for these changes to become an opportunity rather than a threat.

Has there been pushback from psychologists?

Absolutely not.

We have been in talks with the Australian Psychological Society, and they are excited about what is happening.

They want clarity about who counsellors are and who they should collaborate with.

The national standards will create more clarity and stronger professional identity.

Everything around counselling and psychotherapy will become clearer and tighter over time.

We have had a real visibility and credibility issue in the past because there has been so much murkiness around qualifications and titles.

National standards and regulation will help tidy all of that up.

More jobs are going to open up.

There are many jobs currently advertised for social workers, psychologists, OTs or mental health nurses where counsellors are actually very suitable.

Sometimes employers simply do not realise counsellors exist as a distinct profession.

Part of our employer liaison work is about educating employers one employer at a time.

If you see jobs where counsellors should be included but are not, send them through to PACFA.

There are also questions about research.

As regulation and recognition increase, there will be more research opportunities and funding.

PACFA already has a research committee and provides annual grants to support counselling research.

If you are interested in research, apply for a grant.

At the moment, if you're a student counsellor and want to start working, there is nothing stopping you.

However, from PACFA's perspective, private practice should ideally be reserved for people with clinical registration and substantial supervised practice behind them.

There are concerns around community safety if people open private practices immediately after minimal training.

In terms of employment, people can absolutely work while studying or early in their careers.

Many speakers today talked about volunteering, utilising previous work experience and getting a foot in the door.

Volunteering is a standard pathway into the workforce.

The national standards will likely improve how counsellors and psychotherapists work within multidisciplinary teams.

We hope counsellors become a recognised mainstay of mental health teams with clear scopes of practice.

PACFA clinical registration aligns with level three of the national standards.

Certified practising counsellor aligns with level two.

Level one is diploma-level practitioners.

Specialist modalities such as hypnotherapy are not specifically included in the national standards because the standards focus on core counselling and psychotherapy training.

PACFA-accredited courses are the only accredited courses that fully meet the national standard levels currently specified.

There are still many details to work through, and we appreciate everyone's patience.

What we can assure you is that PACFA has been vocal on your behalf and is continuing to advocate strongly for the profession.

The future is looking very positive for counsellors and psychotherapists in Australia.