

# Skin in the Game: The Professionalization of Lived Experience Roles in Mental Health

Should the Lived Experience workforce become more professionalized?

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## Aim

The arguments for and against professionalization are explored to understand the risks and benefits for the Lived Experience workforce.

## Background

Lived Experience work developed as part of the consumer movement and the impact of deinstitutionalization. The employment of Lived Experience workers has greatly increased since their inclusion in mainstream mental health services. However, the growth and effectiveness of the workforce has been impacted by a lack of clear and shared understanding of Lived Experience roles.

Including Lived Experience workers is recommended as best practice in mental health service delivery in Australia. This is because of increasing evidence of the benefits of Lived Experience workers in improving outcomes for people receiving services, Lived Experience workers, colleagues and organisations. Despite evidence of the benefits of Lived Experience work, challenges exist. Several strategies support best practice in employing Lived Experience workers, including Lived Experience specific policies, supervision and training.

There is increasing pressure for the Lived Experience Workforce to become professionalized as Lived Experience work is more and more included as part of mainstream mental health services. Lived Experience workers have expressed fears of co-option if Lived Experience workers are heavily influenced by the dominant medical model and lose their unique way of working. There is also a concern about the power imbalance between Lived Experience workers and people accessing services. To reduce these concerns, Lived Experience work must be grounded in the history of the consumer movement and consumer/survivor culture in providing the foundation and values of Lived Experience work within a Human Rights and social justice framework.

### What is a Profession?

A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards and who hold themselves out as and are accepted by the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of learning derived from research, education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of others (Australian Council of Profession 2003).

## Lived Experience Work as a Developing Profession

Professions can be measured based on a range of factors associated with professionalization. The Lived Experience workforce in Australia is a developing profession based on the following stages of professionalization. This means the Lived Experience workforce has reached some but not all steps to becoming professionalized.

<p><b>Formalised Collaboration</b> Exists with state and national networks, but there is currently no National peak representing the Lived Experience workforce</p>	<p><b>Authorised practice</b> No registration or licencing requirement for the Lived Experience workforce. However state and national guidelines and standards are being developed.</p>	<p><b>Standardised qualifications</b> Increasing push to have standardised qualifications. Currently there is accredited Cert IV training</p>
<p><b>Educational Uniformity</b> Nationally accredited training exists in Australia, NZ, UK and US.</p>	<p><b>Educational Identity</b> Lived Experience is not recognised as its own discipline</p>	<p><b>Consolidated Beliefs</b> Push to develop a core set of principles and values, but this has not been established</p>
<p><b>Enlarged Influence</b> Lived Experience work has shaped policy reforms and led to a greater recovery focus.</p>	<p><b>Enhanced Communication</b> Lack of specialised Lived Experience journals</p>	<p><b>Specialisation</b> Limited senior Lived Experience roles. A small number of specialised Lived Experience roles exist eg: Youth</p>

## The Argument For and Against Professionalization


For	Against
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater credibility and valued status</li> <li>Collective identity as a discipline</li> <li>Recognised skills and knowledge beyond the use of personal story</li> <li>A platform for building evidence through standardised practice</li> <li>Potential for greater funding</li> <li>Attract more training and professional development</li> <li>Guard against the workforce as a form of cheap labour</li> <li>Greater potential for change within the system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential restrictions on political action</li> <li>Demands for uniformity and less flexibility and creativity</li> <li>Registration to a governing body may restrict the service reform agenda</li> <li>Exclude those who do not have the entry requirements of the profession</li> <li>Tension in who is included in the governing body and who will decide what is best practice</li> <li>Reduce authenticity of Lived Experience roles and replicating clinical roles</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

This debate about professionalization highlights how Lived Experience work centred on personal experience and relationships can struggle to find credibility in a system that prioritises formal knowledge. It also shows how overall, workplaces have a lack of recognition and lack of value of life experience and informal learning.

Ultimately, professionalization could be the result of attempting to solve the 'wrong' problem. Instead of addressing the need for professionalization, perhaps the focus should shift to how we shape the work environment to greater value and acknowledge lived expertise as knowledge.

Click [here](#) to go to a blog about this paper provided by Mad In America which also outlines the key points covered in the paper.

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