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Update on the associate psychologist training programme

Tēnā koe

The project to develop an associate psychologist¹ workforce continues to progress. This document provides an update on the work underway, with a bit more information about some of the drivers of the project.

Defining scope and competencies

The New Zealand Psychologists Board (NZPB) is continuing to work on the regulatory aspects of the role. The scope and competencies are expected to be outlined by the end of April so that a qualification can be developed ready for a 2026 intake. NZPB remain committed to the project timeframes, while all acknowledge that this is a complex piece of work, occurring in a context of potential changes to health workforce regulation.

Developing the tertiary qualification

The procurement process is nearly complete to select the first two tertiary providers to develop the associate psychologist qualification. Contract discussions are being finalised, and announcements will follow of the successful providers. There was a lot of interest in the project and other tertiary providers may also join the work to develop the qualification in future.

Workforce solutions to meet the needs of New Zealander's

One of the greatest risks to the public in our mental health and addiction system is the scarcity of workforce to provide the support and treatment required across the spectrum of care. The introduction of the associate psychologist role will help to grow the mental health and addiction workforce and aims to enhance equitable access and outcomes for people requiring services.

The notion of developing a multitiered psychology workforce to address the broad spectrum of needs of people with mental health and addiction issues in Aotearoa New Zealand is not new. While the psychology profession here has observed and waited with some hesitancy, most other countries have moved ahead. While we can learn from these, a New Zealand approach needs to be uniquely responsive to our diverse cultural perspectives, geographical reach, and the clinical and emotional support needs of tangata whai ora and their whānau.

There are multiple complexities in developing this role and we acknowledge the caution that the psychology profession and others are advising. This has included the need for training to prioritise Māori focused course content, the potential that the associate psychologist workforce may have demands placed on it that exceed competence, and that cultural and clinical supervisory support may be stretched. We are committed to finding solutions to these and other challenges. We are also focused on maximising the contribution this workforce can make to ensure that tāngata whai ora and their whānau have access to care that meets their needs.

¹ The title of the role has not yet been finalised.

The vision for the associate psychologist role

The training and practice of associate psychologists will be culturally safe and responsive across the diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand populations.

It is intended that the training will reflect the skills, knowledge, attributes, and application relevant to psychological practice in health settings and mental health and addiction settings, including Kaupapa Māori services, Pacific services, primary and secondary Mental Health & Addiction services, NGOs, and across sectors. Foundational competence in te Ao Māori models and concepts, as well as knowledge of Pacific health models and their integration within practice, will be a cornerstone of training. Additionally, the training will focus on the development of knowledge and application of competencies when working with the diversity of cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand.

It is acknowledged that clinical and cultural competence is not a destination but a commitment to lifelong learning. This will be a key message in the requirements for professional development, as well as supervision.

Associate psychologists will be supported to deliver psychological services in mental health and addiction teams across our communities. To ensure safe practice in areas with limited psychology resources, employment guidelines, a career framework, and clinical and cultural supervision models will be developed and funded.

While some associate psychologists may be employed as assistants to psychologists and work on delegated and directly supervised tasks, it is anticipated that others will be employed as practitioners within multidisciplinary MH&A teams in primary, secondary, and NGO services. This message of unmet need has been received clearly and emphasises that the associate psychologist role is eagerly anticipated in communities with the greatest gaps in access to psychological services, particularly in rural areas and in NGOs.

Deploying an associate psychologist workforce to teams with the greatest need raises a challenge: these services may lack the infrastructure for supervision and other supports. There may be instances where there are no other psychologists in the service, and as a new workforce, employers will require guidance on how to optimally define and support the role to ensure they work within the safe boundaries of their competency. Added to this is that the existing demand for clinical and cultural supervision will increase as this workforce grows and as the intake to training for other scopes increases.

To address this, the NZPB's regulation of the associate psychologist role, and employment guidelines from Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora (Health NZ), will clearly define the graduate competencies that provide the boundaries of entry to the role. Work is underway to progress the models and resourcing of clinical and cultural supervision, as well as the expectations for professional development and career progression that will sustain and grow skills.

The vision is for the psychology workforce to be multitiered, with a range of scopes utilising complementary skill sets (from low to high intensity), providing for the spectrum of needs within MH&A services.

One aspect of the vision for introducing associate psychologists to the mix of psychological scopes is to help bring more cohesion to the profession overall. The vision is of a multitiered

workforce that's able to offer support based on complementary skills, covering everything from early assessment/intervention to formulating and treating complex, high-intensity issues. This approach not only spans different levels of service—community, primary, and specialist care—but also caters to the range of needs of each person/tangata whai ora and their whānau. This is especially true for those dealing with more complex mental health and addiction needs. In such scenarios, associate psychologists may play a supportive role for intensive psychological work while also addressing the lower-intensity aspects of care, ensuring a well-rounded approach for those who need it.

Currently, many roles in the mental health and addiction workforce are filled by allied professionals, such as social workers and occupational therapists. While these professionals may not have come from professions trained specifically for mental health, they have stepped up to meet the demand for mental health care, including psychological therapies, thanks to training often funded by Health NZ. The psychology profession now has an opportunity to grow and respond to some of these workforce needs.

Training and regulation of psychologists will be responsive to the needs of the workforce and tangata whai ora. The associate psychologist training model will ensure growth and allow adaptation.

The role of psychologists in public mental health and addiction services, along with the model of training and the size of the psychology workforce, has seen little change over the years despite the well-known and long-standing shortage in this workforce. Adaptation and evolution will be necessary to respond to these challenges.

Over the past few years, several universities have introduced restructured undergraduate psychology programmes, presenting a prime opportunity to create a more focused and tailored training pipeline for a new generation of students who are eager for a psychology career. The addition of associate psychologist training adds another crucial piece to this puzzle. It is intended that this role will be a step on a staircase to other scopes of practice and initiate a more flexible pathway of career progression.

The challenge now lies with tertiary providers and employers to leverage these opportunities, adapting training and workforce structures to ensure that the psychology profession can grow, evolve, and lead in meeting the increasing demand for mental health and addiction care.

We'll continue to update you as this project progresses - read more [here](#).

Ngā mihi nui

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