

Transition to professional social work practice: The initial year

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of the first year of a three-year longitudinal study of new graduate social workers from a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program in Aotearoa New Zealand. We compare work outcomes and graduates' perceptions of their readiness for practice against the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board's (SWRB's) 10 core competencies. This study's impetus came from an increase in the professionally accepted minimum qualification benchmark, recent political commentary on the preparedness of social work graduates, and associated roles of the SWRB and Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Work (ANZASW). The aim of this longitudinal research is to track paid and unpaid work outcomes and identify the support needs of social work graduates as they transition from students into professional practitioners. An on-line questionnaire offered graduates the opportunity to comment annually on their professional progress. The respondents all found paid employment as social workers in that first year and identified transitional challenges. Supports to ease this transition included supervision, mentoring, collegiality, coaching, case-load protection (both volume and complexity), continuing professional development, and professional networking. Concluding that the first year of practice is a highly demanding one, we highlight the need for new graduates to have reduced case-loads and additional levels of support. This article is highly relevant for the profession in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere, particularly for countries such as Australia where there is no legislated registration process for social workers.

Keywords: *Newly qualified social workers; Transition from graduate to social worker; Preparation for practice; Social work registration; Practice standards; Competencies*

INTRODUCTION

The first years following qualification are challenging for social work graduates as they embark upon their careers as qualified social workers. As social work educators our underlying motivation for this research include the SWRB's directive that, from 2017, all recognised entry-level professional social work qualifications will be a minimum of a four-year, 480-credit-point bachelor's degree (SWRB, 2016); changes in the context and expectations of social work practitioners; recent political commentary on the readiness of social work graduates for the workplace, and interest in the support graduates require to manage the challenges of their early career and achieve competence. Of particular interest are the Social Workers Registration Act (2003) and subsequent SWRB policies surrounding the voluntary registration process implemented by the SWRB, the role of the ANZASW practice standards, and the responsibilities of employers and the social workers themselves. In this article, we present data collected from stage one of a five-year longitudinal study. The full study will survey three cohorts of University of Waikato BSW graduates annually for three years each. We examine the graduates' paid and unpaid work outcomes, conditions of employment and their perceptions of practice readiness measured against the competencies set by the New Zealand SWRB. We also explore the support needs and professional development achievements of the graduates over their first three years after qualifying.

While social work in Aotearoa New Zealand may be considered a relatively young profession, challenges around graduate readiness for practice have increased as the profession has developed. The Act gives the SWRB responsibility for the recognition and monitoring of the standards of 23 social work qualifications across 17 tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand (SWRB, 2013a, 2014d). The SWRB policy statement on the process of recognition/re-recognition of social work qualifications in New Zealand (SWRB, 2013a) sets out the process, requirements, graduate profile and program standards of qualifications. The SWRB's core competencies are integral to the final assessment of students prior to graduation (SWRB, 2014e).

Aotearoa New Zealand currently has a voluntary registration process with 4701 registered social workers as of October 1, 2014, and approximately another 2000 unregistered social workers who would meet registration requirements (SWRB, 2014d). In the 2013 New Zealand Census over 18,000 people identified social work as their occupation, leaving around 12,000 people identifying as social workers in an unregulated workforce (Sepuloni, 2015). Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing rapid change, while protection of title is yet to be achieved, the workforce is under scrutiny due to public and governmental concerns about the need to review child protection services, the emphasis on a social investment approach and legislative changes related to capability, accountability, risk management and vulnerability. Thus we were interested to hear from our past students about their perceptions of their own readiness for practice set against the SWRB core competencies and their initial social work experiences and practice realities. The first cohort of students from the program graduated in April 2011. This initial cohort comprised three students who had cross-credited into the program when it began in 2008. In April 2012, there were seven BSW graduates, and this number has steadily increased annually to 9, 13 and 15 in 2013, 2014 and 2015.

Literature review

The complexities of moving from a relatively well-protected position of student to that of a professionally qualified social worker are challenging and often seemingly contradictory (Bates et al., 2010). The balance that a manager has to find between the need to offer a quality period of induction to newly qualified social workers (NQSW) and the practice pressures of a team with a busy workload can also be difficult to safely negotiate. (Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002).

It is important for the profession to explore the best processes for support of NQSWs in their first employed professional position (Brown, 1986; Connolly & Rathgen, 2000; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 1994; Grant, Sheridan, & Webb, 2014; Hay, Franklin, & Hardymont, 2012; MacIntyre et al., 2011; Ryan, Fook, & Hawkins, 1995). The pressure for social work graduates to be ready and fit for practice at the point of qualification is growing (SWRB, 2014c), with the education period for the BSW degree in New Zealand increasing from three to four years from 2017 (SWRB, 2013a) and the period of field work placement being a minimum of 120 days split over at least two separate placements (SWRB, 2014b).

At the SWRB 10th Anniversary conference “Protecting the public, enhancing the profession” in Wellington in November 2013, Minister Bennett¹ in her opening speech to the delegates stated:

I think there has [sic] been questions repeatedly raised for me both within the Child, Youth and Family organisation² but wider than that in all of those other organisations that are working in it, not just about the capability of those who are within the sector now but the capability of those who are coming out of the universities and tertiary institutions.

(P. Bennett, transcribed speech, 11 November 2013 in Beddoe, 2014, p. 24)

The rhetoric surrounding social work graduates’ readiness for practice is unrestricted at present with the Children’s Commissioner, Dr Russell Wills stating recently on radio:

Currently, you can graduate from a university with a degree in social work in New Zealand and know very little about child protection or domestic violence or the impact of abuse and neglect on a child’s development ... That’s not ok. (K. Ryan, National Radio 2015, April 2)

As a result of stakeholder and ministerial feedback to the SWRB regarding their Program Recognition Standards and the implementation of a four-year undergraduate degree as the minimum professional entry qualification, a full-day meeting in September 2014 was convened by the SWRB with expert representation from a wide range of sectors to discuss, among other things, graduate preparedness for employment and the support required and provided to student and new graduate social workers by all involved in this process (SWRB, 2014c).

In recognition of the issue, Child Youth and Family (CYF) initiated a one-year pilot study offering NQSWs additional support and reduced case-loads. The study recommended protected case-loads, sanctioned learning and mastery time, mentoring systems, internal practice curriculum and additional levels of supervision for NQSWs. It also recommended increasing the number of social workers in CYF to respond to workload demands (Ministry

of Social Development, 2014). This evaluation mirrors results from studies in other settings such as a program developed in an Australian health setting to support NQSWs in their first year of practice which had mutual expectations of the agency, the NQSW and supervision. The requirement for a new social worker to consolidate not only professional identity and skills but also patterns of ongoing professional development was intrinsic to the program (Pockett, 1987).

Consideration of graduate readiness for practice thus, is not a new phenomenon. Research and discussion abound: genericism versus specialism of social work education; reducing barriers between graduation and employment induction and support; as well as initial and continuing professional development within that first graduate position (Agllias, 2010; Bates et al., 2010; Brown, 1986; Donellan & Jack, 2015; Grant et al., 2014; Hay et al., 2012; Pockett, 1987). Further discussion around the learning and development needs of NQSWs by Bates et al. (2010) considers the notion that professional knowledge is not simply about applying a specific range of learned topics to practice. Professional knowledge is more about *being*, than *having*, thus the term implies an “iterative process to development into and beyond qualified practice” (p. 154).

Once employed within an organisation, the beginning practitioner will experience a new set of challenges around how they integrate theory and over-arching knowledge gained from the BSW into practice. They must simultaneously develop underpinning context-specific learning in the workplace. This prescribed learning framework involves the adoption of a critically reflective approach to learning that includes an awareness of different perspectives, contextual influences, organisational issues and an analysis of power (Eraut, 2000; Ingram, 2015).

In a study on the transition from student to employee and readiness for practice in a statutory social work organisation, Hay et al. (2012) found a complex situation with factors such as academic and personal attributes, tertiary training, preparation from the placement agency and the structure, function and operation of the new workplace all affecting the transition. Other studies list factors that assist a new graduate to cope with their new role including effective supervision, support and debriefing from colleagues, mentoring and coaching, as well as a staggered increase in volume and complexity of case-load (Agllias, 2010; Donellan & Jack, 2015; Grant et al., 2014). Davys and Beddoe (2010), O’Donoghue (2010), O’Donoghue and Tsui (2012), Chiller and Crisp (2012), and Beddoe and Egan (2013) have all discussed the significance of supervision within a social worker’s professional journey from student through to mature practice in order to provide an opportunity for ongoing critical reflection which takes into account contexts of practice. Professional bodies in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia suggest that, in the first few years of practice, a social worker should have at least one hour’s uninterrupted supervision per week (ANZASW, 2014; Beddoe & Egan, 2013; SWRB, 2013b).

Donellan and Jack (2015) developed a survival guide aimed at the transition phase from student to new social worker, suggesting that attention is paid to ongoing acquisition and workplace application of knowledge and skills; strategies to manage self, workload and time; actively seeking support, and stress-management techniques to maintain job satisfaction.

They posit that the transition is characterised by both overarching knowledge derived from academic learning and underpinning knowledge which develops in practice learning, arguing that “bringing them together into an individually balanced equilibrium is one of the main tasks for transition into any profession” (p. 59).

Considering development of professional knowledge and tacit knowledge (Eraut, 2000; Zeira & Rosen, 2000) has implications for educators, employers and newly graduated social workers alike, in that there will always be gaps between knowledge gained and the application of that knowledge in a practice setting (Bradley, 2008; Ryan et al., 1995; Woodward & Mackay, 2012). Employers, therefore, who are seeking the holy grail of a perfectly prepared NQSW will naturally be disappointed and need to be ready to offer additional support, training, and development to ensure that their new employee becomes fit for purpose within any given workplace (Ryan et al., 1995). While the experience a student gains on fieldwork placement helps them to integrate theory into practice, alongside a particular set of values (Bates et al., 2010; Parker, 2007), availability of relevant quality placements can be an issue and more support is clearly necessary at the point of employment following graduation.

METHOD

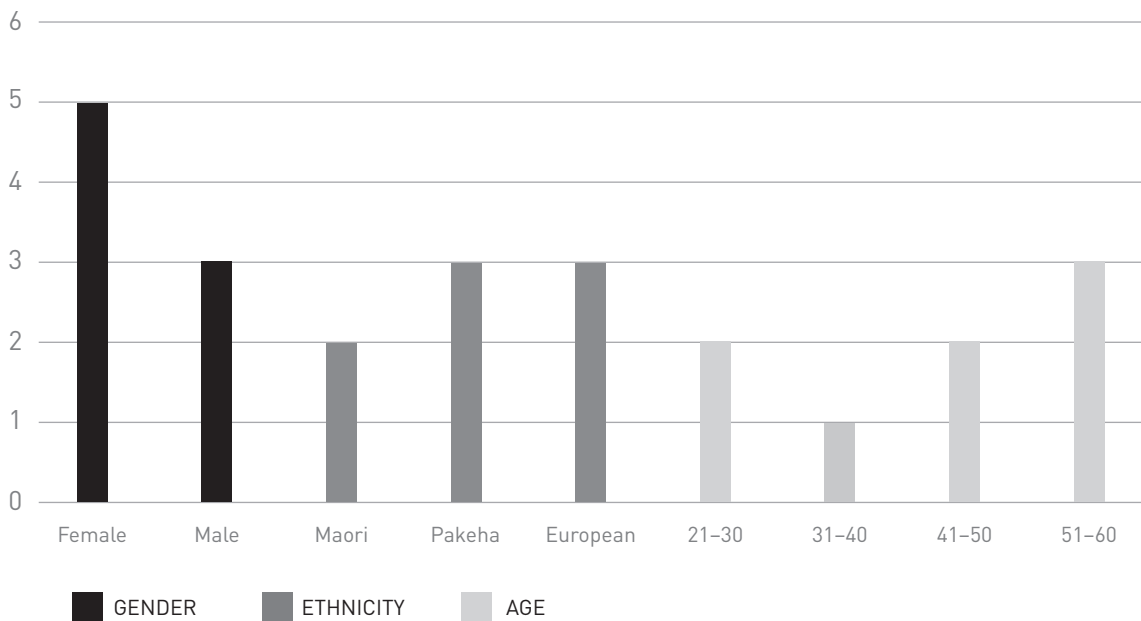
Research background

We intend to identify social work graduate expectations of support required for a successful transition from student social worker to practitioner and to support progress from novice practitioner to advanced beginner, competent, proficiency and expert practitioner stages (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). In this study we consider the paid and unpaid work outcomes, conditions of employment and perceptions of readiness for practice of one cohort of BSW graduate social workers. Additionally, we explore the professional development achievements and needs of these graduates. We anticipate that we will add to national social work work-force projection data; inform current and potential students of possible work outcomes and contribute to the ongoing development of our programs.

A longitudinal study design utilising an on-line survey method of data collection was selected as it enabled yearly observations of the same cohorts of social work graduates over their first three years post-graduation. A cross-sectional study of NQSWs in which a group is examined at one point of time would not have given us the information needed to determine the developmental needs and transitions made by them as they progress through the first three post-graduation years (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2012; Fawcett & Pockett, 2015).

Respondents

We aim to survey three consecutive cohorts of BSW graduates for three years each to track their readiness for practice and work outcomes. The initial survey was sent to the first cohort one year after graduation. We present here the findings of this survey. All BSW students ($n = 9$) who graduated in the first year of our study were emailed an invitation to complete a survey. The students had earlier been asked at their final placement meeting the previous year if they would be interested in participating in this study.

Figure 1. Participant demographics

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was received from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Waikato Protocol No FS2014-09. Additionally the researchers are registered social workers and full members of ANZASW and thus subject to the research ethics requirements of our professional bodies (ANZASW, 2008; SWRB, 2014a).

Instruments

A structured questionnaire was developed with open and closed questions. The survey was designed to be anonymous, endeavouring to limit social desirability bias. The questionnaire was pre-tested with three graduates from an earlier cohort who were not included in this research. The final online survey was created with Qualtrics® survey software (www.qualtrics.com). The questions focus on understanding professionally based outcomes for each graduate including paid and unpaid work, membership of professional bodies, supervision, perceptions around competence, and specific practices that supported the graduates in their new roles.

Procedure

The BSW graduates in the first year of our study were emailed an invitation in May 2014 to complete the online survey with the link to the questionnaire. The information sheet was provided within the survey and containing the study's purpose, nature, and methodology. The respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and that the survey would take no more than 30 minutes to complete. The online survey was anonymous—no consent form was distributed as completion of the questionnaire implied consent. The respondents were asked to create a personal five-digit code in order to enable us to confidentially track each respondent's information over the three years of participation.

Data analysis

Most of the questions required the respondents to select from a number of forced options while other questions were open ended and interpreted using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The forced-option questions were subjected to statistical analysis and the reporting function in the Qualtrics® survey software to descriptively analyse the data. The sample size of eight from a potential nine respondents, while a high proportion of returnees, is a small sample size overall. However, this is the first year of a longitudinal study with three separate cohorts of students studied for three years each, so the data is comparable as the study progresses.

Results/themes

Professional status

Within a year of graduation all the respondents had been employed as social workers in New Zealand. Only one respondent had relocated for employment. Two respondents were employed in two separate, paid social work positions in the year 2013–2014. At the time of the survey one respondent was not in current paid employment. The respondents were employed in either part-time ($n = 1$) or full-time ($n = 6$) work ranging between 25–40 hours per week. Respondents employed as full-time social workers secured annual remuneration ranging from \$40,000 to \$50,000 which is within the range paid to new graduate registered nurses (\$47,528) or secondary teachers (\$45,068). The respondent who secured part-time social work earned between \$30,000 to \$40,000 pro rata (all values NZD).

Of the seven respondents who were currently employed at the time of survey, six were on permanent contracts.

Although those who were employed as social workers ($n = 7$) indicated that they were required to be registered social workers in their paid positions, only two had become registered within a year of graduation. The registered respondents were the only respondents who had also become members of ANZASW.

Three respondents considered that their first paid employment was a very good fit with their career ambitions. The two respondents who changed their jobs within their first year of employment cited reasons for leaving as including lack of support from, and a poor fit with, the organisation with whom they were initially employed.

The learning experiences during the respondents' ($n = 4$) education, along with the availability of local job opportunities ($n = 4$) were the most common factors that influenced respondents' choice of first employment. Other factors included pre-qualifying interests ($n = 3$) and experiences post-qualification ($n = 2$).

Most respondents ($n = 5$) were employed in non-governmental organisations, including iwi social services³. The remaining respondents ($n = 2$) were employed in government organisations.

The most common field of practice in which respondents were employed was mental health followed by care and protection and family work.

In addition to paid employment as a social worker, some ($n = 3$) respondents also worked in volunteer roles for up to eight hours a week that used their social work skills and knowledge.

Responsibilities

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to state the major responsibilities experienced in their social work positions. Case management was identified as a major responsibility with the tasks including “monitoring medication compliance, maintaining regular case notes, and assisting with psycho-social issues in a multi-disciplinary team”. Working with family/whānau to ensure safety was also identified by respondents as a major responsibility and included tasks such as linking family/whānau with support alongside providing information and advice. Although working with individuals and families was recognised as the main focus of work, working with the community was also acknowledged by respondents as a second area of work. Engaging clients with goal development and facilitating goal achievement was also a common task. Early-intervention models and strength-based approaches were identified as common strategies in working with families.

Support for new graduate social workers

While induction or orientation into new positions has been identified as necessary to support new employees to adapt to work situations (Bates et al., 2010), the respondents’ experience of induction differed. Over half of them felt that the induction prepared them well for their first job as a social worker, rating the quality as “very good” ($n = 4$), and “good” or “fair” ($n = 2$). Two respondents felt that their induction poorly prepared them for the job and one of these respondents changed jobs within the year.

Supervision was identified as one of the most important aspects of support received by respondents. All of the respondents in paid social work employment ($n = 7$) received supervision and three of them had a mentor in addition. Therefore, vital supervisory support was available for them and the mentoring that some respondents received was an acknowledgement of their needs as beginning practitioners.

When questioned about workload protection as a support mechanism, four of the respondents in paid social work acknowledged their workload was protected predominantly in volume and case complexity for the first six months. Some respondents had their case-loads capped in line with organisational contracts. These workload-protection mechanisms were instigated formally, either as part of agency policy or as a result of supervision and assessment of professional development needs. Workload protection was also instigated informally. One respondent observed, “it just made sense! Not sure if it is actually stated anywhere, probably not”.

Application of overarching knowledge

We asked the respondents to state the extent to which they were able to apply knowledge gained during their four-year BSW education to their social work practice. Two stated that they could apply their learning to a very large extent, four stating to a high extent and one to a reasonable extent.

Using a five-point Likert scale with response options of “very confident”, “quite confident”, “confident”, “somewhat confident”, or “not at all confident”, we asked respondents to rate their current perceptions of their confidence in fulfilling the 10 SWRB competency standards at a beginning practitioner level on graduation. The responses were assigned a number from zero (not at all confident) to four (very confident) and the mean and standard deviations for each statement were calculated (see Table 1). Out of the eight respondents surveyed, one respondent who was not employed as a social worker did not provide any responses to these competency statements.

Table 1. Mean, Median and Standard Deviation of responses to confidence about SWRB competencies

COMPETENCIES	MEAN	MEDIAN	SD
1. Competence to practise social work with Māori	3.14	3.00	.69
2. Competence to practise social work with different ethnic and cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand	3.00	3.00	.58
3. Adherence to professional social work ethics	3.43	4.00	.79
4. Competence to promote the principles of human rights and social justice	3.57	4.00	.53
5. Competence to promote social change	3.00	3.00	.82
6. Competence to promote empowerment and liberation of people	3.29	3.00	.76
7. Competence to utilise social work practice approaches	3.57	4.00	.53
8. Competence to utilise theories of human behaviour and social systems	3.29	3.00	.76
9. Competence to promote problem-solving in human relationships	3.14	3.00	.69
10. Competence to ensure systems of accountability are in place for their work	3.00	3.00	.82

The highest mean confidence was found for Competency 4 and Competency 7. The high confidence level ($M = 3.57$, $Mdn = 4$) and small variability ($SD = .53$) associated with these competencies indicates that the respondents, as new graduates, felt highly confident in promoting two of the fundamental principles of social work practice: human rights, and social justice (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). Additionally, they were confident in using a variety of social work approaches. The next highest mean confidence was found for Competency 3 ($M = 3.43$, $Mdn = 4$, $SD = .79$) reinforcing that respondents felt confident that they were able to adhere to ethical principles such as the

ANZASW *Code of Ethics* and SWRB *Code of Conduct* in their practice. The lowest mean confidence was found for Competencies 10, 5 and 2 ($M = 3$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = .58$). This provides us with some guidance as to which competencies may require additional focus when delivering BSW papers.

Aspects of the BSW most relevant to employment

The respondents were also asked about the most relevant aspects of the University of Waikato BSW degree in relation to their current social work practice context. At the point of survey, respondents were working in different fields; their responses indicated that the papers that directly linked with their current practice contexts were the most relevant and included social work issues (violence, abuse, and neglect), social work ethics, and social policy. However, the respondents also acknowledged the importance of field placements in the BSW where they integrated theory into practice. Papers that were also commonly described as useful involved social work theory and human development.

The social work ethics paper has been useful in my work and the paper that addressed the different types of abuse perpetrated against women and children... I feel that I learnt lots from all of our social work papers and that they all hold relevance in my day to day practice. Psychology and sociology were also useful. Above all, the placements were where I obtained most of my learning regarding the practicalities of social work.

Two of the respondents felt that everything they were exposed to in the BSW was of great value to their practice.

Everything I was exposed to while undergoing my study has benefitted my mahi to date. It is difficult to identify one aspect, however the theory base even though extensive and at times repetitive I feel has had the greatest relevance thus far.

The quote below demonstrates that this respondent values the social policy training received as it enables them to consider structural issues beyond their agency mandate.

[A] social policy emphasis has given me the larger mandate/focus when my work situation has restricted at times my ability to fully make a difference in people's lives.

Respondents were also asked which aspects of the BSW had least relevance to their current paid employment. Again, as the fields of practice differ, the respondents identified a variety of degree papers. A philosophical paper teaching critical reasoning was considered by most respondents as one that had fewer direct linkages to practice. One respondent stated:

... even the likes of the social science research paper has had its place in my mahi [work], part of my role is writing quarterly reports based on data I have gathered as well as qualitative narratives to describe trends and other factors. I feel all of it has been relevant, even my electives have transitioned into my current mahi.

Respondents also stated they appreciated smaller class sizes and readily available assistance from BSW staff members. "I feel fortunate that due to the mentoring and quality of the

social work lecturers and ancillary staff, all experiences have added to the whole—even the research papers which I at times struggled with.”

Challenges in practice

Five participants responded to the question concerning difficulties encountered after qualifying, stating that much of their first professional year was challenging: “nearly every day presents difficulties for me”. The responses to the open-ended question about work challenges indicated that one respondent struggled to practise social work within a multi-disciplinary team. A further comment was made about a lack of acknowledgement of life experiences they had prior to earning their BSW qualification.

My greatest difficulty has been in relation to my life previous to social work, there has been little to no acknowledgment of the skills and experience I bring from previous roles. I am seen as a new grad and basically a baby in the social work field, however my past work experiences complement social work well and place me above others within my cohort, however this is not acknowledged.

Continuing professional development

Of the eight respondents, one had begun postgraduate study. Four respondents indicated that they were interested in completing further studies as continuing professional development (CPD) listing counselling, management, supervision, cognitive behavioural therapy, violence prevention, and working with addictions as areas of specific interest.

DISCUSSION

In researching the understandings, experiences, and perceptions of competence of our social work graduates we identified three dominant themes: professional status, support for NQSWs, and significance of the BSW to the graduates’ professional careers. We provide a summary of our findings in relation to these three themes.

Professional status

Until recently, social work featured on Immigration New Zealand’s long-term skills shortage list (Immigration New Zealand, 2015). The demand for NQSWs is verified through the ability of all eight respondents to be employed as social workers in their first year post-graduation although it may additionally be a reflection of social and economic factors in the community. The addition of further data from subsequent cohorts of graduates will strengthen this discussion. It is encouraging that three respondents felt that their first job was a good fit with their career ambitions, and that two respondents reported that they were able to change jobs when they chose – suggesting that respondents had some degree of flexibility around employment choice.

Alongside providing protection to the public, the rationale underpinning the Social Workers Registration Act (2003) is to support professionalism through ensuring that registered social workers are adequately equipped for practice. This requires social workers to be supported with regular supervision and to undertake regular CPD (Duke, 2012). This initial survey demonstrated that the emphasis to become registered in their first year post-qualifying was low (only two of the eight respondents achieving registration even though seven

respondents stated that they were required to be registered as part of their paid social work role). In a mandatory registration environment, all NQSWs would be required to be working towards full registration upon completion of 2000 hours of supervised social work practice. Non-mandatory registration could account for the low number of respondents who had completed the registration process, particularly for the respondent who was employed in the part-time position. The cost of registration for social workers could also be a barrier, especially for respondents who are employed in NGOs. Even though a registered workforce is seen as advantageous in a competitive contracting environment, NGOs are struggling to afford to employ them (Smith, 2013; SWRB, 2012).

Whilst it is recognised that belonging to a professional organisation would offer support to a NQSW, a scoping report conducted for ANZASW explored professional membership and CPD found that ANZASW was attracting limited numbers of NQSWs as members (Geoff Pearman Partners in Change, 2011). Teaching time on the BSW was used to highlight the difference between, and professional value of, both ANZASW and SWRB. Membership of ANZASW was viewed as valuable in relation to CPD, supporting professional identity and professional socialisation, and contributing to the voice of the profession in a demanding time of public sector reform and social care agendas. However, only two respondents had become members of ANZASW at the time of the survey.

Support for newly qualified social workers

The IFSW policy statement on the effective and ethical working environments for qualified social workers highlights an essential need for effective orientation and induction into new social work roles (IFSW, 2012). It is recommended that quality induction for NQSWs should sit alongside regular, good quality supervision. In response to the question about how well induction prepared the respondents for their first paid social work experiences, half reported their induction prepared them well, while two respondents felt that the induction did not prepare them. One of the respondents who felt that the induction was poor, left their job within the year and acknowledged this in the question about career difficulties.

Bates et al. (2010) recommend that induction processes should be tailored to meet the NQSW's personal and professional developmental needs. Alongside supervision and in-house training, organisations should develop technical learning to inform the required social work practice (Donellan & Jack, 2015). The respondents in Grant et al.'s (2014) study identified that NQSWs utilised colleagues, other professionals and/or family and friends if they did not feel adequately supported in their transition into the workforce. A staggered increase in workload to support NQSWs is recommended by Hay et al. (2012). Support for the respondents in our study varied and included workload protection for four of the seven respondents, as well as mechanisms such as limiting volume and complexity of case-work.

Supervision was available and identified as an important professional supportive process by all the respondents to provide a forum in which they could critically reflect on and examine their practice, correlating with the view of the profession and other authors (ANZASW, 2014; Beddoe & Egan, 2013; Chiller & Crisp, 2012; Davys & Beddoe, 2010; O'Donoghue, 2010; O'Donoghue & Tsui, 2012; SWRB, 2013b). Three of the respondents also identified the value of mentoring alongside supervision to their developing practice. These results

correlate with findings by Grant et al. (2014) on readiness for practice of NQSWs in Scotland in which respondents stated that they benefitted greatly from good supervision and further, that shadowing senior social workers assisted with skill development.

Significance of the BSW degree to their initial social work career

The SWRB recognises graduate competence for social workers who have completed a SWRB-recognised program. When responding to questions around confidence to practice in accordance with the 10 SWRB core competencies, our respondents felt most confident with relation to competence to promote the principles of human rights and social justice, and competence to utilise social work practice approaches. Social justice and human rights are considered to be core values of social work (IFSW, 2014). The ANZASW *Code of Ethics* (2013) states that: “Members engage in constructive action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate injustice. They respect the law, whilst working towards change in any laws that disadvantage clients or other members of the community” (s. 2.6). It is encouraging that respondents felt a high degree of confidence for promoting the principles of human rights and social justice, and it is anticipated that this will translate into action for social change. It could, however, be argued that the lower mean score for competence to promote social change is related to the respondents’ focus on case management, an individualised-casework approach to practice rather than a more macro approach that involves community development, social policy development, and social action (Ife, 2012). Further, the current climate of managerialism ensures social workers are challenged on any attempts to undertake radical action for social justice (O’Brien, 2013) and can result in routine-orientated, proceduralised practice in which technicality becomes a prime focus instead of commitment to core social work values and action for social change (Lymbery, 2001).

Respondents were least confident with competence to ensure systems of accountability are in place for their work and in competence to promote social change. It is important to view this in relation to the new public management focus in the social services sector that emphasises managerial solutions to societal issues resulting in an increased emphasis on outcomes and accountability of social work practice (Payne & Askeland, 2008). In Aotearoa New Zealand, as with many westernised countries, the rise of inequality alongside the state withdrawal from many aspects of social-service provision has created an increased moral imperative for social workers to overcome the neo-liberal language of risk that blames public troubles on individuals and to move beyond individualised case-work approaches (Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014).

Beddoe (2013) asserts that social workers often experience marginalisation in health settings. In line with this, concern was expressed by one respondent about the experience of being a sole social work voice in a medical setting. Beddoe’s (2013) research into how social workers can remain professionally assertive in such an environment concludes that there is a link between CPD and the status of health social workers; additionally she advocates for social work research to strengthen professional identity in a medical setting.

While case management, engagement and support of whānau/family were considered to be some of the key responsibilities for the respondents, NQSWs need to be supported, post-qualification, to address inequality and poverty at a structural level, potentially at least

through professional membership. Research into social workers' lived experience and the gap between professional ideals taught in social work education and practice realities has observed that social workers suffer when their practice does not match their ideals (Rossiter, 2005).

Our results show that the core social work papers were perceived to be the most important aspects of the BSW program by the respondents. It was also noted that the emphasis on the integration of theory into practice and the experiential learning gained on fieldwork placement was beneficial. The social work coded papers tended to be smaller in class size and this aspect of delivery of teaching was a factor for success: "The smaller class sizes and ready availability of assistance meant that meaningful social work practice was modelled while completing the program."

This study has limitations due to its small sample size. As the study progresses, more information will be gathered from this cohort of graduates and two successive cohorts about their work outcomes, their readiness for practice and the challenges that they experience in their first few years of professional practice. These preliminary findings serve to provide an initial indication of the experiences of respondents in their first year following graduation.

We plan to refine the survey instrument in subsequent years in response to the initial findings and themes in the data; for example, we plan to gather more detail on the regularity and type of supervision that our graduates receive.

CONCLUSION

These preliminary findings serve to provide an initial indication of the experiences of the respondents in their first year following graduation. Correlations will be made between the experiences of these respondents over the three-year period that they are studied and will also be compared with two other cohorts of social work graduates.

These findings have enabled us to develop a stronger sense of the support and CPD needs of NQSWs in their first three years of practice. We also hope that it will inform further social work research initiatives through illustrating the practice realities, strengths and challenges of beginning practitioners. Grant et al. (2014) and Donellan and Jack (2015) argue that, while social work education is preparing NQSWs for the challenges of practice, attention to curriculum content of qualifying degree programs is not enough to ensure positive practice outcomes. Beginning practitioners need to be supported through quality agency orientation, personalised induction programs, regular supervision and mentoring to foster them into their working environments. The focus by SWRB on beginning competence and practice readiness at the point of graduation emphasises the necessity for social work graduates to be technically proficient at a time when they are also consolidating their professional identity and skills and negotiating new pathways into employed work. This is a demanding period for any NQSW and further highlights the need for reduced case-loads by volume and complexity alongside increased levels of supervision and mentorship. Indeed, one could argue that this should be an ethical position taken by any employer of a beginning practitioner.

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¹Minister of Social Development at the time

²Government Department focusing on child protection and youth

³Indigenous Social Service organisation