

Sustaining the social work workforce in Aotearoa: A whole system challenge

Kieran O'Donoghue, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand

Recently the Government has been systematic in its attempt to ration social services through the contract revision in Oranga Tamariki, public services cuts, and fiscal restraint in the health sector (Gibbens, 2024; Ignoe, 2024; Quinn, 2024). Despite the government's rationing of services and its social investment approach (Palmer, 2024), a social work workforce development strategy remains some way off. Given this context, I read the viewpoint on the sustainability of social work education during low enrolment with interest (Kim, 2024). While Kim (2024) overviewed professionalisation and social work education developments, the focus is on the undergraduate degree and questioning its sustainability. He did not consider the wider social work workforce system. The social work workforce system is the context in which the sustainability questions concerning social work education, social worker employment and the broader social work profession must be considered.

It is acknowledged that the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), as the lead workforce development agency, has developed an evidence-based foundation for the social work workforce. The most recent spotlight reports on social workers employed by Oranga Tamariki, Health Hauora, and non-governmental organisations highlighted that workforce sustainability needs attention from all employer groups (SWRB, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e).

This viewpoint explores the challenges facing the social work workforce by discussing the pipeline of future social workers, the recruitment of social workers into the profession, and the retention and

development of the social work workforce. Hopefully, this will promote an ongoing conversation and collective engagement with challenges and work together on a workforce development strategy and plan.

The *Demand for Social Work Services Report* (SWRB, 2022a) highlighted the challenge of filling social worker vacancies and the mismatch between the supply and demand for social work services. The report noted that the number of graduates produced in Aotearoa over the past 4 years has averaged 500 per year, far less than the advertised vacancies. The report estimated a shortage of 707 social workers among the employers surveyed. The report identifies an obvious need to recruit more people to become social workers and support them through their studies and into employment. The *SWRB Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Social Development and Employment* (SWRB, 2023a, p. 7) detailed workforce issues regarding the supply and demand for social workers and stated, "At the current rate, by 2024, there will likely be more social workers leaving the profession than registering with the SWRB". The report also identifies that "90% (585) of 650 newly registered social workers in 2022/23 were New Zealand-qualified, 6% (39) were internationally qualified, and the remaining 4% (26) were on the S13 experience pathway" (SWRB, 2023a, p. 25). Similarly, the *SWRB Annual Social Worker Workforce report* (SWRB, 2023b, p. 15) recorded, from a total of 4,411 respondents, the pathway to registration was 86% (3,792) New Zealand Qualification, Overseas Qualification including Australia 12.2% (520) and 2% S13 (99) Experience pathway. These data show that most of the social work

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CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Kieran O'Donoghue
K.B.ODonoghue@massey.
ac.nz

workforce in Aotearoa are New Zealand-qualified social workers. The SWRB Social Work Education reports show a declining enrolment trend from a high of 3,885 students in 2015 to 2,793 students in 2022 (SWRB, 2022b). Table 1 below compares the number of domestic students enrolled nationally and the number of social work students from 2015 to 2022. It also shows the percentage of social work student enrolments of the total domestic enrolments across the period.

The trends for overall domestic enrolment show that it decreased markedly between 2015 and 2019. It rose slightly in 2020 and 2021, then decreased by almost 15,000 students in 2022. The social work student enrolments mirror the overall decreasing trend between 2015 and 2018, which saw a marked decrease in the percentage of domestic enrolments. The period 2019 to 2022 has seen fluctuations in social work student numbers, and a trend emerged where the percentage of overall enrolments has declined from 2020 to 2022. Since 2015, there have been significant challenges to the social work profession. These have included the external review of Child, Youth and Family, the transformation from the Ministry for Vulnerable Children to Oranga Tamariki, and several high-profile reviews and inquiries into events and practice (Dale et al., 2017; Oranga Tamariki, 2023). In

addition, public trust in social workers is not high (SWRB, 2023f). Notably, the NGO study awards scheme funded by the Ministry of Social Development was discontinued and stopped taking new entrants in 2017. This scheme was the only specific social work award that supported employment-based students in completing their social work qualifications and doing this with financial stability (Yeung et al., 2020). Table 2 provides an overview of the data for all full-time and part-time students and shows that the percentage of part-time students has ranged from 18% in 2020 to 27% in 2022.

An increase in part-time students has implications for the social work workforce. This means that more students are taking longer to complete their qualifications. Possible reasons for an increase in part-time students are the lack of scholarship support for social work students, the impacts of financial hardship, and the need to work whilst studying to support themselves, family and whānau (SWRB, 2021). The 2022 SWRB Annual Providers Education report reviewed the attrition rate across bachelor's degrees. It estimated an attrition rate of 45% from year 1 to year 4, with the highest attrition rate between years 1 and 2 at 31%, the year 2 to 3 attrition rate was 18%, and the rate between years 3 and 4 of 4% was the lowest (SWRB, 2022b). While the report does not identify

Table 1. Comparison between NZ Domestic students and Social Work students 2015–2022

Years	NZ Domestic Students Enrolments	Social Work students SWRB Education provider reports	% of Social Work students of Domestic Enrolments
2022	343,990	2793	0.0081
2021	358,845	3059	0.0085
2020	328,940	2899	0.0088
2019	327,915	2927	0.0089
2018	335,560	2841	0.0085
2017	343,555	3310	0.0096
2016	353,440	3337	0.0094
2015	357,860	3885	0.0108

Sources: Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga Ministry of Education (2023), Refer to Figure 5, Part 1, Page 13 of the Student Loan Scheme Annual Report 2022/23 <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/80898/2555/student-loan-scheme-annual-report-2023> and (SWRB, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022b)

reasons for the non-completion, the impacts of student financial hardship on mental and social wellbeing must be considered in the context of the call for greater support for those preparing to enter the social work workforce (Bartley et al., 2024).

Overall, there are challenges to the pipeline of social work graduates going into the workforce locally. The number of students has trended down in recent years, and an increasing number are taking longer to complete. For the bachelor’s degree nationally, 45% of those who start a degree are arguably not completing it. The fastest pipeline for graduates of prescribed qualifications is at the master’s level, and it is growing, with 55% of these students completing their studies in 2 years (SWRB, 2021, 2022b). The challenge for the profession is how the local pipeline, which provides 90% of newly registered social workers, can increase its inputs (the number of students entering programmes), throughput (the number of students completing programmes), and output (graduates who register and practise as social workers). The current pathways for recruiting domestic students into social work are:

- School leavers and adults over 20 years old with no previous qualifications complete the prescribed 4-year BSW.
- Those who hold Level 5 and 6 qualifications in support work, community work and youthwork may receive credit or recognition of prior learning and thereby complete the degree in less than 4 years.

- Those with a relevant degree may also get some credit towards the BSW, meaning they can complete it in less than 4 years.
- Those with a relevant degree and sufficient GPA can complete a prescribed 2-year master’s degree.

In addition to recruiting domestic students, programmes also recruit international students, who may go on to practise in Aotearoa and become residents or citizens. This is due to the social worker role being currently on Immigration New Zealand’s Green List as a pathway straight to a residence visa (Immigration New Zealand, 2024). This situation raises the question of whether international student recruitment and a pathway to residence via the Green List are to be explored.

Turning to retention in programmes through to registration as social workers, several areas remain unexplored by the profession and employers, for example:

- How can we, as professionals and employers, support students in completing their programmes?
- What support avenues exist for students through scholarships and bursaries nationally and across institutions? How can we, as a professional community, promote these?
- Is there a need for a student support programme for student members of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, and what might that look like?

Table 2 Full-time and Part-time Students 2017-2022

Year	Full-time (N)	Full-time (%)	Part-time (N)	Part-Time (%)
2017	2483	75	827	25
2018	2307	81	534	19
2019	2155	74	772	26
2020	2180	82	480	18
2021	2366	78	698	22
2022	1827	73	766	27

Source: (SWRB, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022b)

- What hardship funds are available to students?
- What can we do as a professional community to support students navigate the challenges of hardship during placements?
- Who could the professional community work with concerning providing support for students?

Questions related to the throughput of the pipeline of registered social workers are:

- How could we streamline the pathway through the BSW by recognising prior learning, particularly in the first 2 years?
- How can we optimise the fast-track pathway of the prescribed master's degrees?
- How could the pathway be streamlined for those with social-work-like roles to registration?

Beyond the locally qualified social worker pipeline, there is the question of whether the profession wants to increase the percentage of internationally qualified social workers. This, in turn, raises the following questions:

- Do we actively recruit overseas and strive to increase the number of internationally qualified social workers?
- If so, where do we look to streamline the recognition of international qualifications with particular countries?
- Do we also look to formalise education towards competencies 1 and 2 for provisionally registered, internationally qualified social workers?

The last section of this paper concerns the retention and development of the social work workforce. The 2023 Workforce Survey identified that 16% (714) of their sample of 4414 Social Workers intend to leave the profession in the next 5 years. The report extrapolates this to an estimated 1,400 social workers holding practising certificates (SWRB, 2023b). The report also identifies that over two-thirds (67%) of respondents believe the recruitment and retention of social

workers is our greatest challenge (SWRB, 2023b).

The five most common reasons given for leaving identified in the report are retirement (46%), burnout (34%), high workload (28%), poor pay (21%) and lack of career progression (20%) (SWRB, 2023b). Looking at the five reasons, one wonders if there are discussions to be had about planning for retirement, how to prevent and manage burnout, and how to develop tools and support with workloads. Perhaps the reason for the poor pay reflects the challenges in implementing the various pay parity settlements and the extent of coverage of these. It might also reflect that the increasing cost of living has reduced any gains from pay parity. The lack of career progression raises questions about career planning in the profession and how to establish pathways across fields of practice, organisations, and the profession that facilitate social workers' professional growth and development.

Related to career development is the question of how we, as a professional community, build capability and capacity in professional supervision, practice leadership, social work management, and social work education and research. Does the professional community do this through micro-credentialing? Do we use a post-qualifying pathway like the New Entry to Specialist Practice for Allied Mental Health (see Te Pou, 2024)? Do we do both? Or is it something that is field-of-practice specific? And how are these developments supported and funded by social service organisations and funders? Is there a need for a specific commissioning organisation for the social work workforce?

This viewpoint has summarised the evidence and raised questions about how we respond to the workforce challenges facing us as a professional community. The SWRB, as the lead agency, have named the issues and provided the information from which we can ask questions and start conversations. Our challenge as contributors to the social work workforce system is to live the questions, engage in courageous and creative

conversations and work together to develop workforce plans for the next 10 years and beyond.

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