

The sustainability of social work education during low enrolment in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Introduction At some point during the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher, then British Prime Minister, was asked to comment on the growing ranks of the unemployed. She responded by suggesting that they should do social work. The tale contained the uncomfortable idea that social work is something that anyone can do, without any education. (Doel, 2012, p. 4)

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This notion reminds me of my family's disappointment when I decided to study social work decades ago. At the time, social work seemed accessible to anyone, regardless of qualifications, a perception echoed by Doel (2012). Many likely questioned the necessity of systematic training to help people in need, especially considering the then anticipated low income. Upon this reflection, the evolution of social work as a profession, originating in the late 19th century in London's impoverished areas (Prior, 1992)—while social care functions have existed in one way or another in many cultures (Hunt, 2016)—has spurred substantial global and domestic deliberations on its professional status (Hunt et al., 2019). Today, social work is recognised as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline, emphasising empowerment and societal change, especially for vulnerable populations (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014).

Professionalisation trajectory in Aotearoa New Zealand

While a full account of the trajectory of professionalisation in social work lies

beyond the scope of this viewpoint, in Aotearoa New Zealand it began with the establishment of the New Zealand Association of Social Workers (NZASW), later renamed the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) in 1998 (ANZASW, n.d.). This organisational development was crucial in forming a cohesive professional identity within social work in Aotearoa New Zealand (Hunt, 2017) and aligning with IFSW's guidelines.

Simultaneously, the recognition of ongoing education's importance for professionalisation led to the inception of social work programme at Victoria University in 1949, marking Aotearoa New Zealand's first professional social work qualification. The New Zealand Social Work Council was established in 1973, aiming to develop minimum standards for social work courses (Nash, 1998). It later accredited three university-level social work programmes, including a two-year postgraduate course at the University of Auckland and a Bachelor of Social Work programme at Massey University, both in 1976, followed by the University of Canterbury in 1980 (Hay et al.,

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2016). Readers are referred to Nash (1998) for a comprehensive history of social work education until 1995.

Through these collective efforts, social work is now a registered profession in Aotearoa New Zealand (McCurdy et al., 2020), requiring higher education levels, with an undergraduate bachelor's degree as the current standard. Since 2017, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) has recognised two social work qualification levels: a four-year, full-time equivalent bachelor's degree and a two-year full-time equivalent applied master's degree, while acknowledging historically recognised social work qualifications (SWRB, n.d.). This qualification requirement challenges the historical perception of social work as an unskilled profession (Doel, 2012), with a belief that a longer degree allows for greater academic rigour, better industry preparedness, enhanced research-mindedness, and improved balance between classroom time and field placements (Beddoe, 2014).

Established in 1964, the Association faced challenges as many social workers in Aotearoa still practised outside its membership, given the diverse routes to social work qualifications (Nash, 1998). In response, during the formative years of social work identity, the Association embraced inclusivity, admitting individuals with social work qualifications or involvement in social service agencies. However, the ensuing lacking formal competency assessments (Fraser & Briggs, 2016), compounded by racism in childcare systems (Hyslop, 2017; Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1988), heightened public scrutiny. This situation led to the Social Worker Regulation Project in the 2000s, culminating in the Social Workers Registration Act (SWRA) in 2003, aimed primarily at protecting public safety (Hunt, 2017). This legislation established the SWRB, a platform for social work registration, setting standards for professionalisation and

accountability, investigating complaints, and applying disciplinary measures, thereby fostering public trust (SWRB, n.d.).

Until 2021, registration remained non-mandatory in Aotearoa New Zealand, sparking debates on the potential benefits of mandatory registration (Beddoe, 2018). Subsequently, the SWRA 2019 mandated social worker registration with the SWRB from 27 February 2021. Eligibility requires graduation from an institution offering a SWRB-recognised programme, as accreditation responsibility shifted from ANZASW to SWRB after the SWRA 2003 (Staniforth et al., 2022). Social work education providers now assess students' fitness to practice, including child safety based on the Children's Act 2014, and their programmes are designed to equip students with the skills to function as competent social workers, addressing employers', clients', and community needs. Currently, 18 tertiary institutions, including universities, institutes of technology and polytechnics, and wānanga, provide social work programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand (SWRB, n.d.). Notably, all institutes delivering SWRB-recognised qualifications undergo regular reaccreditation by the SWRB, ensuring education quality and relevance.

The changing educational landscape

Since the introduction of the SWRA in 2003, practitioners with recognised social work qualifications have been held accountable to the SWRB, which oversees programmes designed to cultivate essential skills for immediate readiness upon graduation. However, a significant concern arises regarding the potential barriers these qualifications impose on aspiring social workers, particularly the four-year duration required to obtain a bachelor's degree (SWRB, n.d.).

In an increasingly challenging economic environment, characterised by escalating living costs, many students struggle to

support themselves financially (Bartley et al., 2024; Cox et al., 2022). The notion of full-time study in Aotearoa New Zealand has become unsustainable for many students due to rising living expenses, changes in student allowance entitlements, and limited government support. The prevalence of neoliberal ideology—emphasising individual responsibility, competition and performance-based accountability (el-Ojeili & Barber, 2021)—has shifted the focus away from supporting student learning and towards treating education as an economic equation (Strauss & Hunter, 2018). Consequently, many students face overwhelming challenges in balancing studies, paid work, and family commitments (Beddoe et al., 2023), often leading to significant indebtedness (Bartley et al., 2024). Many are compelled to engage in various forms of employment to sustain themselves, with detrimental effects on their academic performance.

At this juncture, the author wishes to initiate a discussion about the sustainability of the current four-year bachelor's degree in social work. Unlike their counterparts in the health sector, such as nurses or occupational therapists who typically complete three-year bachelor's degrees, social work students must invest an additional year, incurring both emotional and financial costs, in their pursuit of becoming a social worker.

The SWRB's 2021 Annual Education Providers Report highlights a troubling statistic: the completion rate for social work courses hovers around 50%, meaning that half of the students who embark on this educational journey do not complete their degrees. In contrast, the attrition rate for nursing students is reported at 30% (Macintosh, 2023), with financial pressure and family responsibilities cited as significant factors—challenges that mirror those faced by social work students (Beddoe et al., 2023). This discrepancy raises critical questions about the additional 20% attrition rate in social work education. One plausible explanation is the extended duration of the

social work bachelor's degree. The four-year commitment demands a considerable investment of time, and places immense strain on students, often exacerbating financial hardships and contributing to the high dropout rate. The impact of the four-year bachelor's degree is evident, with a significant decline in social work course enrolments noted between 2015 and 2018 when it transitioned to a four-year degree programme (SWRB, 2021).

Moreover, within the prevailing neoliberal paradigm, characterised by an unrelenting drive for higher profit and reduced investment (Strauss & Hunter, 2018), tertiary education providers are increasingly compelled to align with market dynamics, prioritising the profitability and perceived validity of their courses. The pressure to marketise and commodify education has led to the restructuring of programmes, particularly in disciplines with low enrolment. Social work education has been particularly affected by these trends, facing declining enrolment and high attrition rates in recent years (SWRB, 2021). This situation has been exacerbated by a decrease in international student numbers due to prolonged border closures, further destabilising the sustainability of social work programmes in universities, despite their critical importance to social work's professional claim (Beddoe, 2014). For example, the University of Waikato has phased out its social work courses, while some universities have transitioned to online teaching modes. There is growing concern that other social work education providers may follow suit, threatening the future availability and quality of social work education.

Call for collaboration

The author presents a nuanced perspective on the four-year bachelor's degree in social work. On one hand, this programme has been pivotal in developing future social workers, equipping them with diverse

worldviews, theoretical knowledge, and practical skills through two field placements. However, concerns have emerged regarding the challenges students face throughout this extended duration (Bartley et al., 2024; Cox et al., 2022). These challenges threaten the sustainability of the social work course amidst declining university enrolments (Kenny, 2023). The potential closure of social work programmes and the return of accredited licences to the SWRB could jeopardise our journey of professionalisation. The scarcity of educational opportunities in social work would also deter aspiring social workers.

Although no simple solution exists, one thing is clear: collaboration is essential. Key stakeholders, including SWRB, ANZASW, social work education providers, and other relevant entities, must work together to develop strategies that sustain social work qualifications without compromising educational quality. Drawing on ANZASW's five decades of resilience, I am confident that innovative approaches can be found to ensure the sustainability of social work education for future social workers and the communities they serve. For example, while acknowledging the financial, social and emotional demands of long, unpaid, clinical placements (Cox et al., 2022), lessons can be drawn from the National Health Workforce Plan 2023/2024, which aims to reduce student-nurse attrition rates through scholarships, hardship grants, and earn-as-you-learn programmes (Macintosh, 2023). Indeed, social work education already promotes a national paid placement scheme and in-post placements, which should be expanded to address financial hardships, explore alternative study modes, and ensure the continued relevance and accessibility of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Lastly, reconsidering the duration of our bachelor's courses may be necessary, especially given past debates surrounding the transition to a four-year bachelor's

degree (Staniforth et al., 2022). The future sustainability of social work education lies in cultivating a resilient and capable cadre of our professionals, equipped to meet society's evolving challenges.

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