ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The impact of studying social work on student social wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: Struggling with incongruent demands

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Social work education places many demands on students, including dealing with challenging content, demanding assessment requirements, and long unpaid placements. A growing literature reports that social work students are experiencing social and financial hardship with impacts on their health and wellbeing.

METHOD: A mixed methods study incorporating a survey (*n* = 353) and 31 semi-structured interviews was conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2019. Participants in the study were then current students or new graduates in their first 2 years of practice.

FINDINGS: The findings reported in this article are drawn from analysis of the responses to the relevant open-ended questions in the survey and the qualitative interviews. Participants reported various challenging impacts of their engagement in a social work qualifying programme. These impacts were felt in their personal and family relationships, social and cultural participation, and physical and emotional wellbeing. Some students reported impacts on their opportunities to participate in social activism.

IMPLICATIONS: These findings confirm, in a local context, those from Australia and elsewhere. It is recommended that professional bodies and social work education providers should urgently address how study in social work could have a less detrimental impact on students. It is vital that we avoid an overly responsiblising emphasis on self-care but rather acknowledge the impact of structural factors. The lack of congruence between social work stated values of social connection and participation and the student experience reported here suggests a dissonance that limits student inclusion and success.

Keywords: Social work students, social work placements, social work education, student wellbeing

Background

In 2020, approximately 2,666 students were enrolled in a recognised social work qualification with one of the 18 SWRB recognised providers (Social Workers Registration Board [SWRB], 2021) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Most of these students were women (86.9%), with Māori students making up over 31% of those enrolled, Pākehā (non-Māori) students about 45%, and almost 22% were Pasifika students[1]. Almost two-thirds of all enrolled students were over 24 years old and could be classified as mature, thus being more likely

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to have caregiving responsibilities, noted in extant literature as more likely to experience various forms of hardship (Baglow & Gair, 2019; Heagney & Benson, 2017). Approximately 500 students were eligible to graduate in 2020, down from a peak in 2016 of about 900 students (SWRB, 2021a).

Students in Aotearoa New Zealand navigate several hardships including financial hardship (Point Research, 2022; Strauss & Hunter, 2018), and hardship related to their mental health (Gharibi, 2018). In social work education internationally, these impacts are influenced by a number of factors at macro, meso and micro levels such the neoliberal ideology that requires individual responsibility (Cox et al., 2022); regulatory and programme design requirements including in Aotearoa New Zealand the necessity to undertake 120 days of full-time practicum placement (SWRB, 2021b), the length of the qualifying qualification, as well as the confronting content of the qualification (Campbell et al., 2024). Personal factors included those such as the motivation and biographical pathway into study followed by individual social work students (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2020; Newcomb et al., 2019; Newcomb et al., 2017). Student poverty is exacerbated by long placements and the argument has been made that unpaid placements not only cause hardship (Gair & Baglow, 2018a, 2018b; Hodge et al., 2021) but are exploitative (Farr, 2024; Howells, 2024). The psychosocial stress experienced, particularly by students pursuing a social work career, has received increased attention in recent decades and the impacts of both a rigorous social work curriculum and stresses of their life circumstances are well known (Collins et al., 2010; Wilks & Spivey, 2010). Mature students are often juggling parenting and caregiving (Hulme-Moir et al., 2022), and all students may need to contend with intense social problems addressed in the curriculum with consequent risks of vicarious trauma (Moore et al., 2011).

Illuminating the social work student experience, recent studies have highlighted high levels of hardship, stress and psychological distress (Campbell et al., 2024; Collins et al., 2010; Stanley & Mettilda Bhuvaneswari, 2016; Wilks & Spivey, 2010), posing challenges to social work educators to address the incongruence, for example, of their own students struggling with food insecurity (Gair & Baglow, 2018b). Research points to financial hardship, often related to long unpaid placements (Gair & Baglow, 2018a, 2018b; Hodge et al., 2020) and concerns about indebtedness (Bartley et al., 2024; Morley et al., 2023).

Noteworthy also is the concern that students are reluctant to disclose their emotional reactions to practice and admit that they need help (Wilks & Spivey, 2010). The study reported in this present article found that stigma and fear of repercussions lay behind this reluctance (Beddoe et al., 2023). It is increasingly recognised that social work educators need to prepare students for the emotional demands of practice more effectively (Moore et al., 2011; O'Connor et al., 2009).

Within professional expectations of capabilities and competencies are exhortations that, in order to practise effectively, social workers must safeguard their own wellbeing and enhance their emotional resilience. While well-intended, calls that ignore or minimise the structural factors behind student distress invoke neoliberal ideological notions of intensified individual responsibility which have infected higher education for several decades (see, for example, Bay, 2011). In the New Zealand context, SWRB Core Competence Standard 10 includes the requirement that a social worker "knows the limits of their own practice and experience, practices appropriate self-care and seeks advice where necessary" (SWRB, n.d.). Barks et al. (2023) have challenged an uncritical acceptance of self-care as overly responsiblised. In their systematic review they note that, "[o]verwhelmingly, social workers who reported greater sociostructural, economic, professional, and physical health privilege

engaged in more self-care" (Barks et al., 2023, p. 926). As noted previously by Myers et al. (2022), amongst social work educators themselves, high workloads, competing demands, and an overburden of personal and professional responsibilities posed barriers to self-care.

Defining wellbeing

Vidal and Osteen (2022) noted that defining wellbeing is challenging due in part to the wishes of policy makers to make it quantifiable and unambiguous (Dodge et al., 2012). Wellbeing has been simply defined by Elliot et al. (2022, p. 1) as, "what helps people's lives go better for them". Wellbeing, like health, is more than the absence of illness or injury, rather it is the presence of several elements: living with purpose and a sense of fulfilment, positive feelings of self-worth, social connections, and strong personal relationships. Arguments have also been made that link a nation's wealth and growth to wellbeing, but this has been challenged as limited thinking, grounded in neoliberalism and avoiding issues of racial and gender inequalities, capitalist exploitation and limited ability for political participation (Nussbaum, 2003). Social wellbeing, the focus of this article, includes the external resources that people have available to them and their perception of their ability to engage in and enjoy their social world without structural barriers.

Recent literature has also contested the Western, highly individualised approach to defining wellbeing, shifting from a biomedical model to a more holistic approach and challenging the idea that there is a universal meaning (Vidal & Osteen, 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, literature provides strong explorations of Māori conceptualisation of wellbeing that have challenged narrow Western accounts (Elers & Dutta, 2024; Mark & Lyons, 2010; McLachlan, Wirihana et al., 2017; McLachlan, Waitoki et al., 2021). This scholarship posits that Māori concepts of wellbeing are grounded in a fundamental relationship with the natural world and cultural traditions. This philosophical approach finds that wellbeing is defined within "ancient cultural knowledge and traditions which see the mind, body, spirit, family, and land as essential aspects of health and wellbeing" (Mark & Lyons, 2010, p. 1762). In social work in Aotearoa New Zealand, a holistic approach underpins one of our core values, manaakitanga: "Social workers recognise and support the mana of others. We act towards others with respect, kindness and compassion. We practice empathic solidarity, ensure safe space, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations" (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW], 2019). It behoves all social workers, including educators, to strive to ensure that these obligations are met. We will return to these stated values of our profession in Aotearoa New Zealand in the discussion.

The focus of this article is to identify the challenges to personal, relational, and social wellbeing that were highlighted by the participants in response to questions about their social wellbeing. We also asked study participants to articulate a range of strategies to cope with the challenges they faced, and these will be reported elsewhere. A detailed analysis of the financial hardships faced, and the impacts of student debt is reported in Bartley et al. (2024).

Method

An online survey was designed to be undertaken by current students and recent graduates of all qualifying social work programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participant Ethics Committee.

To reach current students, we enlisted the support of professional bodies to advertise the survey to practitioners and students. We also advertised via the social work professional Facebook groups to attract recent graduates. While

membership is voluntary, the ANZASW had a membership of around 3,800 social workers (ANZASW, 2018) at that time. The survey contained a total of 33 questions, which were a mixture of closed and open-ended questions that addressed a range of topics, including: demographic variables (including age, gender, and ethnicity); caring responsibilities; details of the social work qualification undertaken (e.g., undergraduate/postgraduate, year completed or expected to complete, part-time or full-time study), but not including the educational institution, to preserve anonymity; financial matters, including employment while studying, forms of financial support, details of student loan debt and attitudes towards debt, and details of the impact of financial hardship; aspects of social wellbeing, including questions about the impact of study pressures on relationships with partners, family members, friends, community and hapū/iwi, and on other cultural pursuits; aspects of mental wellbeing, including experience of mental distress and use of professional help; and any positive strategies that they may have employed to cope with the impact of studying. While our survey was not planned as a solely qualitative survey (Terry & Braun, 2017), open-ended questions in surveys can deepen the understanding of a response to a preceding question, adding richness to the data available for analysis (Ballou, 2008).

The survey was available online, via Qualtrics, for the first three months of the academic year, 2019. In total, 353 social work students or recent graduates completed the questionnaire. Given that just over 90% of the respondents identified as female, gender has not been incorporated into our analysis of the results although we have reported elsewhere that female students with caring responsibilities experienced particular struggles (Hulme-Moir et al., 2022). The survey gained more than 48,000 words in responses to the open questions, and in this article, we draw mainly on responses to "tell us more" questions about the impacts on social life of study demands. Those completing the survey were invited to participate in an interview and 31 interviews were conducted by phone or video call and transcribed.

Author two conducted a thematic analysis of both data sets by undertaking an initial coding of interviews and relevant sections of open responses and then development of themes that were reviewed and further developed and constructed by authors one and three. Nuanced codes created across the team were compared and refined to create the themes that provide a compelling reading of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Author four conducted the initial literature review (Cox et al., 2022).

Participant demographics

Of the 31 interview participants, 28 identified as female and three identified as male. Twenty-five identified primarily as Pākehā, four as Māori, one as Cook Island Māori, one as Samoan/Pākehā. Eleven were aged 45–54, six were 35–44, seven were 25–34, and seven were aged 24 and under. Interview participants came from 12 different tertiary institutions. A total of 14 attended university schools of social work and 17 studied in other programmes. Most students ($n = 25$) were or had been, engaged in full-time study, and the other six were part-time students.

Details of the survey participants are presented in Table 1. The high proportion of female responses was to be expected, given that social work is a highly gendered profession. The participants were all in the process of completing or had recently completed a tertiary qualification in social work. Of the participants who provided details of their degree studies 82.7% ($n = 282$) were studying in an undergraduate and 17.3% ($n = 59$) were studying in a postgraduate social work qualification. In total, 82% ($n = 288$) were (or had been) studying full-time and 18% ($n = 63$) were (or had been) studying part-time. Nearly two-thirds of the participants (64.3%) were aged under 35, while six participants identified as being 55 or older.

As to ethnic identity, while participants were able to choose more than one ethnicity, their answers were prioritised according to the government guidelines (Te Whatu Ora, 2024). Proceeding with a prioritised ethnicity variable allowed us to keep the initial size of the sample. These results are presented in Table 2.

Findings

These data are drawn from the responses to the open-ended questions in the survey as well as the qualitative interviews that relate to social life, including family and study activities. To enhance readability and ensure clarity of meaning, quotes have been reduced

Table 1. Survey Participant Demographics

	n	%
Age		
Under 20	6	1.7
20 to 24	111	31.4
25 to 34	110	31.2
35 to 44	68	19.3
45 to 54	52	14.7
55 to 64	5	1.4
65 or over	1	0.3
Gender		
Female	323	91.5
Male	28	7.9
Gender diverse	2	0.6
Current Student/Recent Graduate		
Current Student	267	75.6%
Recent Graduate	86	24.4%
Currently studying Full-time / Part-time (current students)		
Full-time	216	80.9%
Part-time	49	18.4%
Not Ascertained	2	0.7%
Spent most time studying Full-time / Part-time (recent graduates)		
Full-time	72	83.7
Part-time	14	16.3

Table 2. Prioritised Ethnicity Survey Participants

Ethnicity	Frequency	M	SD
NZ/European	218	25.4	8.5
Māori	67	30.65	9.26
Pacific	28	28.59	10.68
Asian	19	21.79	7.62
Middle Eastern/Latin American/African.	8	25	11.64

with ellipses or paraphrasing signified by square brackets without altering meaning. Interview participants are identified by a pseudonym to distinguish these data from the open-text answers from the survey, which are not labelled.

Social work students face varied impacts from their study, some of which may have not always been acknowledged. We found that personal wellbeing, as well as relationships with whānau, family, friends, and peers, were affected. The ability to respond to cultural responsibilities was often negatively impacted, along with the capacity to participate in social, sporting, and other enriching cultural activities. Societal connections including social activism and volunteering were often curtailed.

"You just have to do what you got to do": Challenges to living a balanced life

Social work educators urge students to maintain a healthy work–life balance in accordance with the SWRB's expectations. And yet the structural barriers of poverty and precarious incomes made this very challenging for students. Working many jobs was a common experience, juggling paid and unpaid responsibilities with studies and needing to plan ahead to survive. In results from the study published in Bartley et al. (2024) it was reported that only 16.1 % of respondents (n = 57) never worked while studying, while 67.7 % (n = 241) undertook casual or part time work and 15.6 (n = 55) were in full-time work. It is unsurprising then, that in interview and open-question responses, paid employment featured heavily as essential but created significant social and psychological pressure.

The pressure of study, often combined with the requirement to have at least part-time employment to mitigate financial hardship, regularly had a negative impact on wellbeing for participants.

> I think people need a balance while studying. if we didn't have to work (as much maybe) to support ourselves we would be able to spend more time on our wellbeing, doing things that make us happy. Studying should be treated like a full-time job.

For Angi, her understanding at the beginning of her study that placement was coming meant both planning and tight budgeting:

> I am going to be working on placement for three months for two years. So, working over the holidays which meant a hit to my social life throughout the summer. But yeah, it is just necessary you just have to do what you got to do. Working and budgeting, yes there have been weeks when oh no got to choose between the milk or the bread. (Angi)

Part-time work over summer "brought in a little bit of money, but it was just a short period of time, [but] it meant I worked during the holidays, so that took its toll stress-wise" (Bella). Debt became inevitable for some, offset by taking any work that was available and for those previously employed, juggling employers' expectations of doing some work through placement:

> I shall have to go back into work because the job that I do I can't kind of up and leave for that amount of time and not have any contact with my job. They are expecting at least two days' work out of me when I am on placement, which kind of does help financially, but it does stretch the placement out longer (Brenda).

Brenda noted that juggling paid work was a source of tension for fellow students as working:

> … makes things a bit easier because you have a little bit of money coming in, but then everything else is a lot harder at the same time. Do you really suck it up and try not to work so you can be there for placement fully? But then it impacts in other ways. It is a very tricky situation that one.

Students may have appreciated the need for balance but the ability to achieve this was not borne out in their realities: "No time to fill up my own tank; all relationships have suffered; my children have barely seen me".

The study participants spoke of many different challenges to their social wellbeing over the course of their studies. Ellen succinctly stated: "I felt like my overall hauora … that's our whole wellbeing, was impacted negatively." Another participant simply declared 'Social work makes it too challenging to live a balanced lifestyle'.

Sam reflected that the cost to their wellbeing was greater than expected and more challenging to manage than even the financial impact of being a full-time student:

> I quit a pretty well-paying job to come here. I realised that it was going to be quite a challenge, but in terms of the dollars in the pocket in the end of the day hasn't been quite as bad as I thought, but the cost to my wellbeing has been more than I thought. It's really changed the whole way that I live.

The participants reflected upon the challenging impact of study on their personal sense of identity and self-development. In particular, social work programme content impacted on students' social wellbeing and they discussed experiencing paradigm shifts to their underlying assumptions and beliefs and the intensity of the process, for example from a survey respondent: "It is hard every year, but more because of the learning and self-development that can be at times rapid."

> The main thing would be that with social work is not just something that you can research and write. It requires a lot of self-reflecting, like your bias and positioning, and so it does require a lot of unpacking of yourself, and what you believe. (Jade)

> In social work the topics themselves can be challenging of course, that's an extra. You're not just learning about something academic, it's kind of real. It has real applications, real experiences. (Sam)

Losing relationships might arise because of the changing attitudes, beliefs and values of the students: "It is crazy that you are studying social work and yeah you do lose a lot of friends. I think it is hard because the conversations you have are different as well" (Jane).

Many also commented on needing to work through personal issues raised by the topics discussed in class:

> Mental health can be triggered while studying social work due to the sensitive topics you encounter and [that] can hit close to home. For example, during a mental health class, the topic of depression came up and made me unable to focus on the class content without thinking about my own experiences with depression.
>
> I think that some of the papers impacted me emotionally and as a result and on reflection I felt I had to address those issues before I felt I could complete my studies. (Ellen)

Participants explored the impact of study on their spirituality, noting their ability to participate in their spiritual beliefs was reduced due to study demands: "often I have skipped church because like I just need to get study done." Time and energy constraints also resulted in students limiting their religious practice: "[I] temporarily worked an 8-hour shift on Sundays and struggled to have the energy to attend church in the evening".

Struggling with guilt and recognising incongruence: The impact on relationships

Participants reflected on the impact of study on their relationships with partners, children, family, whānau, and friends: "It's

hard to balance time with loved ones when assignments pile up." University work fills up all the gaps: "I have seen an impact on my social life (not spending as much time with my family, partner or friends) as I am either working at university or studying". Doreen noted, "I feel for my husband because he doesn't always have a very nice wife because she's so task focused. You're still wanting to support your children; you're supporting elderly parents, and you have a partner".

The incongruence between the values and ethics of social work as a profession and the reality for social work students, was intensified for parenting students, bringing feelings of guilt and a reflective critique of the dissonance present in the intersection between their study focus and personal lives:

> I have struggled with the guilt of not being available for my family. I struggle with the incongruent nature of social work which works for families and children to have the best care and love they can have from their caregivers, yet as a social work student my children experience a lack of basic needs from me.
>
> … I carried a lot of guilt because of not being completely present for my child because of the multiple responsibilities I had.
>
> … sometimes I neglected to spend time with my daughter because I have been so busy that actually if I just put that [work] down for 10 minutes and give her a hug and have a little bit of time with her it is actually all she wants. (Millie)

Feelings of guilt and anxiety because of unavailability to wider family and friends were also prevalent in student stories. When Natalie, for example, did spend time with whānau and friends, she still did not relax: "When you do, you're probably a little bit stressed cos you're often thinking about your next assignment or your next thing that's due". Jade tried to see her recently widowed grandma once a week, "but sometimes with study I'm like I won't want to see her if I'm just going to be stressed and wanting to be elsewhere".

> I have struggled to see whānau throughout the degree. My anxiety has increased due to lack of contact with whānau and friends. I feel guilt for not seeing them as much as I would like.
>
> My father lives in [a different town] and I haven't really travelled to see him since I've been at university, so that's related to money, but it's also time because I need to go to work. (Sam)
>
> I've got an auntie with a serious mental health disorder, so I feel I can't be there as much for her as much as I used to and feel quite a lot of guilt actually. (Bella)
>
> [I'm] less available to help out with family at times – less emotional energy to put into things that I usually would have before study. … I needed to put bigger boundaries up with family. (Maria)

As a result of the constant stresses of juggling time for study and personal commitments, some relationships and friendships ended during the time of study: "I lost a lot of friends while studying as did not have time to see them or money to visit them".

> My relationship with my partner has suffered as well, because of studying and working. It's driven by finances, because if I don't work then I'm jeopardising … being able to study basically. It's a catch-22 where you want to have quality relationships, but then if you're working, and committed to university, seven days a week, then my relationship was not really sustainable. (Sam)

The negative impact on relationships was particularly intense at pressure points of the degree such as final year of study, the end of a semester when many assignments were due, or when there were compulsory block course requirements:

> Especially in this final year, I have had barely any time to spend with friends and whānau. I have had time for one trip to see my family who live [away from where I study].

> It's really hard to keep up with family and friends in the fourth year particularly. Especially if you have a family that is emotionally draining to you. You need to keep all of your emotional energy for placement.

The trade-offs required in managing competing demands added to the sense of incongruity of social work students feeling stressed by the needs of their children. The juggling of parenting responsibilities and studying was described by one participant as "punishing":

> I have so little time for my kids. When I have assignments due the only way I can study is go to bed at the same time as them at 8.30pm, sleep until midnight, then get up and work until 4.00am, sleep for 2 more hours, then get them up at 6.00am for school and day-care. It is punishing.

Many parent participants commented about not having sufficient time for their children including: "there was barely any time to spend with my own child" or "You have no life especially if you have children." Parents frequently commented on the constant stress of conflicting demands for example: "The time pressure was a constant nagging stress I often felt my children missed out on time, resources and opportunities." Children missing out was a common refrain:

> I chose to do this for [my eight-year-old son] … as I will get a better life afterwards and have a job, … but at the same time this is four years out of his young life where I haven't been there as much as I would like to. Often on weekends I am studying, so it's like … "oh if you be good while I study for 20 minutes, then I will play cards with you". (Bella)

> My son and I] haven't had a proper holiday for two years. I did summer school this year, so we couldn't [go away] … It's been non-stop study. (Sally)

> [I] often feel stressed and some important things I want to do I can't, such as parent nights at my kids' school, or helping more at [the] kids' school. All socialising is very limited but I am a single parent, so this also impacts.

However, some students felt that there was also a benefit for their children of having their parent study, even though they missed out on time with their parent:

> I feel like my children have missed out on a lot of my time because of my study but it has also been important for me to set an example to them, of commitment to further education and achieving my goals.

> My children have commented about my regular response as "I have to [study]. I have an assignment due." However, they do now understand the importance of the sacrifices I needed to make.

Impact of life's curveballs: Dealing with loss and change

Exacerbating the impact on participants' personal and relational dimensions of wellbeing, was the impact of unexpected stressors or "life's curveballs". The combination of these stresses at times overwhelmed students as the following quotes highlight:

> We had a family member pass away and I had to fit around going to funerals and keeping an eye out supporting my parents in their grief. I was doing it around studies, I had one day at her funeral the next day I'm presenting and the next day I'm back with my parents trying to support them because they were going through grief and loss themselves. So, I have struggled with that because I couldn't stop. If I had been working

> fulltime, I would have taken bereavement leave and just gone. (Janet)

> I think the exhaustion I'm feeling now is probably not from work but just from a lot of things that have happened with me in the past year, so that exhaustion's coming from grief, depression, anxiety, medication I suppose. (Karen)

"All I do is work, study and complete family responsibilities": No room for leisure

We asked respondents to comment on the impact of study on social, sporting, and other cultural activities. Students' opportunities to participate in other activities outside of family, whānau and friend relationships were curtailed because of the demands of studying. Student participants disclosed their internal prioritisation process to respond to the multiple demands they were facing. Participants were unequivocal about the trade-offs necessary to complete their degrees. Getting through required sacrifice of activities that they knew were beneficial to their health and wellbeing. And for this survey respondent, it was about being "productive":

> I can't spend as much time doing [leisure] activities, which I consider self-care, as I would like. Because doing them means that I'm not working and not studying, so even though I know doing these things would be beneficial for my health, I simply don't have the time or the peace of mind to be able to do them because I feel guilty, I'm not being "productive" (either earning money or doing assignments).

Hobbies, fitness, and sport and socialising were often sidelined due to both financial and time constraints, even though they knew these things had great benefit for their social wellbeing: "Me and a fellow student often talk about wanting to go out somewhere and socialise but never have the money...", and "there simply is not any time for [leisure] activities. All I do is work, study and complete family responsibilities".

> … when trying to fit in other activities for a balanced life, study necessarily takes priority and my social/sporting/cultural interests/activities take a backseat. Therefore, I get very little downtime and very little time to socialize, all circling back round to have an impact on my mental and physical health and wellbeing.

> … keeping up my health and fitness is so important to my mental and physical wellbeing but I found this slipped when I was juggling placement and completing coursework, or completing coursework [while working] three part-time jobs.

Students were conscious of the struggles and the downstream effects. Impact on body weight and sleep (discussed in Beddoe et al., 2023) were the most frequently mentioned consequences.

> I've probably put on about 3 kilos in the last 12 weeks … I make my mental health a priority over my physical health. (Sally)

> I used to do a lot of hunting and tramping and fly-fishing and outdoor stuff and I just don't do it. I've put on about 4 kilos, my fitness has dropped a little bit. (Sam)

> I didn't have time to do regular exercise, and I gained weight, I had very bad skin. And I've noticed a difference since I stopped study, I've gotten much healthier. (Ellen)

> We have all noticed that everyone [in cohort] slowly puts on weight. (Millie)

Financial constraints mean sport, socialising and other cultural activities were unaffordable to many of the participants: "Sport can be unaffordable due to fees which hinders socialising. Really affects the mental health being unable to participate in team sports", and

"there is no money to live so essentially training becomes almost impossible" and "I don't have a life outside of study because I don't have the funds. My life revolves around work and study. No social life". Even students who competed at high levels within their sport, or were very familiar with the benefits of sport, did not feel able to continue with this because of study commitments and finances:

> I competed in [sport named] competitively at a national level and wished to compete internationally, however I was unable to maintain training requirements during my 4th year because of balancing placement and work and being unable to afford the travel and coaching fees I needed at that level.

Participants explained that they were unable to prioritise cultural responsibilities at times and this negatively impacted on their social wellbeing, and clashed with expectations within their wider communities:

> I started learning Te Reo Māori last year, which I just couldn't continue with this year, because of time constraints. (Saria)

> It is hard because cultural activities should take priority, as it is good for my whānau wellbeing. Unfortunately, I cannot afford time or money to do these visits to my marae.

> As a Pacific Islander, a lot of our cultural things for those of us living in New Zealand are … big celebrations – funerals, birthdays and weddings. I wouldn't be able to go to [these] for people who are very close, immediate family, or even just outside of the immediate family. If there was a tangi for a close family member, I would go, but a lot of the cultural things I probably wouldn't 100% commit to. (Linda)

Participants noted that activities, including volunteering that were not directly related to their social work degree, were often set aside during their student years despite the social justice connection in the degree content:

> I used to volunteer at Trade Aid last year until I ran out of time. I have done that a lot in the past, so it was like an easy goer. Sometimes I don't think I've volunteered this year. (Kate)

> I volunteered for [foodbank] and also prison visiting … running 12-step meetings in the jail. But I've pretty much stopped with [foodbank] and I just go to the prison maybe once every couple of months now. I just don't have the time to give. (Sam)

> I volunteered with [Pasifika disability advocacy] … I used to do cultural performances, I used to help teach some cultural items, … but have recently stopped because yeah, my priority is study. (Karen)

Similarly, social activism was also off the agenda, in spite of students' prior involvements, Kate reflected: "I have been thinking I have got this essay due next week and I want to go to this activism thing on Saturday and I'm trying to figure out which one is more important".

> I'm a very political person and in my background, I've done a lot of activism, and I've been involved in political spheres and environmental stuff, and I did a lot of protesting. There's been a lot of things that I've looked at that I've wanted to get more engaged in, more involved in, whether it's fighting against racism, some of the justice reform issues…. but I just don't feel I have the time to engage in political issues. (Saria)

Limitations

There are some limitations of the sample, because the experiences of people who did not complete their degree programme were not obtained; however, the study does provide a snapshot of several cohorts

of students, and with data collected pre-Covid-19. A second dataset, essentially exploring the same questions has been collected in 2023 which will provide a fuller picture and will also capture the impacts of pandemic-related lockdowns on students' experiences while studying social work.

Discussion

The participants' sense of wellbeing and a balanced life were challenged by the demands of studying social work. This impacted on them individually and also on their personal relationships leading to anxiety and guilt, especially for those with caring responsibilities. Their fitness, leisure activities, sleep, and physical health were compromised, along with their ability to contribute to their communities. The findings here echo prior work conducted elsewhere where elements of student life that underscored student stress included "the transitional nature of university experiences, relationships strained by the pressure of study" (Collins et al., 2010, p. 964). In this research, the transient nature of social work study however underpinned the notion that the sacrifices made were a trade-off for a future better life. Being focused on that end goal enabled participants to make sense of the strong negative feelings of guilt, anxiety and the incongruity of their actual versus idealised notions of self-care and work–life balance.

Students who were undertaking part-time work or studying part time while in full-time employment were subject to significantly more demands than other students. As noted in Bartley et al. (2024), nearly one in four survey respondents reported experiencing moderate or severe financial hardship while studying, and that this had a significant impact on their mental and social wellbeing. However, the students in this study also developed strategies for surviving and managing the challenges that they faced, and these will be reported in a subsequent article on students' strategies to "survive" their studies. Our findings confirmed those of Collins et al. (2010) that, while support was obtained from fellow students and educators, significant numbers of students experienced problems with emotional and physical exhaustion. Our student participants reported sleep disturbance and weight gain, which they related to lack of time for exercise or sport, and significant mental distress (reported in Beddoe et al., 2023).

Findings from our study indicate that many faced a significant impact on their family and social relationships, which should be of great concern. The combination of course work and field education demands, alongside the need to undertake paid work, impacted on the time and emotional energy available for partners, children, family, whānau, and friends. Sporting and cultural activities and volunteering which were likely to have been of social, psychological and cultural benefits were often decreased over the course of their studies.

Furthermore, students' efforts in social activism, in pursuit of cultural and social justice aims were also curtailed. The evidence of the impact of the shift in costs from state to students are borne out in this study. In the introduction we highlighted manaakitanga as one of the pou or values in our *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019), but we note here that additional principles should be considered when we think about the implications of this research. The pou rangatiratanga suggests that as a professional discipline in higher education we could do better to support diversity and cultural identity in our programmes as evidenced by students struggling to meet whanau/family and cultural responsibilities and contribute to community life.

Morley (2019) argued that "social work education should be explicitly *critical* in

nature if it is to prepare practitioners to meet the universally espoused activist goals of the discipline" (p. 47). If we are to meet this aspiration as a profession, then time needs to be available for students to experience praxis: enacting their values and political orientations through social and community engagement and activism. The impact of neoliberal ideology, and the shift of costs of higher education from the state to the student have created the combination of circumstances in which activism is neither taught nor facilitated (Russell, 2017; Russell & Lessing, 2024) with downstream effects on practitioner attitudes to social justice practice (Renau et al., 2023). Morley (2019) noted that social work education "does not socialise students to be activists because from this perspective, social work has no legitimate role in advocating for social change; rather social workers seek to assist people to cope with and adapt to their particular hardships" (p. 438).

We also raise the issue of potential exploitation of students on placement. Students may experience marginalisation and powerlessness as the requirements of their study limit other facets of their life. We pose the question: Are we doing enough to challenge this and realising the potential of *kotahitanga* and *wairuatanga* which both connect to wellbeing and underpin our duty of care to our students?

Conclusion

The impacts of social work education on the participants in this study suggest that radical change is needed in our social work education system. We recommend the development of meaningful opportunities for the stakeholders—students, educators, the professional associations and the regulator (SWRB)—to discuss the implications of this research and consider how we can address the disjuncture it reports between our stated values and our students' realities. We endorse the scholarship of Gair and Baglow (2018b) who have challenged the disconnect between social work's social justice agenda and a lack of empathy or action regarding student hardship highlighting implications for curricula, universities, accrediting bodies and educators who want to facilitate social justice education. Gair and Baglow (2018b, p. 107) stated: "[u]niversity student identity in past eras has been synonymous with social activism. Equally, social work has a mandate to uphold social justice. Yet tertiary students' own growing material hardships appear to constitute an unacknowledged injustice".

We finish with a comment from Angi who finished her interview with this wry observation:

> I think in terms of creating or fostering of collective voice as social work students and social workers in general in terms of the supports that we need, I think advocating for ourselves in creating that change because [… you know] the classic line, the revolution won't be funded, right?

At the time of writing this article, research increasingly supports the call for paid placements. Leaders (see, for example, Howells, 2024) and supporters of a highly visible campaign for paid placements lodged a petition to the New Zealand Parliament with over 16,000 signatures with the aim of convincing government to assist social work, nursing and other students who face long, unpaid placements as requirements in their degrees (https://www.paidplacementsaotearoa.org/).

As a profession we need to build on this work, as it is important that educators and practitioners keep this issue alive. It is not tenable to ignore the dissonance between our embedded ethic of care and principles of social justice and these lived student realities. It is time for a review of curricula alongside supporting the campaign for

paid placements. This should not be gained by reducing or weakening what we teach.

Note: [1]Students were able to choose more than one ethnicity that they identified with.

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