

The development of a professional capabilities framework for social work in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This research brief discusses methods used to co-produce a professional capabilities framework as the final part of a larger programme of research on enhancing the professional capabilities of newly qualified social workers.

METHODS: This phase of the research programme began with a literature scan of five social work professional capability frameworks. We then used this information, along with data from earlier parts of the study, to engage a range of key stakeholders in co-production workshops using a structured, participatory, “World Café” approach.

FINDINGS: Analysis of the data from the co-production workshops identified seven core values that underpinned capable social work practice in Aotearoa. It also identified 10 core capabilities with a clear, professional practice focus that were strongly supported by workshop participants.

IMPLICATIONS: Professional capabilities frameworks can guide and inform learning experiences of social workers at all levels of practice. The data collected during this phase of the project informed further development of the 10 capabilities using a staged approach to practice development at three levels.

KEYWORDS: Professional capabilities; social work; newly qualified social workers

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Background

As in other jurisdictions, social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand operates in highly political and contested terrain (Beddoe, 2018; Nash & Munford, 2001). In recent years, criticism by public figures, including government ministers and the government-appointed Children’s Commissioner, have stimulated debate within the profession. Significant policy developments, including a substantive government review of child protection services (Ministry of Social Development, 2015), have also increased scrutiny of the

roles and capabilities of social workers and the quality of their initial education. For example, the Children’s Commissioner (Children’s Commissioner, 2015) commented that:

Child Youth and Family reports that many new graduates they employ lack the required level of knowledge of child protection, youth justice, child development, mental health, addictions and family violence. This means new social workers need to learn these skills on the job. (p. 34)

AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL
WORK 34(2), 81–89.

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However, in the absence of good quality, empirical evidence there is a risk that debates about the nature and quality of social work education rely on ill-founded, anecdotal comments by policy actors that direct social work education in ways that are less than optimal for student outcomes. In 2016, in response to these issues, the Enhancing the readiness to practice of newly qualified social workers (known as Enhance R2P) research team submitted a successful application to Ako Aotearoa for funding to carry out a three-stage project with a focus on graduate readiness to practise. The research team consisted of five academics from different social work programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand and were assisted at times by research assistants. A project advisory group was established at the beginning of the project and included members from the Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association, Tangata Whenua Voices, Oranga Tamariki, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), the Council for Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand, the National DHB Health Social Work Leaders Council, the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, Social Service Providers Aotearoa, Careerforce, and the Public Services Association. The purpose of the advisory group was to review the planning and conduct of the research project and to recommend actions to ensure that project deliverables and associated project outcomes were achieved in a manner that recognised Māori as tangata whenua and met the project's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The study

The overall aim of the Enhance R2P project was to develop an evidence-informed, industry-agreed, professional capabilities framework that could be used to inform and guide the design of learning experiences and continuing professional development opportunities for social workers both before and after the point of qualification.

This three-year project had three different phases, each of which was given ethical approval by the University of Canterbury (HEC 2016/90). Phase one (during 2016) focused on mapping the current tertiary social work curriculum using documentary analysis. The curriculum documents of 19 social work degree programmes recognised by the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) were analysed (Ballantyne, Hay, et al., 2019). Focus group discussions were also held in a sample of tertiary institutions exploring the main messages present in the curricula and perceptions of gaps in current social work education (Beddoe et al., 2018). This phase addressed the question: "What is the content of the current social work curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand and how does it relate to the ten core competencies of the SWRB?"

Phase two (during 2017) used mixed methods to explore the readiness to practise of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) as perceived by recent graduates and managers or supervisors (Ballantyne, Beddoe, Hay, Maidment, Walker & Mayhew 2019). An online survey included a sample of 119 NQSWs and 158 managers/supervisors. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 15 NQSWs who were in their first 2 years of practice and 17 managers/supervisors of NQSWs. This phase considered the question: "How well prepared are newly qualified social workers to enter professional social work practice and how is their learning being supported and enhanced in the workplace?"

This article provides a brief overview of phase three of the project which was conducted over 2018. This phase began with a literature scan on professional capability frameworks (Hay et al., 2019). We reviewed five social work competence and capability frameworks from four jurisdictions (Aotearoa New Zealand, England, the USA and Canada) and then convened five workshops with social work managers, field educators and practitioners (held in Auckland, Hawkes Bay, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin). The purpose of the workshops was to co-

produce a draft professional capabilities framework. Phase three aimed to answer the research question: “What are the professional capabilities, including cultural capabilities, we should expect of newly qualified social workers and of social workers working at beginning and experienced, levels of practice?” This research brief describes the research process utilised in phase three which involved workshops using a “World Café” approach to co-produce a professional capabilities framework.

The co-production workshops

Phase three of the Enhance R2P project was intended to engage stakeholders from the social work community in workshops for the co-production of a draft professional capabilities framework (PCF). Being realistic about the burden of time we could expect from busy professionals, we decided to organise the workshops in a structured manner. We adopted a modified “World Café” style approach to the workshops to maximise participant engagement (Fouché & Light, 2011) and, at the same time, using the data generated from the first two phases, prepared draft values, domains

and capability statements for the workshop members to consider.

The team were persuaded, by our review of previous PCFs and, in particular, the Aotearoa New Zealand family violence framework, of the value in identifying a list of principles or values that underpinned all of the professional capabilities. Therefore, in advance of the workshops and following the guidance of the Māori members of the advisory group, a list of six underpinning values expressed in te reo Māori and with English descriptions were drafted. These values included *rangatiratanga*, *manaakitanga*, and *whanaungatanga* that were already part of the SWRB’s Core Competence Standards. However, they also included *aroha* and *kotahitanga*, adapted from the family violence framework and considered by the team and advisory group to add essential social work values of compassion and solidarity. In addition, the idea of moral courage and the need for social workers to act in conditions of uncertainty was identified and described in the principle of *mātātoa* (see Figure 1 for the six draft values).

Secondly, we wanted to consult stakeholders on domains for the PCF. To facilitate this

Figure 1 Draft Social Work Values for the Enhance R2P Professional Capabilities Framework

Rangatiratanga: Social workers respect diversity and cultural difference and use our leadership to support the self-determination, autonomy and empowerment of others.

Manaakitanga: Social workers show respect, generosity and care for others. We practise empathic solidarity, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations.

Whanaungatanga: Social workers work to strengthen reciprocal relationships, connectedness and to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Aroha: Social workers are accepting and show compassion for others. We recognise our common humanity with people who use our services and hold people to account without being judgemental. We focus on people’s strengths and finding solutions.

Kotahitanga: Social workers work to build a sense of community, solidarity and collective action for social change. We challenge injustice and oppression in all of its forms including: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.

Mātātoa: Social workers have the moral courage to act in situations that are uncomfortable, challenging and uncertain. We use critical reflection and questioning to work through contradictions and complexity.

process, we agreed a list of key high-level terms (including titles in te reo Māori). In drafting the Enhance R2P domains, the team decided to identify a list of no more than 10 domains so that it did not become unwieldy. While some domains were similar to the existing SWRB core competencies, the domain on working with Māori was expressed as *Te Ao Māori* in order to capture the value of awareness of the Māori worldview. The strong practice emphasis of the American capabilities framework was also preferred and so four domains on the social work process: engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation were listed. From the outset of the project, we had determined to identify capabilities at three different levels—from newly qualified to more experienced. However, on reflection, we considered that attempting to define three different levels of capabilities for 10 different domains in a single, half-day workshop was too complex and that our focus should be on the newly qualified level. We agreed that the more advanced capabilities could be developed from the benchmark NQSW level and results distributed to participants for feedback after the workshops. These domains were presented to participants at the workshops

with summary terms for the existing Core Competence Standards as a comparator (see Figure 2 below). In addition, capability statements relevant to each domain were extracted from the five frameworks reviewed by the research team and these were also used at the workshops as described below.

Recruitment and demographics

The criterion for inviting stakeholders to the workshops was that they were considered to have a key role within their organisations in enhancing the capabilities of social workers at the point of graduation, and at more experienced and advanced levels of practice. The research team consulted with the project advisory group, asking them to use their professional networks to propose stakeholders from relevant organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand. Invitations to participate and an information sheet, which explained the purpose of the research and the focus of the workshops, were distributed by email through professional networks. Participants were informed in the information sheet that photographs would be taken at the workshops and that they could indicate on the consent/confidentiality form as to whether they wished their

Figure 2 Comparator Domains for Discussion at the Workshops

Draft Enhance R2P Domains	Existing SWRB Core Competence Standard
1. Te Ao Māori The Māori world	1. Social work with Māori
2. Kanorau Diversity	2. Different ethnic & cultural groups
3. Manatika Social Justice	3. Diversity & Difference
4. Mātanga Professionalism	4. Rights & Justice
5. Whaiwhakaaro Critical Reflection	5. Social change
6. Kaupapa Here Policy Practice	6. Knowledge, methods & models
7. Hononga Engagement	7. Critical thinking
8. Aromatawai Assessment	8. Empowerment
9. Wawaotanga Intervention	9. Legal & ethical
10. Arotakenga Evaluation	10. Professionalism

images to be used in future publications. The consent/confidentiality forms were completed at the beginning of each workshop. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the data they contributed to the process. Data from the co-production process were de-identified and stored in a password-protected site. Individual co-production process data were not available to anyone outside the research team. Between 20 and 30 participants attended each of the five hui, with 132 people taking part overall. A total of 76% of participants identified as female, 22% as male and 2% as other. As to ethnicity, 69% identified as NZ European, 18% as Māori, 6% as Pasifika and 7% as another ethnicity. Finally, in relation to their occupational role, 29% described themselves as managers, 32% as social work practitioners, 10% as field educators, and 29% gave another role definition.

Workshop programme

The programme (see Figure 3 below) consisted of a half-day meeting where participants were presented with a summary of the findings from the first two phases of the project; the content of the social work curriculum (phase one) and perceptions on the readiness to practise of newly qualified social workers (phase two). This was followed by a structured discussion of the proposed professional capabilities framework which included a series of values, domains and statements.

The workshop programme began with sessions where participants in small groups used flipcharts to discuss and comment on the draft values and the draft domains. Participants then went on to review candidate statements for the 10 draft domains. This part of the programme was conducted using the World Café format: a conversational process whereby participants move between tables for short 30-minute rounds of conversation with a different domain discussion at each table. This format fosters collaboration with all

participants able to engage in dialogue that is constructive, focused and intentional (Fouche & Light, 2011). Highlights of the discussion were captured by participants on flipcharts, and, at the end of 30 minutes, each member of the group moved to a different table and a new domain (see Figure 4 below). Because of limitations on time, each group reviewed only two domains but, between them, discussed all 10.

At the end of each workshop, the individual flipcharts, capturing participants' comments on the draft values and domains, were scanned, converted to PDF format and uploaded to the cloud, giving the team a repository of content to review. The scanned flipcharts were then sorted into those commenting on the values, the domains and the candidate statements for each of the draft domains. The content of the flipcharts was used by the research team to inform revisions to the draft values and domains, and to produce a draft professional capabilities framework.

Comments on the value statements

At each of the workshops, during plenary discussions, the team were left with the impression that, with a few caveats, the six values were strongly supported. This impression was confirmed in participants'

Figure 3 Programme for the PCF Co-production Workshops

9.00 Welcome & introductions
9.30 The Enhance R2P project aims and findings
10.00 Introduction to the World Café process
10.15 World Café groups to discuss proposed PCF values
10.45 Morning Tea
11.00 World Café groups to discuss proposed capability domains
11.30 World Café groups to discuss proposed capability statements
12.00 Plenary
12.30 Ends

Figure 4 Participants Working at the University of Auckland Workshop



comments on the flipcharts, a representative selection of which are included below:

“We really like and identify with these values.”

“These values are great; because they are uniquely NZ.”

“Feel that six values align well to social work.”

“Culturally inclusive, using te reo Māori is highly appropriate.”

Some groups suggested amendments and additions, for example, “Include kindness with Manaakitanga”, “Ahuratanga: safety, where is it?” and “Wairuatanga: self-care and knowledge of self.” Commentary was also provided on the importance of clarity for specific terms, including the depth of te reo kupu (words). For instance, one group noted that “Aroha: we use professional judgement without being judgemental.” and another, “Manaakitanga is much more than respect and generosity. We can’t ‘give’ people mana (they already have it), it’s about us recognising mana.”

Other groups commented on the ways in which the values could be used in social

work education and practice and were seen as having value as “... a way that we can show others the values of social work and are a way of educating others about social work” given their “... broad application with clients, colleagues and organisations.”

Comments on the 10 draft domains

During the workshop plenary discussions, the proposed domains also appeared to be welcomed by participants, and the four process-related domains—domains seven to 10—were particularly well-received. The comments on flipcharts supported this view and, once again, added a more detailed commentary, for example, “Very positive to include domains 7 to 10 as these are practice-based”; “Domains 7 to 10, we like this because this is what social work does” and “Having assessment as a separate capability is excellent/very important for new graduates and more experienced social workers, who do assess/analyse but don’t necessarily communicate or document this.”

Some comments suggested well-considered and wide-ranging amendments and

additions. Supervision, community development and macro practice, for example, were suggested for inclusion as specific domains. Other suggestions focused on interpersonal skills or attributes such as the ability to communicate empathy; authenticity; and managing stress with self-care strategies. Further, *oranga* or wellbeing, was recommended as an additional domain. One group noted that the Te Ao Māori domain did not acknowledge the diversity of *iwi* while another group commented that the Treaty of Waitangi should be prioritised, and the domains seen in relation to this document.

Other comments were in the form of questions, sometimes rhetorical questions, suggesting missing dimensions from the domains. This was especially so for advocacy, human rights and whether ethics were included in professionalism. In the absence of detailed domain descriptions, many of the comments above are unsurprising. They did, however, provide the team with a rich seam of informed reflections that assisted with further refinements to the 10 domains and the subsequent drafting of domain descriptions.

Comments on the capability statements for the ten draft domains

At each workshop, participants also had the opportunity to review candidate capability statements for the 10 domains. They were asked to select the most important of the statements, to rank order them (where possible) and they were informed that they could add their own statements or amend the statements on offer. Few groups added new statements, although several amended existing statements. Most attempted a rank order, although many made comments to the effect that this was difficult or impossible because all of the statements included were equally valuable. Some added that the linear format implied by rank ordering masked the relationship between statements, and others stated that this was a Western approach to

knowledge generation. Most groups added comments on flipcharts and sometimes the layout and design of the flipchart itself conveyed a particular emphasis or meaning (see, for example, the three sample flipchart commentaries in Figures 5, 6, & 7 below).

Figure 5 Flipchart Commentary on Social Justice Domain

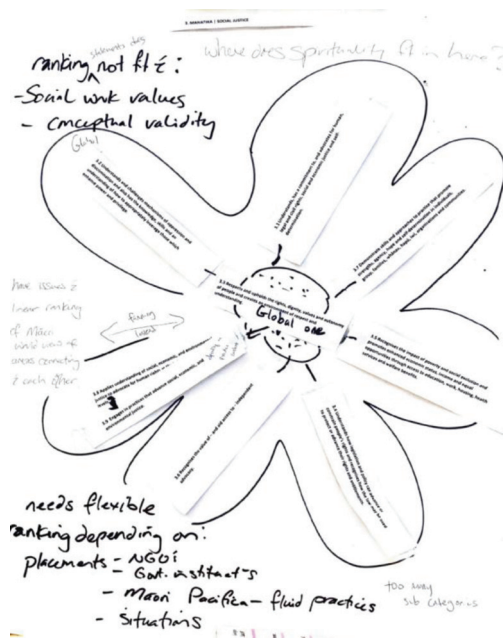


Figure 6 Flipchart commentary on critical reflection domain

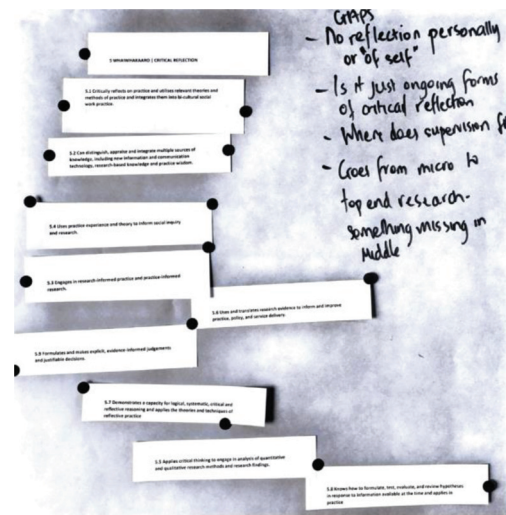
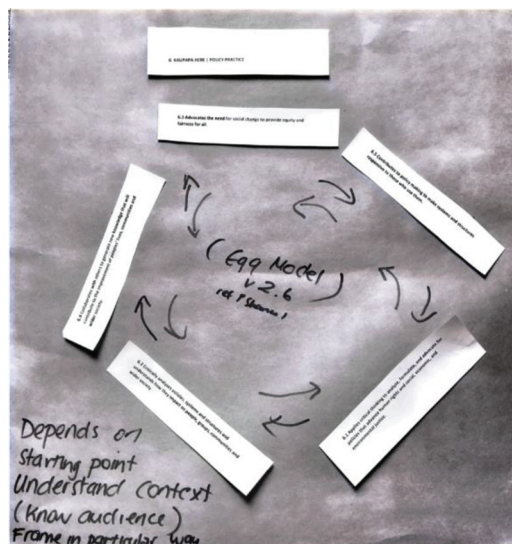


Figure 7 flipchart commentary on policy practice domain



The flipchart commentaries provided by the workshop participants, along with the literature review and five frameworks review, were used by the team to develop the final draft values statement and the professional capabilities framework. The proposed professional capabilities framework (Ballantyne, Beddoe, Hay, Maidment, Walker & Merriman, 2019.) was distributed to the workshop participants and project advisory group for comment and further revisions were made. Key stakeholder groups, including the SWRB and ANZASW, are aware of the co-produced PCF; however, a formal endorsement of the framework, perhaps after further consultation and development, is required for its maintenance and distribution.

Summary

Professional capabilities frameworks can guide and inform learning experiences of social workers at all levels of practice. They provide a staged approach to practice development that enables the assessment of a person's current capabilities as well as identification of next steps for learning and professional development. A capabilities framework offers an opportunity to move

away from a tick-box, mechanistic approach common in competency frameworks to a holistic view of professional development. The co-production of the professional capabilities framework for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand enabled the inclusion of multiple stakeholders as well as the development of values and concepts relevant to our context. In one development, unanticipated by the project team, the draft values we co-produced were requested for use by the ANZASW and were subsequently adopted for their revised *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019). This new code of ethics was commented on favourably by Banks (2021), who noted its distinctiveness and that it was "Structured in terms of values and principles, the values are based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi and include reference to qualities of character as well as behaviours and actions" (p. 122). Further, the PCF and all three of the Enhance R2P project reports were submitted for inclusion in a proposed governmental review of social work education. Finally, as a result of the recent introduction of mandatory registration, the SWRB is reviewing their educational programme requirements and the 10 core competence standards. We recommend that the SWRB considers the adoption of the capabilities framework to replace the current competence standards and work with industry stakeholders to review and develop the framework to ensure its continuing relevance. If adopted, the framework would become a significant focal point for the education of social workers and for their continuing learning and development.

Submitted 26 May 2022

Accepted 21 June 2022

Published 15 July 2022

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