

# The role, advantages and disadvantages of regulating social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## The regulation of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ)

- The Social Workers Registration Act 2003 (*Social Workers Registration Act, New Zealand Statutes. (2003).*) set up a Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) to regulate social workers and to recognise social work education programmes. The Board has a total of 10 members; six social workers and four non social workers, appointed by a government Minister. Nominations are invited from the social work sector, including CSWEANZ.
- Social worker registration is still optional although major employers support having registered staff. There are over 4,700 registered social workers in ANZ with about an estimated 2,000 social workers who are not registered but could meet the requirements (Social Workers Registration Board, 2014a, p. 3).
- Social work registration in ANZ, as has happened elsewhere, has had a range of drivers including the fall out on social workers from the public outcry over child abuse scandals where social workers amongst other groups are deemed to have failed (Beddoe, 2014, p. 18).

## Social work education programme approval by the SWRB

- The Board negotiates with a social work education provider for a panel to visit over a two day period. Evidence is submitted by the provider beforehand, then assessed at the visit against a set of SWRB programme standards (Social Workers Registration Board, 2014b) based on: social work definition, code of ethics, competencies, graduate profile; programme expectations – governance, curriculum, student centredness, professional and stakeholder collaboration, resources, and quality assurance.
- In 2013 the Board changed the required undergraduate degree length from three to four years, continuing with a two year masters option. Programme recognition is reviewed every five years.

## Social work education context in ANZ

- There are 19 providers covering: 11 polytechnics, 5 universities, 2 wananga – indigenous providers, 1 private. Producing over 500 graduates annually (Social Workers Registration Board, 2013, p. 6).
- The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) is the professional body affiliated to IFSW; it began in 1964.
- The Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association was affiliated to IFSW in 2014 as an indigenous partner with ANZASW representing ANZ, having developed as a membership organisation over the past several years (Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association, n.d.).

There has been a strengthening of indigenous social work over the past 30 years, along with developments by the profession to honour the Treaty of Waitangi 1840 and ensure rights for indigenous people (Staniforth & Noble, 2014).

- A current Ministerial initiative for the social work sector is reviewing graduate preparedness and support of new practitioners in employment.

#### Council for Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand (CSWEANZ)

- All 19 providers are active members of CSWEANZ, all are members of IASSW and APASWE.
- It began in 1996, it was earlier called ANZASWE.

#### Social work as a contested profession

- Social work is a contested profession strongly influenced by neoliberalism. This is reflected in the context of social work education and also within social work regulation (Beddoe, 2014, p. 17).

#### Advantages of the regulation of social work education

- Registration allowed for the delineation of a benchmark for social work education and thus strengthens the case for education. Clear standards for social work education programmes and the process for recognition is backed by legislation. Standards are based on core social work policies, including competence to work with Tangata Whenua people. A relatively flexible approach to the operationalising of programme recognition policy by schools allows for a critically reflective style of education. The standards require that social work registered staff make up the bulk of the faculty, and that staff are active in research and have advanced qualifications (Beddoe, 2014).
- Allows ANZASW and CSWEANZ to be independent, to focus on the wider profession and for ANZASW to not also be operating a regulatory style function. Clarifies roles in social work sector, opportunity to collaborate.

#### General advantages of social work registration

- An affirmation of public safety with clear public accountability via a complaints process, sits alongside the goal of professional legitimacy (Beddoe, 2014, p. 18).
- The Board is made up of a majority of registered social workers ensuring a predominantly profession influenced Board.
- ANZASW found a largely positive role post registration as the provider of a competency assessment programme that was incorporated into the application process for social worker registration (O'Donoghue, 2013, p. 61).
- Regulation provides leverage for the wider profession with government, education providers and employers, to have a well-educated workforce, ongoing professional development, and promotion of the profession. History of partially qualified social workers and varying accountability (Social Workers Registration Board, 2014a).
- Strengthens the position of social work in the health and other sectors where social workers practice alongside other regulated professions.

## Disadvantages of the regulation of social work education

- CSWEANZ recognised the tensions inherent in the SWRB having sole authority for programme recognition. When the SWR Act was being considered, CSWEANZ argued against the SWRB having sole authority for the recognition of social work programmes and that it was better to keep social worker registration and programme recognition separate (Rennie, 2013, p. 5).
- Further to this concern was the risk of the influence of political neoliberalism via the Board on programme recognition as a Trojan Horse that blunts the critical edge and academic independence of social work education (Van Heugten, 2011, p. 175).
- This includes questioning how the Board's programme recognition process strengthens or constrains the core social work obligation to pursue social justice (O'Brien, 2013).
- The move from a three to a four year undergraduate degree for all providers was argued against by three year degree providers on grounds of inequity for students and a lack of focus on support in initial employment and post qualifying education (Rennie, 2013, pp. 8-9).
- ANZASW developed its own programme recognition system via a Course Approval Board and undertook visits to three providers but efforts to have a joint approach with the SWRB did not eventuate (McNabb, 2014, pp. 66-67).
- The Minister over sighting the SWRB made unfounded accusations about the quality of graduates of social work education in 2013 which were of major concern to educators (Beddoe, 2014, p. 24).

## General disadvantages of social work registration

- Social work registration has not become mandatory though the sector wants this. Implications also include a relatively high cost for social workers which would be reduced if all eligible social workers were registered (Social Workers Registration Board, 2014a).
- ANZASW has been destabilised post registration and has struggled to find its place alongside the relatively powerful Board that has legislated powers (O'Donoghue, 2013).
- The emphasis within registration is on individual practitioner competence and not on collective action that groups such as a professional body can lead. Given that the ANZASW is now the weaker party, key social injustices such as poverty are at risk of further neglect which in turn leaves neoliberalism and managerialism unchallenged (O'Brien, 2013, p. 57).
- SWRB has a powerful position in the social work sector as a legislated body which generates its own funds. It was criticised early on for only engaging in limited consultation (Pitt, 2005, p. 41).
- The Minister for SWR can have negative influence through Board appointments, policy affecting social work, and negative public statements. This highlights the state vs profession power imbalance.

## The Future

- The social work sector wants mandatory regulation to complete this phase of professionalisation but requires Ministerial agreement. A new Minister has yet to express a view on this (Social Workers Registration Board, 2014a, p. 3).
- Awaiting further Ministerial support for the next step for a sector wide group investigating social work student preparation and graduate support, including better resourcing for

student fieldwork and post qualifying development (Social Workers Registration Board, 2014a, p. 5).

- We require stronger collaboration between key parties in the social work sector and better general resourcing for social work in ANZ to flourish. Post qualifying education should be strengthened along with new practitioner programmes. We need effective social work workforce and research strategies. Perhaps this would be aided by an England style national social work review? (McNabb, 2014, p. 69).
- We need better evaluation of social work education and the student experience (Beddoe, 2014, p. 26).
- The pursuit of social justice should more clearly define our profession along with a strong public voice (O'Brien, 2013).
- We should continue to build a stronger profession aligned with Tangata Whenua rights and interests (McNabb, 2014, p. 69).

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