

Transitioning the curriculum: the development of four year social work degrees in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Background to the research

- In Aotearoa New Zealand, social work education has evolved from a mosaic of programmes of varying length.
- Seventeen schools offer qualifying programmes, some on multiple sites.
- The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) determined that from 2017, all undergraduate programmes should be taught over four years. This mandate required nine polytechnic and wānanga programmes to transition from three to four year models.
- The first of the new four year programmes held their recognition processes in late 2014; the last in 2016. The first of the new degrees commenced in 2015; the last, this year.
- All undergraduate programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand are now of equal, four year duration.



The Research

- A small scale qualitative research project was designed to capture a snapshot of current social work identity in Aotearoa New Zealand, through the perspectives of the academic social workers involved in the design of the new degrees.
- Focus groups and interviews with social work staff from seven institutions out of the nine possible programmes. Interviews followed their programmes' recognition and approval processes of the SWRB and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA).
- All of these Schools represent polytechnic or Wānanga perspectives on social work education: universities and some polytechnics and wānanga already had four year degrees...
- One institution decided not to take part in the research; we are still following an ethics application process with one other institution – so what this presentation covers is somewhat tentative and covers only some aspects of the project.

Social Work education in Aotearoa New Zealand is regulated by a Crown entity (SWRB)

- A brief history of regulation... the Social Workers Registration Act came into effect in 2004 and took over the approval function of programme recognition from the professional body, ANZASW.
- Currently, programme recognition is awarded by the SWRB; programme approval and accreditation (the ability of an institution to deliver a programme) is via CUAP for universities or NZQA for polytechnics, PTEs and wānanga.
- Renewal of programme recognition is achieved through measurement against the Programme Standards of the SWRB.

The relationship between social work and the State

- The SWRB is a Crown entity that answers to the Minister of Social Development.
- Only about a third of social workers are employed directly by MSD within child protection and youth justice services of the Ministry for Vulnerable Children / Oranga Tamariki.
- The previous Minister, Paula Bennett, signalled in 2013 that she was sceptical of the ability of social work education to deliver what the government needed.
- There have been recent discussions at SWRB and MSD level to define the scope of social work practice.

The definition of social work and the content of social work education programmes is very much under the government spotlight

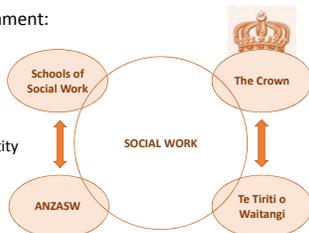
Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand: te Tiriti, regulation, programme recognition and the Crown

Pre-2004 and the regulation environment:

Social workers could be located within State agencies, or in settings which had a Treaty relationship with the Crown

Programme recognition and social work identity rested outside of the Crown, within the professional association and education

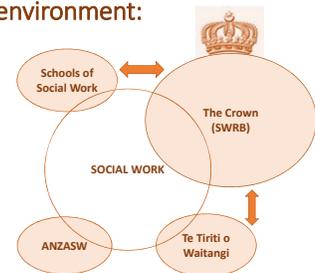
ANZASW accredited social work education programmes



Post-2004: a regulatory (but not-yet-mandatory) environment:

Responsibility for programme recognition is with SWRB (a Crown entity) and so rests within the State

Only the SWRB recognises social work programme: ANZASW no longer has a role in programme recognition



(Very) broad findings so far

- Each of the Schools of Social Work involved in this study has developed its curriculum according to unique configurations of research knowledge, cultural relationships and regional characteristics.
- Their reflections on pedagogy and curriculum design are invaluable and will be addressed in other presentations/publications.
- Focus in this presentation on the 'dominant discourses' of local/global, bicultural/indigenisation v. standardisation of curriculum,
- Tensions between State and employer expectations of technical and professional competency on one hand, and the development of critically reflective practice emphasising (for example) bicultural competency, human rights, social justice and social change on the other hand, reflect broader questions about the role and identity of social work in our current political environment.

1. The relationship between the Crown and the self-determination of programmes

Several focus groups talked about the mandate for change from the SWRB and their response to this: *...in terms of curriculum design, you are very constrained by the Social Workers Registration Board. They designed the curriculum, we put a flavour on it, but really they predetermine what needs to be in it in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudinal beliefs stuff.*

Sometimes with reluctance: *We had probably positioned ourselves as a school as fighting against it*

- *Let's be honest, the most important thing was to get it through so that was what the Social Workers Registration Board were demanding. That is your start point because if you don't have that you don't get it passed.*

- *So some people in the department still wanted to go back and argue about it.*

And often with acknowledgement of new opportunities: *it's like right, get into groups [...] so like social work, community development, a passion that you are really passionate about, get your paper out and look at your course with new eyes, even if it already exists and think about 'in an ideal world what would our degree look like?' [...] it just really did open the door for quite a creative process [...] and it really worked and once people could see that it was actually easy to get people on board with the change.*

And sometimes there was identification of active resistance to a perceived imposition of content:

That's a crafting exercise in learning to write learning outcomes and indicative context so that [...] it is sort of disguised - some things that you have to be able to embed radical transformative principles inside what may look safe outcomes in indicative content, or reflect the words that the Registration Board want to hear. And I think that is what we spent most time doing so that we had a right to develop the teaching and learning materials that deliver what the team and the community are demanding, but doesn't frighten the Registration Board.

2. The balance between the global and the local:

The importance of retaining a local perspective: *it needs to be in relation to your community. I remember that is one thing we talked about [was that] we didn't want to lose those things about our different communities that made it our community [...] they need to know the history for [the region], they need to know [...] those iwi and those hapu that are part of that community, because it would be wrong to be teaching one generic thing. It needs to be specific to where they are without excluding the rest of the world ...*

- *we kept trying to think about indigenisation, about keeping in mind the students and the [...] community. Because these women or these people are [...] not going to work in Auckland or whatever. They are going to stay in their local community.*
- *[in that other course] the demographic didn't suit our demographic here. It was designed for white middle class Pakeha women.*
- *it has to be because it was one of the things that was raised when it went through to the panel was that we needed to stop thinking that it is a [regional] degree. It is an international degree.*
- *It leads very much to our tino rangatiratanga too as a programme. This is what we wanted, this is what our people that we work with wanted, and we could also match every other requirement that was needed to put it up against an international standards and an international degree as well.*

3. Standards and values

Providers developed programmes out of the values they held rather than directly out of the SWRB standards: *[consultation] had really clearly told me [...] it was really important that inequality and advocacy and the Treaty sat in the centre.*

- *Like what the panel were really trying to get to in terms about what is our pedagogy for how we teach and really basically we kept trying to say, we start where the students are and we take into account who our students are and that informs everything from that point, you know, we don't predetermine that.*
- *This time was the first time I think we actually said, 'no it happens this way. You can still have your process, but when you come to [institution] then this is how it happens'.*
- *I said the social work is everywhere, you put the lens on any kind of relationship and look at notions of empowerment, anti-discriminatory practices and things like that.*
- *[The programme recognition standards] were there printed out and absolutely we needed to be following those, really obviously.*



4. Bicultural content or a bicultural degree?

- **Discussions about how to culturally position the new degree:** *[I said] 'are you wanting a bicultural degree or [...]?' What she was saying is 'no, we want to strengthen our bicultural content' and I said 'well, that's great, because as soon as you say you are going to develop a bicultural degree then basically you have to flip everything you've done on its head and it hasn't started the way, [...] it's too late in the piece for that'.*
- **For some, te Ao Maori or Pasifika perspectives shaped the entire degree:** *So, equity for Maori and Pasifika, there's got to be an understanding that this is a western and very white modality on which education is actually run, and so therefore people coming in from that arena are going to be marginalised. So it is being aware of that and a lot of our stuff is about being reflective and being aware of things that are happening to a whanau that are coming in.*
- **We identified our core foundations for it, for how we see ourselves in the world around really about based on the Treaty. Whakapapa, that everything and anything has a whakapapa to it but also whakapapa means that there is a relationship that the individual brings and comes with. So whakapapa is core and we kept that and then we are layering of how we articulate whakapapa and how experience is taught in each of the years. The other one is rangatiratanga. So as social workers we make decisions everyday over ourselves and others, but also social workers our role is to enable others to make decisions over themselves.**

How might this contribute to current discourses about social work in Aotearoa New Zealand?

- It has identified awareness of both tensions and resistance strategies that educators seek to negotiate in the context of social work programme regulation and broader political agendas
- It serves to illustrate the ongoing tensions within social work's commitment to bi-culturalism but also offers examples of positive self-determination in curriculum design and community engagement
- It underscores a social work educational commitment to connect with local communities' perspectives of need, and to develop pedagogies and content that are accessible and relevant to whanau
- It can raise questions about current governmental intentions to define social work, and potentially, future government intentions for social work education.

I find that after predominantly four year degrees in tertiary organisations, there are questions that need to be asked about the capability of people that are coming out from them. And that is not a reflection, of course, on any of them as individuals because more often than not they shine above the training that they have been given through those institutions. But four years is a huge government investment and more importantly a huge personal and family investment for those who have gone to train.



Paula Bennett, previous Minister of Social Development, Nov. 2013

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