
Registration and continuing education for social work in New Zealand - what about the workers?

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Abstract

Registration of social workers in New Zealand raises issues of cost, benefit and access to opportunities for continuing professional education (CPE) and poses challenges to the profession. The registration environment requires individuals to be responsible for maintaining adequate levels of professional development. While there is considerable diversity of social work practices and contexts internationally there is a common challenge to retain balance between the corporate goals of employing organisations, the aspirations of education and development providers and the individual needs and aspirations of social workers. Beddoe and Henrickson (2003, 2005) surveyed professional association members in New Zealand. Results indicated that the majority of social workers surveyed had a strong interest in CPE despite considerable barriers. CPE represents a large investment for all stakeholders and is not well served by ad hoc approaches to selecting courses. This article provides a brief overview of continuing education for social workers in New Zealand and offers guidelines for the selection of professional development opportunities.

Introduction

A number of countries around the world have moved to professionalise and increase the regulation of social work. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Parliament passed the Social Workers Registration Act in April, 2003. This Act established a Board empowered to establish the standards for registering social workers. The Social Workers Registration Act (2003) requires social workers to hold a recognised social work qualification, demonstrate competence and have sufficient practical experience. The competency test, which is subject to five-yearly review, includes specific competencies to work with Maori and other cultural and ethnic groups. The Annual Practising Certificate requires registered social workers to demonstrate sufficient CPE and evidence of regular professional supervision. For non-registered social workers the status quo applies and is likely to be related to employing agency requirements. Many non-registered social workers will, however, be members of the voluntary professional body, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). Registration has raised the membership of ANZASW, as all registered social workers require a competency assessment and the ANZASW is one of the two approved providers of such assessments at the time of writing. The professional association has at July 2006 recorded

2998 members (ANZASW, 2006: 13). In June 2003 membership was only 1,834, so there has been significant growth.

The 2001 census reported that there were just over 10,000 social workers in New Zealand and that the social work occupational category had grown by 25% (Harington and Crothers, 2005: 5). It is likely that the number of social workers engaged in formal 'professional' social work practice is lower than the census figure, as the social work occupational category is broad, relies on self-reporting and may be overstated (Harington and Crothers, 2005: 4), and additional categories exist for probation officers and case workers. Only 19% of those in the social work category also reported having qualifications, while 53% held some post school qualifications, though as Harington and Crothers point out:

...this data does not elaborate on the nature of the educational qualifications that have been achieved [they] may not be in social work, and there could have been a great deal of water under the learning curve bridges masked in these figures (Harington and Crothers, 2005: 8).

There were only moderate levels of recognised qualifications held by New Zealand social workers according to the 2001 census information (Harington and Crothers, 2005). Currently, however, there is a rising expectation that social workers do hold formal social work qualifications and, therefore, it is not surprising that many social workers identify current study towards such a recognised social work qualification as their main source of continuing education and development. In a survey of CPE amongst ANZASW members, almost 12 percent of respondents were undertaking study toward a formal social work qualification in 2002 (Beddoe and Henrickson, 2003). The impact of the degree benchmark set by the Social Workers Registration Board in 2004 is likely to have greatly increased that number, but information is not available at the time of writing.

A brief overview of the literature on continuing education

The literature which addresses continuing education issues for the social work profession has been relatively sparse, with even less information in New Zealand, other than several articles intended to raise awareness of the issues (Asher, 1984; Beddoe 1999, 2003a; 2003b). In Australia, McMichael studied the links between professional identity and continuing education amongst social workers in health settings (McMichael, 2000). In the United Kingdom, Mitchell evaluated the impact of a 'Post Qualifying Award for Social Workers' on social workers' practice (Mitchell, 2001). This study found that the organisational culture of the social workers' agencies exerted positive and negative influences on the individual's experience. Mitchell found that tensions arose around the 'ownership' of academic study in some settings where managers acted as gatekeepers putting constraints around what would be supported (Mitchell, 2001: 439).

More recently, there has been a proliferation of material on the development of learning cultures in social work (see for example Gould and Baldwin, 2004, for some useful contributions). In this material there is a strong recognition of the importance of the organisational environment. As an occupational group that generally operates within bureaucratic environments, social work is clearly affected by many (and sometimes competing) forces that impact on the profession in its organisational context. Continuing education and professional development are, as a consequence, tied inextricably into the issues of professional status,

power and management control of resources within these contexts. Tobias has suggested that there are close links between the 'professionalising project' or 'journey' for each profession and the educational processes which have accompanied that journey, including continuing education, (Tobias, 2003: 449-454). As such, CPE can be rife with tensions and contradictions; emancipatory or status driven. This is clearly the case in New Zealand, where little interest has been shown in CPE as a field of inquiry, neither by the professional association nor academics, prior to the advent of professional registration. As the social work workforce in New Zealand moves towards greater homogeneity in the possession of entry qualifications, holding a recognised qualification may have less value in differentiating an individual social worker from their peers.

As the workforce reaches this stage CPE may become a more active feature of New Zealand social work, in which individuals do more than participate to meet compliance requirements. Individuals may value continued engagement with formal and informal education in order to 'get ahead'. This can be observed to some extent now where social workers are paying their own fees to upgrade their qualification to a degree, despite holding a recognised diploma qualification. Their motivation to 'upgrade' is presumably because the belief that holding the new benchmark level qualification will benefit them in the job market. Holding at least the benchmark qualification, if not a higher degree, raises their status and competitive edge in the market. Tovey expresses this link to status clearly in this passage:

...professions and professionals are socially constructed statuses; and that education plays a key role in achieving and securing that status and marking off lines of differentiation from non-professionals. Also, professionals are able to exert influence...over others; the content of expert knowledge evolves and is modifiable (Tovey, 1994: 8).

Educational qualifications may help to mark out status within the profession, and in line with the trend towards credentialism, we can expect to see greater numbers looking at postgraduate education. In the current era social work is not dissimilar to other professions – it is subject to the impact of globalisation: shortages or gluts of particular kinds of professionals; international markets for education and professional skills and increasing specialisation within broad occupational categories (Jarvis, 1996). New Zealand social work is not immune to these trends. Internationalisation becomes a demand, as increasingly New Zealand graduates are actively sought after for employment overseas. In seeking continuing education opportunities some will consider the institutional 'brand' of their qualification and its acceptability in an international environment.

Different approaches to CPE in the international context may be generally classified in the following ways:

- 1) A compulsory CPE system directly tied to competency or registration;
- 2) Mandated CPE, implemented by a professional association on behalf of a registration body, and, therefore, not applying to non-members;
- 3) A 'laissez-faire' approach, where professional development is left to decisions by the individual worker and their employing organisation;
- 4) Advanced practitioner awards or qualifications issued nationally on achievement, but delivered by approved providers to practising social workers via normal tertiary education funding mechanisms; and lastly,
- 5) Post-qualifying awards or formal induction schemes that target beginning practitioners

through the provision of specialist knowledge and mentoring (Beddoe and Henrickson, 2005: 75).

For purposes of comparison, interested readers can go to the websites of professional associations in Australia, the United States and Ireland for further information on their policies and guidelines for CPE. (See the Australian Association of Social Workers, 2006; the Irish Association of Social Workers, 2005; and the National Association of Social Workers, 2002 for website links).

It is difficult to consider the types of CPE in social work without noting the organisational environment, and the extent to which the individual and the organisation they work for generate, contribute to and maintain activities. Table 1, Modes and focus of continuing education, sets out five broad categories of educational focus for continuing education. The compliance mode includes such things as induction training for new graduates, or those new to a specialist field of practice; service development; training workers in a new method or approach; and genuine compliance training-health and safety, cultural safety, family violence and other screening tools and so forth. *Performance* may also include service development, because an organisation may take on a new approach or use new technologies to solve problems or reduce risk.

Table one. Modes and focus of continuing education.

Modes of CPE	Focus of CPE	Outcomes
Compliance (organisation generated) Nowlen (1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning to perform specific new tasks • learning to implement policy change in practice 	Adaptation and accommodation
Performance (organisation generated) Nowlen (1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning to solve problems defined within work context • applying new information /procedures 	
Knowledge updates (organisation generated) Nowlen (1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning about research evidence for new practice • learning about new theoretical developments 	Knowledge consumption
Reflective/reflexive practice (Organisation can generate and support but requires worker commitment and input) Fook (1996, 2003, 2004) Schon (1983) Redmond (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using new information to review and change practice • synthesising and utilising research findings • learning to be a reflective practitioner • learning to deconstruct and reconstruct expertise • learning to be a practice researcher • learning to utilise action research to solve problems or enhance practice 	Innovation, challenge and change
Research/ scholarship (Organisation can support but requires considerable worker investment and commitment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conducting effective research • learning to theorise from analysis of research data • dissemination of findings and ideas • direct or indirect application of new knowledge to practice 	New knowledge, Theory building

Compliance and performance modes are organisationally generated and generally applied to all staff in categories. These modes usually represent the organisation's minimum expectations of staff development. Inherent in these forms is the assumption that there is an irrefutable, constantly improving knowledge underpinning professional expertise. Within the organisational contexts of social work, it is the organisation that determines what knowledge is to be utilised by the practitioner, thus the organisation is the body that offers up 'the mantle of unconditional expert' (Redmond, 2004: 144) rather than the profession itself. The organisation, in the form of a service unit responsible for training, decides what knowledge is to be offered to social workers, packages it and delivers it.

Induction training and much of the training often categorised as service development, is generally delivered 'in-house', and it is often described in the jargon of the managerialist era. It is 'rolled out' via 'roadshows' as features of mechanisms designed to deliver new policy initiatives from the corporate heart to the various sites and domains of the organisation. If the policy environment is volatile and change is constant, then 'training' needs to be able to deliver a rapid response. Eraut points to the use of training as part of change management strategies within corporate environments in health and social care:

Changes preceded by an artillery barrage to soften people up, and accompanied by minimal or misdirected support for learning, just make practitioners more resistant the next time they are challenged (Eraut, 2002: 64).

In the author's own experience social workers are very critical of attempts to dress policy change up as training. An increasingly tertiary-qualified workforce does 'know the difference'. An Australian study found that policy documents in corporate child protection organisations in Australia revealed strong links between the popularity of the idealised 'learning organisation' and the implementation of neo-liberal reforms in the public sector (Reich, 2002). This is compliance training, rather than the provision of continuing education. An example from an agency policy document, quoted by Reich illustrates this argument:

Training, education and development is aligned with strategic and workforce planning to ensure individuals and work units proactively respond to a changing work environment (anonymous document, cited in Reich, 2002: 225).

As a consequence there may be cynicism about in-house training amongst professional social workers, unless it can be seen to solve real problems and provide some individual sense of achievement and mastery. An over-reliance on slick delivery of pre-packaged material, however well done, may risk rejection as corporate puffery, bereft of any critical or intellectual engagement, by an increasingly well educated workforce. It is often at this compliance level that, unfortunately, most investment in training occurs in the social services. In in-house training there is often inadequate time to practise new skills, discuss and explore new information and little opportunity for critical reflection (Fook, 2004; Frost, 2001; Postle, Edwards, Moon, Rumsey and Thomas, 2002).

Beyond these rather utilitarian approaches, is a form of continuing education that is more focused – the update of practice and policy knowledge through research utilisation or the application of new theoretical understandings to practice. *Knowledge updates* may be organisationally generated or may include some individual investment.

In the next mode of CPE, *Reflective/reflexive practice*, the organisation can support continuing education, but strong engagement to completion may require worker (and manager) commitment and input (Fook, 2004). A conceptualisation of continuing education that is one of professional renewal encourages reflexivity, change, innovation and indeed transformation:

Education ... concerns the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state. Whereas training aims to create an inbound trajectory targeted at competence in a specific practice, education must strive to open new dimensions for the negotiation of the self ... Education is not merely formative – it is transformative (Wenger, 1998: 263).

Reflective practice and its activist cousin, reflexive practice, are popular notions in the social work literature, though often requiring much deeper consideration than allowed for in this paper (see for example Redmond, 2004 ; Lynch, 2006). To be more than ‘navel gazing’, reflective approaches need to be change oriented and put all practices up for close scrutiny. Truly transformative learning requires, at the very least, that learners are supported to take off their expert mantle, admit that they often struggle to find answers to the really hard questions in practice and look for partnerships with service users and others. As Redmond’s reflective practice research demonstrates, practitioners often find it immensely liberating to be relieved of the responsibility of always being right and, as a consequence, their relationships with service users and the outcomes of intervention improve (Redmond, 2004: 144-6).

Finally, the mode of *research/scholarship* is much more likely to rely on the individual, (and a supportive manager), as to undertake research within a practice setting requires a huge personal investment of time and money. Few social work employers, for example, would currently find the resources to support a practitioner to undertake a PhD. And yet without this kind of support, social work will remain a poorly-resourced profession in terms of growing our own knowledge base.

Whether partially funded or not, it seems that the time burden of taking on further education opportunities falls squarely on the shoulders on individual participants (Youll and Walker, 1995). Social workers struggle to find the time and space to read and reflect. In the current environment practitioners carry quite a heavy burden of compliance activity - preparing for appraisals, participation in accreditation activities, production of internal and external competence portfolios, preparing an application for registration and so forth. Formal education with significant assessment is often experienced as too onerous.

Continuing education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Despite the constraints and concerns described above, a survey of professional social workers conducted in 2003 found there was a strong uptake of CPE amongst members of the ANZASW (Beddoe and Henrickson 2003, 2005).

Beddoe and Henrickson reported 88.7% of respondents reported doing some CPE in 2002 and 65.3% of respondents reported doing some CPE in 2003, mostly in courses related to their field of practice. An encouraging 97.4% of respondents reported they would like to undertake some CPE in the future. Barriers were not a major issue though, when mentioned, time, cost, geographic location, opportunities and management support were the factors cited.

The 2003 survey supported a number of recommendations (Beddoe and Henrickson, 2003: 32-9). Among these is the suggestion that professional bodies should continue to support the existing ethic of CPE for social workers at all stages of their careers and provide specific encouragement to non-tertiary qualified and certificated social workers to upskill themselves to attain formal social work qualifications. Professional groups were also advised to ensure that professional standards of culturally appropriate continuing education in New Zealand are created including the provision of opportunities to undertake specialist training in fields of practice.

The authors advocated not only paid time off for CPE and financial support, but also workload relief for employees attending training courses or undertaking formal study. This can be viewed as employer support for the growth of the profession, rather than only meeting agency requirements. It was suggested that employers who held a:

...strong sense of social work identity and who embrace a learning culture often recognise that by supporting their employees to gain further qualifications they may speed up their departure from the organisation, but are able to see this, not as a loss, but as a broader contribution to the profession and the community (Beddoe and Henrickson 2003: 24).

In a similar vein the authors suggested that professional bodies work closely with schools of social work and employers to ensure that social work education is accessible and responsive to the demonstrated needs of practitioners. CPE also creates a strong pressure on training providers to respond to the call for a greater range of professional development opportunities for qualified social workers. McMichael identified that the status accorded CPE by the schools of social work seemed to be growing following the implementation of the Australian Association of Social Workers CPE policy (McMichael, 2000). It is expected that strengthening CPE requirements is likely to lead to greater opportunities for schools of social work to capitalise on the new demand for ongoing professional education. In addition there will inevitably be considerable expectation that schools of social work take a major role in preparing graduates for a career-long commitment to CPE.

At the time of writing, ANZASW has a draft Continuing Professional Development (CPD) policy out for discussion (ANZASW, 2006: 13-14). The association has aligned its policy closely to the Social Workers Registration Board policy, adopting 150 hours CPD over three years as a guideline for minimum expectations and utilising the Board's description of types of CPE activities.

Making effective continuing education choices

Social workers have limited purchasing power when it comes to making choices in their further development. While employers clearly have a responsibility for providing some support, there is some validity to the argument that continuing education is also a *private good*. We don't generally stay with one employer for life and it seems likely that as the workforce becomes better qualified and more able to sustain specialisations, social workers will actively seek opportunities to expand their repertoire. Allowing, then, for the limitation of resources, how can the practitioner (and their supportive manager or professional advisor) ensure that they make good choices when selecting professional development opportunities?

There are probably three main perspectives from which to assess what is on offer: personal interest and career goals; alignment with agency and professional goals and resources; and lastly the characteristics of effective learning opportunities.

Tables 2 and 3 set out some very practical guidelines that may assist in making these choices. These sections have benefited from input from several colleagues (see acknowledgements). In addition, two professional associations, NASW (USA) and AASW (Australia), have some excellent sets of guidelines which have been drawn on in the development of this set for New Zealand social workers (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2006; National Association of Social Workers, 2002).

Table two. Guidelines to assist decision making – questions for practitioners.

- Does the workshop/course or programme align with your professional development and career goals?
 - Will it assist you to reflect and challenge you to change your practice? Does it fit the goals of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand?
 - Can you get feedback from others about the effectiveness of the programme?
 - Does the focus of the course inspire you to learn?
 - Is it aligned with your agency's focus and goals?
 - If not, what will you need to do to gain support to participate?
 - Does the proposed event seem to meet the level of learning for you? Is it going to stretch and challenge you?
 - Will you need to 'brush up' your learning skills? Does it suit your learning style?
 - Will you need any resources e.g. a computer, broadband access, work space at home, books?
 - Will the commitment of time be manageable given your professional and personal commitments?
 - Will your employing agency support your request for time off for classes and study time, if required?
 - Will your employing agency assist you with costs?
 - If you have to pay your own fees are you able to apply for a student loan or any scholarships/study awards?
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Table three. Questions to ask providers of continuing education activities.

Checking for attributes of providers (institutions)

- Does the provider have accreditation with a professional body?
- Does the provider participate in some external approval and accreditation for its major programmes in the field of study/practice?
- Does the provider's website or brochure contain information about the institution or organisation's mission statement, goals and values?
- If so, are these goals and values congruent with those of the social work profession?
- Does the provider give any indication of how it will meet the needs of Maori?
- Does the provider give any indication of how it will meet the needs of other cultural groups?
- Does the provider give any indication of how it will meet the needs of learners with special needs?
- Does the provider indicate what resources and services are available to support learning?

Checking for attributes of providers (individual educators/ trainers)

- Do the educators/trainers advise their relevant qualifications?
- Are these qualifications relevant and of a sufficient level to ensure sound teaching and learning, including content knowledge?
- Do the educators/trainers hold membership of a relevant professional association or professional registration?

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- Do the educators/trainers advise their relevant experience in practice and teaching in the field of learning?
 - Do the educators/trainers have peer-reviewed publications relevant to the field of instruction?

Checking for attributes of short courses/workshops

- Does the event meet the CPE/CPD definitions in ANZASW or SWRB policies?
- Does the training event have a clear description of content, purpose and goals or objectives?
- Does the event require more than just your attendance (e.g. reading matter for before or after, activities before or after, feedback processes to the participants)?
- Does the brochure describe the mode of learning clearly?
- Is a brief profile of trainer qualifications/affiliations/experience available even for very short events?

Checking for attributes of formal programmes

- Does the programme meet the CPE/CPD definitions in ANZASW or SWRB policies?
- Is the programme post-qualifying?
- Is an entry level qualification in social work a minimum? Does it require you to hold a degree?
- Does the programme have clear requirements for entry?
- Does the programme have clear requirements for selection?
- Is the programme accredited or approved by a relevant professional body (especially important for overseas distance programmes)?

Managers, professional advisors and clinical supervisors may also be seeking some guidance in working out what to support. In informal discussions those in such positions commonly remark along the lines: 'There is so much to choose from but is it any good?', 'How will I know that the outcome of my staff member taking this course will mean more than a reward for staying the distance?', 'Postgraduate education is expensive – what should I say to the manager about the potential return on investment?' Here again, there are three perspectives to be considered: the personal interest, motivation, capability and capacity and career goals of staff members; alignment with agency and team goals and funding levels of professional development; and lastly the quality and reputation of the learning opportunities. Table 4 contains a set of characteristics of excellent learning opportunities, both short term and formal awards. They are not intended to be prescriptive, but to provide social workers, their managers and professional leaders a starting point from which to make good choices.

Table four. The characteristics of excellent short learning events and formal courses of study.

Characteristics of excellent short learning events

- The workshop/course provides clear objectives given the duration.
- The workshop/course provides a clear outcome statement of any skills to be acquired.
- The workshop/course demonstrates congruence between topics, goals, and the profile of the trainers.
- The workshop/course provides a clear statement about costs and method of payment.

Characteristics of excellent formal courses of study

- The programme provides a clear statement of graduate outcomes.
- The programme provides a clear indication of points/credits.
- The programme provides a clear indication of duration and time limits.
- The programme provides a clear statement of programme entry requirements and level of study.
- The programme explains which components are core and compulsory and what options are available.

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- The programme provides a clear statement of assessment requirement, including any live, video or research components.
 - The programme provides a logical and transparent mechanism for progression to a higher level qualification if available, including any courses mandatory for progression e.g. a research methods course.
 - The programme identifies ways in which it promotes personal professional appraisal of current knowledge and skills.
 - The programme identifies ways in which it promotes strong practice in alignment with the goals of the profession or field of practice.
 - The programme identifies opportunities for informal and formal feedback, through interactive learning processes and formal assessments.
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Discussion

Continuing education is the next big challenge for New Zealand social work education. While I would not argue that our pre-service education is perfect, our profession is fast catching up with its leadership. A degree-based profession starts to look hard at postgraduate education and it is time to review the type (design and delivery) and the focus of continuing education. There will be greater recognition of the significance of ongoing professional education for social work as a mechanism to build and strengthen professional identity, especially in multidisciplinary workplaces.

Our postgraduate offerings are generally excellent but not well supported and sometimes struggle to get viable student numbers. As long as this is the case, the pressure of tight tertiary sector funding constraints will make it difficult for schools of social work to provide the wide variety of options social workers may want. The indication from research that social workers want specialist education (Beddoe and Henrickson, 2003, 2005) probably means that universities and other providers should cooperate to ensure that the territory is covered without wasteful duplication. There is a role here for ANZASW to act as a broker to assist the tertiary education sector to facilitate a collaborative approach to the development of further study programmes.

What is not addressed in this paper, and requires considerable further examination and research, is the broad approach of workplace learning and the creation of 'communities of practice', and how these may contribute to ongoing learning and development (Wenger, 1998). Formal postgraduate study is not the only option for exploration. The modes of continuing education described in Table 1 are educational experiences that are largely external, or have input from trainers or educators. I am acknowledging that this may provide an incomplete picture of continuing learning in social work, because it does not address informal workplace learning. There is little coverage of this in the New Zealand literature in social work and it is an area for potential research.

Ultimately, it is significant that we conceptualise continuing education and development as a major component of professional renewal. Continuing education sits well alongside effective professional supervision as a means to ensure career-long competency, commitment and enthusiasm. Educational experiences are often premised on a kind of front loading; the idea being that knowledge and skills are loaded up in time for the carrying out of social and professional roles. Wenger has argued that front loading is not necessarily the

best, and certainly not the only kind of educational design. Because of life-long processes of being in the world 'we need think not just about education merely in terms of an initial period of socialisation into a culture, but more fundamentally in terms of rhythms by which communities and individuals continually renew themselves' (Wenger, 1998: 263). This must surely apply to professions as well as individuals; it is too easy for continuing education to focus on reproduction of the past, through repeating 'the tried and true' and ignore the need to be forward focused. Much more work is needed in researching and developing alternative models of continuing learning, allowing for the development of rich, responsive opportunities for on-going learning.

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