Enhancing the readiness to practise of newly qualified social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand (Enhance R2P)

Project Overview
Introduction

Enhance R2P involved a collaborative research team of social work academics from the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, the University of Auckland, Massey University, the University of Canterbury and the University of Otago. The purpose of the 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 before and after the point of qualification.

To ensure the proposed professional capabilities framework was founded on solid evidence about the current nature of the curriculum, and accurate knowledge of the preparedness to practise of Newly-Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs), the research project was designed in three distinct phases. Phase one (2016) inquired into the nature of the social work curriculum; phase two (2017) explored the readiness to practise of newly qualified social workers; and phase three (2018) turned to the creation of a professional capabilities framework.

The key contribution of this project to existing knowledge on effective teaching and learning lies in the way it explores the concepts of readiness to practise and capability from a national and international perspective. In particular, the adoption of a distinction made in research about medical education between the declared curriculum, the taught curriculum, and the learned curriculum (discussed in the phase one literature scan) helped to focus the research design, and establishes where and why divergences between different stakeholders might emerge, offering possible ways of resolving them.

This summary maps out the key elements of each of the three project reports and includes some highlights from each phase. It addresses each project phase in turn and ends by listing project reports and academic publications drawing on the project data.

Research question

What is the content of the current social work curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand and how does it relate to the ten core competence standards of the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB)?

Methods

Fourteen of the 17 tertiary education institutions offering social work degree programmes agreed to participate in the Enhance R2P study. Between them, these institutions offered 19 of all recognised social work programmes. Of the 19 programmes included in the study, 14 were bachelor’s degree programmes, two were bachelor’s honours degree programmes, and three were master’s degree programmes. It is important to note that neither of the two wānanga offering recognised social work programmes agreed to take part in the study; therefore, the findings reflect the curricula of mainstream programmes, although all state they are committed to bicultural practice.

Two methods were deployed. Firstly, to describe the declared curriculum, we conducted an analysis of 402 curriculum documents describing participants’ courses. This data was ingested into a specially created curriculum database where metadata was added, and documents mapped to key educational terms derived from an educational taxonomy created by the project team. This method allowed the team to create data visualisations of the curriculum and to analyse similarities and differences between programmes. Secondly, to explore perceptions of the taught and the learned curriculum, focus groups were held at eight of the participating institutions for educators (N=27) and social work students (N=35).

Indicative findings

Core educational content is similar, but course design and emphases differ: Both high-level analysis of course titles and more detailed term-based analysis of curriculum documents indicates that social work curricula in Aotearoa New Zealand have considerable commonality at both the level of courses and in terms of topics included. However, the analyses also suggests significant diversity in the way that topics are woven together into courses, the credits associated with particular course types, the use and proportion of electives, the educational level at which particular topics are taught and the extent to which particular programmes give emphasis to particular topics. Such diversity in curriculum design is not necessarily negative, so long as students achieve key educational outcomes.

There were fifty-five different course types: A high-level analysis of course types revealed 55 different types of social work course, with research as the most common course type appearing most frequently at level seven (typically the third year of a degree). Other course types such as human development and sociology tend to cluster at level five as part of a first-year introduction to the social sciences. Courses focused on the Treaty of Waitangi and Te Ao Māori also tend to be introduced at level five. In around a third of course types identified, the course occurred at only one institution; this included course types focused on family violence, disabilities, risk assessment and youth justice.

There are over 600 different educational topics: A more fine-grained analysis of key educational topics using the taxonomy showed that course documents referred to over 600 educational topics – such as attachment, supervision and kotahitanga (15% of the educational terms included in the taxonomy were terms in te reo Māori). Analysis showed that the top 50 most frequently cited terms in university and non-university course descriptors are exactly the same. However, the frequency of occurrence of particular terms varies between institutions indicating differences of emphasis, at least in the written documentation (or declared curriculum).
Differences in core curriculum areas: A detailed analysis of five core curriculum areas – human development; child protection, risk and family violence; mental health, addictions and trauma; physical health and disability; and te ao Māori – reveals differences in the extent of coverage of these terms in the curriculum documents of participating institutions. These are described in detail, including data visualisations, in the phase one report. However, the absence or inclusion of a topic in curriculum documentation may not relate to its presence in the taught curriculum or the learned curriculum.

The ten SWRB core competence standards: Mapping the ten core competence standards to curriculum documents proved to be imprecise and unreliable. Judgements about mapping were inconsistent because the standards are open to a significant degree of interpretation and include a degree of overlap. This is an important finding about the nature of the current core competence standards. Whist curriculum mapping offered insights into the declared curriculum, the educator and student focus groups explored perceptions of the taught and the learned curriculum. In terms of messages intended by educators and received by students, there was a strong concurrence in relation to theory-practice integration, the importance of bicultural practice, a commitment to social justice and an emphasis on the ‘use of self’ and reflective practice.

Theory-practice integration and the key role of fieldwork placements: Both educators and students emphasised the centrality of good, well-supervised field placements in the preparation of beginning social workers and in the process of integration of curriculum content and skills in actual practice settings. However, both students and educators reflected on the variability of high-quality supervision (this issue is explored and reported in detail in Hay et al., 2018a). Students also mentioned the value of practical learning activities such as problem-based learning, visits to field settings and hearing speakers from the field.

Bicultural and cross-cultural practice: The value of different sources and types of knowledge for practice, and a strong need to balance Māori and Western models and approaches, was recognised by both educators and students, as was the aspiration to develop a genuine, bicultural social work education. However, despite evidence that terms in te reo Māori are liberally sprinkled throughout the curriculum, some educators and students were less convinced that their curriculum was successful in this regard. In addition, many respondents considered that growing population diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand meant that educating for cross-cultural practice, including working with Pacific peoples, was a strong educational need that was not being fully met.

Ethics and social justice: Both educators and students considered that a concern for ethics and social justice were central preoccupations in the social work curriculum. However, some students expressed less motivation to research wider societal issues. Educators considered there was pressure from external actors to narrow social work practice, and social work education, to micro level practices concerned with individual and family casework at the expense of community development and other macro approaches to social work.

Critical reflection and the use of self: Educators and students recognised the value of promoting students’ ‘use of self’ and awareness of self and others in interaction, and on developing students’ ability for critical reflection. The development of personal attributes and practice readiness were thought to be dependent on experience over time, effective placement supervision and learning about the ‘use of self’ and self-care. The gradual growth of students’ self-confidence was considered to be critical (that such gradual developmental growth occurs is supported in the findings from the phase two report on NQSWs readiness to practise).

Genericism and continuing professional development: A generic social work qualifying education was strongly supported by educators, followed by good workplace induction, support and opportunities for further professional development. Educators recognised the need for learning to continue during the
early career of newly qualified social workers, and that learning and development support from the employing organisation, during the transition to experienced practitioner status, was considered to be vital.

**Significant topics:** Educators identified learning about trauma as an important topic but were concerned about an overly narrow focus on childhood trauma. Risk assessment was considered to be an important topic but some argued for a balance between the use of risk tools and the broader assessment of strengths and vulnerabilities. Mental health, child protection and family violence were all considered to be vital components of the curriculum, although differences were evident in terms of the integrated teaching of these topics across the curriculum versus dedicated, specialist courses. Students identified perceived gaps in the curriculum, although these gaps seemed to be specific to particular programmes.
The readiness to practise of NQSWS: Phase 2 – 2017

Research question
How well prepared are newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) to enter professional social work, and how is their learning supported and enhanced in the workplace?

Methods
This phase of the study had two parts: firstly, an online survey of NQSWs (N=119) and managers/professional supervisors of NQSWs (N=158); and secondly, qualitative interviews with NQSWs (N=15) and managers/professional supervisors of NQSWs (N=17).

Indicative findings
The findings from the surveys and interviews are described in the phase two report in considerable depth and detail and cannot be neatly summarised in this short overview. The full report is organised into the following sections: entering the workforce; working life; workplace support, learning and development; and the transition from student to practitioner. Some highlights from each section are included below.

Entering the workforce
Almost two-thirds of respondents stated that their current social work post was their first since graduating, just over a quarter stated they were in their second job since graduating. Almost a third found their present employment by having been a student on placement in that agency. Over half of NQSWs indicated they had had no probationary period and almost half had had no mentor assigned to them on commencement of their post.

Working life
The most highly-rated factors motivating students to become social workers were related to the worthwhileness of the job including helping people to improve their quality of life, stimulating work and tackling injustice. Career-related factors such as well-paid job and good career prospects were far less significant.

The majority of NQSWs held very positive attitudes towards their current job with almost half stating they enjoyed their current position very much and over a third quite enjoying it. The main sources of dissatisfaction for the minority who expressed it were: conditions of employment (pay, superannuation, annual leave, etc.); coping with workload; and prospects for advancement and promotion.

Workplace support, learning and development
Many of the sources of job satisfaction for NQSWs derive from informal peer and team support factors including professional support and guidance from colleagues, friendliness of other staff in the workplace and teamworking. Strong support from managers/professional supervisors is also indicated in levels of satisfaction with accessibility of my line manager and professional support and guidance from line manager featuring highly.

Just over two-thirds of respondents stated that they had access to some form of induction on commencing their present position. However, the content of most induction appeared to be focused on corporate issues and priorities such as organisational policies and procedures, organisational values, general health and safety, record-keeping and confidentiality.
Around half of NQSWs were supervised at least once every two weeks, but another half were supervised monthly or less frequently. Whilst monthly supervision is the SWRB requirement for all social workers, this seems insufficiently frequent for NQSWs.

In the majority of cases, the primary focus of supervision was on advice and guidance on difficult cases, although personal support and case review were also frequently identified. In terms of improvements to the supervision process, many NQSWs wanted more attention paid to the educational and developmental aspects of professional supervision including help in applying theory to practice, more discussion on training needs and suggestions for developing reflection and self-awareness.

Only one quarter of NQSWs stated they had received cultural or kaupapa supervision to support their work with Māori and/or other cultural groups. Of those who had received cultural supervision, almost all found it very or quite helpful. In addition, of those who had not received cultural supervision, two-thirds agreed it was something that would be helpful to them.

Over two-thirds of NQSWs received some form of training, apart from induction, with most of this training being provided in-house. However, the idea of protected development time for independent study was less common with only a third of NQSWs stating that they had such time. Only a quarter of NQSWs stated that their supervisor had discussed post-qualifying social work education.

Asked to score their capability on a scale from 1 to 10, both now and when they first started their current job, almost all NQSWs indicated an upward shift in perceived capability over time; with half of them having increased their self-perceived capability by at least three points on the scale.

The transition from student to practitioner

Two-thirds of NQSWs felt that their degree programme had prepared them very or fairly well for their present job. Only one in ten considered they were not very, or not at all, well-prepared. From the perspective of managers or professional supervisors of NQSWs, two-thirds stated they were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the quality of newly-qualified social workers, none were very dissatisfied and only one in ten was fairly dissatisfied.

Managers/professional supervisors were asked to rate their perceptions of NQSWs' knowledge, qualities, skills and abilities. Almost all NQSWs were considered to be excellent or adequate in relation to effective engagement with service users. Managers/professional supervisors also rated NQSWs highly in relation to teamworking ability and their commitment to best interests of service users and carers.

In terms of analytical abilities, three-quarters of managers/professional supervisors perceived NQSWs to be excellent or adequate, although this ability also attracted a rating of disappointing from almost a quarter of managers/professional supervisors. Whilst the majority of managers/professional supervisors considered NQSWs to be excellent or adequate in relation to coping with stress, almost a quarter of managers/professional supervisors were disappointed in this quality of NQSWs.

The final part of the survey inquired, firstly, into the types of specialist knowledge respondents considered to be relevant to their present job; and secondly, whether, when they started working, they knew as much about that area of specialist knowledge as was expected of them. The top five areas of specialist knowledge identified by the NQSW sample as a whole were child protection/safeguarding children; working with Māori; mental health conditions and their likely progress; the rights of the child; and family violence.

Considering the five most frequently cited areas of specialist knowledge against employers’ expectations, the largest gap was in relation to mental health conditions and their likely progress, where four in ten NQSWs were expected to know more than they did.
There were, however, larger gaps in areas of knowledge that were less frequently cited as relevant to the current job. For example, although only four in ten NQSWs cited preparing reports for legal proceedings in court/tribunal as relevant to their present job, this specialist knowledge area had the largest perceived gap with seven in ten NQSWs expected to know more.

NQSWs also selected from a list of topics they wish they knew more about and the five most frequently selected were working with trauma; dealing with hostility, aggression or conflict; the legal basis for social work interventions; assessing risk; and services and resources available locally 'in your patch' that might benefit the service users or carers on your case.

One interesting observation to note is that the top five topics that NQSWs wish they knew more about in Aotearoa New Zealand are identical to those identified by English NQSWs surveyed in 2009 (with the exception of the topic of trauma, which was not included in the English study). One interpretation of this similarity in NQSW experience between different jurisdictions is that the topics highlighted may be related to issues inherent in the transition from student to practitioner status. As one of the NQSW interviewees put it:

You almost need an internship type programme, or some sort of bridging thing between your degree and when you go out to work. Like a graduate programme. There's something missing in-between and you get a job and get thrown out into the deep end and it's a bit of a wake-up call. (Josie, NQSW)

This issue of the transition from social work student to practitioner status, and the gradual process of skill acquisition, was also strongly evident in the English study (Sharpe et al., 2011). The English researchers concluded that their findings supported "the development of an overarching professional standards framework" (p. 147) and the inclusion of an Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) as part of a professional capabilities framework.
The professional capabilities framework: Phase Three – 2018

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?

Methods
This phase of the study had two parts: firstly, a content analysis of five capability and competency frameworks; and secondly, five co-production workshops involving participants from five different sites in Aotearoa New Zealand. Between 20 and 30 participants attended each of the workshops, with 132 taking part overall; 29% of participants described themselves as managers/professional supervisors, 32% as social work practitioners, 10% as field work educators and 29% gave another role definition.

The competence/capability profile review
The review of existing frameworks considered five separate frameworks or competency profiles; two from Aotearoa New Zealand, one from Canada, one from the United Kingdom and one from the United States of America. The phase three report presents an analysis of the five documents using eight key themes that recur across all of the professional frameworks or – in the case of the first theme – are critical to the unique context of Aotearoa New Zealand. The themes were: social work with Māori; diversity; social justice; professionalism; critical reflection; advocacy and policy practice; ethics; and knowledge, skills and processes.

Although there were striking similarities in the content of the frameworks, each was structured differently and expressed at different levels of detail, from the relatively high-level, holistic approach of the American Educational Policy and Accreditation Standard framework to the meticulously detailed sub-competence checklists of the Canadian Entry-Level Competency Profile for the Social Work Profession in Canada. The phase three literature scan (Hay et al., 2018b), and the competence/capability profile review, shaped the content drafted and reviewed during our five co-production workshops.

The co-production workshops
The workshop programme consisted of a half-day meeting where participants were presented with a summary of the findings from the first two phases of the project before moving into a discussion of the proposed professional capabilities framework. The research team used a structured, participatory process – based on the World Café method – to engage participants in discussions about the proposed professional capabilities framework.

When the workshops were complete, the Enhance R2P team decided on several broad design principles for the creation of our professional capabilities framework. The first was that, following the approach of the Family Violence and Sexual Violence Capability Framework, we would include a set of underpinning values expressed in te reo Māori, with descriptions in English. These values represent the bicultural heart of the framework and should be clear and direct enough to be understood by any student, social worker or service user. The values drafted for our co-production workshops were well-received and are included below.
Secondly, influenced by the UK Professional Capabilities Framework, we wanted a framework that focused on different levels in the professional development of a social worker. At this stage we propose only to illustrate this approach by drafting three levels: NQSW or the point of graduation from a recognised programme of study; first year of practice or after one year of supervised practice (preferably as part of an assisted and supported first year of practice); and social worker or on attainment of two to three years of supervised practice. We used feedback from the co-production workshops to draft the NQSW level and projected additional indicators for the first year of practice and social worker levels.

Thirdly, and in common with all of the existing frameworks, the Enhance R2P framework is not intended as a comprehensive list of all of the knowledge, skills and attributes of social workers, but a framework for highlighting core capabilities. The production of long competency checklists can be counterproductive. We decided to identify no more than ten capabilities, to include a capability descriptor and to identify several behavioural indicators for each of the three levels. In common with the American EPAS framework, our view is that each capability is holistic describing the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes that comprise the capability, and that the behavioural indicators represent observable components of the capabilities at each of the three levels. The Enhance R2P team, and our workshop participants, welcomed the strong practice emphasis of the American EPAS including the four steps in the social work process as capabilities: engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation.

Finally, unlike the UK PCF, our framework is firmly focused on the transition from NQSW to professional practitioner status and we see the three levels described as building on each other. As social workers progress their capability becomes more integrated and we express this in the framework by using fewer, higher-level indicators. The complete Professional Capabilities Framework can be found in the phase three report.
Ten Capabilities

The Enhance R2P Capabilities for Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Developed as part of The professional capabilities framework: Phase Three

**CAPABILITY ONE: Te Ao Māori | The Māori World**
Social workers are capable of understanding the historical and present effects of colonisation on tangata whenua as the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. Social workers understand and work to promote the principles and articles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand society) and work with whānau, hapū and iwi to maintain relationships that are mana-enhancing. Tau iwi social workers are respectful of Te Ao Māori and recognise when it is appropriate to seek cultural guidance, supervision and advice from cultural advisors.

**CAPABILITY TWO: Kanorau | Diversity**
Social workers understand how the power dynamics of diversity and difference lead people to experience marginalisation, stigmatisation, oppression and exploitation. Social workers understand how different forms of diversity intersect to shape human experience and the identities of people. Social workers demonstrate self-awareness and are capable of reflecting on how their own experience, personal values and biases impact their work. Social workers are capable of advocating with or on behalf of oppressed peoples and of analysing and challenging all forms of injustice and oppression including exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.

**CAPABILITY THREE: Manatika | Social justice**
Social workers understand the sources of social inequity and are capable of taking actions to protect and advocate for human rights including civil, political, environmental, economic, social and cultural rights. Social workers recognise the impact of social structural factors on the lives of people – such as poverty, racism, poor housing and social exclusion – and are capable of working with people at micro, meso and macro levels to prevent stigmatisation and promote social change. They understand the global interconnections of oppression and human rights violations and are knowledgeable about theories of human need, social justice and strategies to promote social, economic and environmental justice and human rights. Social workers promote strengths, agency, hope and self-determination.

**CAPABILITY FOUR: Matanga | Professionalism**
Social workers are members of an internationally recognised profession and understand the history, values and ethical standards of the profession. Social workers are capable of taking responsibility for their conduct, practice, self-care and professional development. Social workers are accountable and actively participate in professional supervision, professional development and lifelong learning. They are ethically fluent and can reason about ethical issues, problems and dilemmas in the context of practice, policy or research. Social workers are open to innovative practice developments, stay up to date with relevant research findings and are committed to the ethical uses of emerging technologies. They are mindful of the SWRB code of conduct, the ANZASW code of ethics and other professional frameworks relevant to their role and function.

**CAPABILITY FIVE: Whaiwhakaaro | Critical reflection**
Social workers are capable of using critical thinking to reflect on power, practice, policy and research findings. They understand how evidence from multiple sources: qualitative and quantitative, implicit and explicit – including indigenous knowledge – can be used to inform micro, meso and macro level practice. They are able to identify how power relations affect the underpinning assumptions embedded in research and practice theories. Social workers use critical reflection to reflect on their practice within supervision, to analyse policy settings and to conduct reviews of literature and research inquiries, including undertaking studies that generate new knowledge.
CAPABILITY SIX: Kaupapa Here | Policy Practice
Social workers are capable of understanding the role of policy and legislation in shaping the duties and powers of social workers and the social services and resources available to support the social, emotional, environmental and material wellbeing of people. Social workers understand policy development and implementation and are capable of advocating for and working with people to campaign and create sustainable change in policy settings. They recognise how framing affects policy outcomes and can respond strategically to challenge frames that have oppressive policy effects.

CAPABILITY SEVEN: Hononga | Engagement
Social workers value and work to build respectful, mana-enhancing human relationships. Social workers are capable of critically evaluating and applying theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge to engage and build positive working relationships with other people including individuals, groups, families, whānau, hapū, iwi, organisations and communities. Social workers use empathy, reflection, interpersonal skills and their understanding of diversity to build rapport and trust with people including professionals from other agencies and people who are involuntary users of social work services. They are aware of their role in interprofessional groups. Social workers are self-aware and use reflection in and on action to ensure interpersonal and cultural responsiveness.

CAPABILITY EIGHT: Aromatawai | Assessment
Social workers recognise that assessment is a fluid, dynamic and continuous process involving the collection and analysis of data in order to make judgements and arrive at mutually agreed decisions on future action. Social workers critically evaluate and apply theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge to question assumptions and biases and to interpret information collected from individuals, groups, families, whānau, hapū, iwi, organisations and communities. Social workers actively involve service users, significant others and relevant professionals in assessment processes. They ensure that assessment processes are research-informed, ethical, safe and responsive to the interpersonal and cultural needs of service users.

CAPABILITY NINE: Wawaotanga | Intervention
Social workers recognise that intervention is a fluid, dynamic and continuous process requiring careful attention to the responses and changing circumstances of affected individuals, groups, families, whānau, hapū, iwi, organisations and communities. Social workers critically evaluate and apply theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge to inform and monitor interventions. Social workers actively involve service users and significant others in intervention processes. Social workers recognise the value of interprofessional collaboration and communication to achieve positive outcomes for service users. They ensure that intervention processes are research-informed, safe and responsive to the interpersonal and cultural needs of service users.

CAPABILITY TEN: Arotakenga | Evaluation
Social workers recognise that evaluation is a fluid, dynamic and continuous process requiring careful monitoring of interventions over time. They acknowledge that the evaluation of processes and outcomes is a critical method for enhancing agency practice and ensuring positive outcomes for individuals, groups, families, whānau, hapū, iwi, organisations and communities. Social workers critically evaluate and apply theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge to inform evaluation practice. They understand the role of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods for evaluating processes and outcomes. They ensure that evaluation processes are research-informed, safe and responsive to the interpersonal and cultural needs of service users.
Seven core values
The Enhance R2P Values for Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand
Developed as part of The professional capabilities framework: Phase Three

1. **Rangatiratanga**
   Social workers value diversity and cultural identity. We use our practice to advocate for and support the self-determination and empowerment of people.

2. **Manaakitanga**
   Social workers recognise and support the mana of people. We act towards people with respect, kindness and compassion. We practise empathic solidarity, ensure safe space, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations.

3. **Whanaungatanga**
   Social workers work to strengthen reciprocal mana-enhancing relationships, connectedness and to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion.

4. **Aroha:**
   Social workers acknowledge our mutual responsibility for wellbeing. We recognise our common humanity with people who use our services and hold people to account, using professional judgement without being judgemental. We focus on people’s strengths and finding solutions.

5. **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.

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

7. **Wairuatanga**
   Social workers attend to the wellbeing – spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical – of self and others. We acknowledge the significance of whakapapa, self-awareness and self-care.
Project reports


Journal articles


