

National Study of Social Work Students: Briefing Paper - Important emerging findings

Introduction

The context for the survey findings reported in this Briefing Paper is the ongoing advocacy by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) to increase the rates of income support, specifically Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance, as consistent with the [AASW's position statement](#) on this issue. In addition, concerns had been identified after findings from a pilot study of AASW student members in 2014, indicated a higher level of financial disadvantage than was expected. That pilot study was undertaken by capitalizing on ready access to AASW social work student members. The purpose was to gather original pilot data on the effects of current levels of allowances on students' life, work and study and their vulnerability to increasing poverty. Following on from that pilot study, a larger, national study of social work students was undertaken in 2015 with a sample of 2,320 students, recruited from 29 Australian universities, who completed an online survey. This large sample was made possible by the support of the Heads of Schools of Social Work as well as the various academic and student champions of the research from around the country. Some questions in the online National Survey of Social Work Students (NSSWS) survey were replicated from a recent Universities Australia study (2013) to allow for the results to be considered alongside those important findings.

It is envisaged that this latest data from the National Survey of Social Work Students (NSSWS) will be of interest to social work educators in a number of ways.

- It provides a national snapshot of the effect of the lack of finances on the lives and study experiences of social work students
- It confirms that difficulties experienced by students due to a lack of finances is a national problem and not simply a local one.
- It provides evidence that this problem of lack of finances of social work students is a substantial one which is affecting educational outcomes
- It provides additional information about the difficulties students are facing with a lack of finances during student placements.
- It can be used for future researchers examining more closely the various questions that the current research raises.

Already data from the NSSWS has been used in two AASW submissions to Senate inquiries: the [Youth Employment Bill](#) 2015 and the [Budget Repair Bill](#) 2015. The initial results will also be presented at the World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development in Seoul, Korea in June, 2016.

The survey

During August, September and October 2015, the AASW in conjunction with James Cook University conducted a national survey of social work students in Australia. Two-thousand three hundred and twenty students responded to the online survey, a 25% response when considering national social work course enrolment figures. Students were invited to respond to both open and closed questions. This briefing paper highlights some of the key findings of the survey. Twenty-nine university social work programs throughout Australia took part in the survey. This national study was approved by James Cook University Human Ethics Committee.

Demographics of the respondents

Table 1: Demographics

Demographics			
Gender	Female		Male
	87%		13%
Age	<25 Years	Between 25 and 34 Years	>34 Years
	31%	33%	36%
Study Load	Full Time	Part Time	External
	75%	14%	9%
Geographical Type of Area Students Lived In	Metropolitan	Regional	Rural
	64%	27%	9%
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	
	4%	96%	
Members of AASW	Members	Non-members	
	19%	81%	
Students	Domestic students	International	
	91%	9%	
Allowance received	Youth Allowance	New Start	Abstudy/Austudy
	18%	4%	15%
	Parenting Payment	Disability Support Pension	Carers Allowance
	5%	2%	3%
	No Government Assistance		
	53%		

Emerging Results

Effect of a lack of money on the life of social work students

Overall this study sought to increase available knowledge on the levels of income, financial stresses, and life, study work balance for Australian tertiary social work students. In both qualitative and quantitative responses, students have identified what appears to be financial stress and vulnerability concerning their ability to afford necessities including food and medication, as well as pay for education costs and absorbing the costs associated with field placement.

The analysis of the total data set, in particular the qualitative data, as yet has not been completed.

Below some of the key, emerging findings are presented, with a focus on these emerging findings considered alongside the previously noted UA study, which was one of the intended purposes in replicating questions from that study.

Key Findings

As noted, in order to understand how social work students were faring compared to the general university cohort a number of questions were used that replicated questions in the Universities Australia (UA) study of university students in 2012. A summary of several primary comparative findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of NSSWS and UAS results for full time domestic students

Questions	UA Study Undergraduate	NSSWS Undergraduate	UA Study Post Grad Course Work Degree	NSSWS Post Grad Course Work Degree (Masters Qualifying and Masters by Coursework)
Q 6. Regularly gone without necessities	18.2%	32.2%	18.3%	28.9%
Q 13. Savings in the case of financial difficulty	54.2%	41.7%	57%	48%
Q 4. Not supported financially by family	46%	56%	53%	56%

One key question for this study (Q 6) was "**As a student, have you had to regularly go without food or other necessities because you could not afford them.**" In the UA study the percentage for full time domestic undergraduate students who answered yes to this question was 18.2%. In the NSSWS as presented above, the finding was 32.2%. In the UA study the percentage for full time domestic postgraduate coursework students the figure was 18.3%. In the UA study the comparative percentage of full time domestic postgraduate coursework students was 18.3 per cent, for postgraduate social work students it was 28.9 per cent. A similar pattern was evident among part time domestic students.

The results from this question indicate that across the undergraduate and graduate cohorts, when considered alongside the Universities Australia (2013) results social work students appear to be increasingly worse off.

Another replicated question (Q 13) asked whether students had "**any savings in the event of financial difficulty**". In the social work student cohort in this study 41.7% of full time domestic undergraduate

students answered yes to this question, as did 50% of full time Masters qualifying students and 42.7% of Masters of social work by coursework. This compares to 54.2% of full time domestic undergraduates and 57% of full time domestic postgraduate coursework students in the UA study. This finding suggests that social work students in 2015, when considered alongside the national mainstream tertiary student cohorts in the UA study had reduced savings.

A further question asked in both studies (Q 4) was whether students were **supported financially by parents, partners or other family members**. In the social work student cohort 56% of full time domestic undergraduate students answered no to this question, as did 56% of full time Masters qualifying students and 58% of Masters of social work by coursework. This can be considered alongside 46% of full time domestic undergraduates and 53% of full time domestic postgraduate coursework students who had no family support in the UA study. (Universities Australia, 2013, p.26). This finding suggests that while responses are similar, for the national social work respondents to this study, fewer social work students are supported financially by parents, partners of other family members

As in the previously noted pilot study, social work students in this national study (NSSWS) also were asked **“As a student have you had at any time insufficient money for any of the following:** food, clothing, accommodation, educational resources, transport, medication (Q 5). Over half of all respondents (54%) reported having insufficient money for education resources, 39% reported insufficient money for clothes, 36% not enough for transport, 33% not enough for food, 29% not enough for medication and 27% not enough for accommodation. The percentages were higher for full time students. The major results are in the table below.

Table 3: As a student have you had at any time insufficient money for any of the following? (Q5)

	% of all Social Work Student respondents (followed by actual numbers)	% of Full Time Social Work Students respondents (followed by actual numbers)
<i>Food</i>	33% (760)	36% (507)
<i>Clothing</i>	39% (902)	43% (700)
<i>Accommodation</i>	27% (625)	30% (483)
<i>Education resources</i>	54% (1263)	60% (977)
<i>Transport</i>	36% (825)	40% (657)
<i>Medication</i>	29% (675)	33% (533)

Qualitative Data from question 5

In addition to the quantitative data from Q 5, 829 students responded to the request to “please give a short description.” While a range of experiences and concerns were described, most common responses to the above questions mentioned the costs associated with the field placement, the difficulty of paying for text books, and insufficient money for essentials. A selection of the range of responses to question 5 is presented below.

“Budgeting to afford petrol to travel to another campus which is a 2 hour round trip impacts on the ability to afford food for the day.

Yes at any given time, my rent is paid late, my car runs out of petrol getting home from fieldwork placement and I go without educational resources such as textbooks and laptop, and attending medical care as needed.

In the past when I worked part-time and received AUStudy/youth allowance I had very little money and was

rarely able to purchase text books or readers. I also have a chronic disease which requires a large amount of medication, which I have had to stop taking due to having insufficient money.

I have struggled financially throughout my entire degree. Several times I have missed out on certain things or not bought certain things due to finances. At times I have been incredibly ill and have not been able to afford a doctor's appointment, medication, and have still been required to work to sustain an income.

I am a full time student with 2 children in my care and being on Centrelink benefits with no income coming from child support nor paid part time job, yes, it is common for me and my family to experience a shortage of money in all aspects and it's been challenging.

I had been so run down from placement work and Uni that I had bled funds dry where I was panicking going to placement. I was worried about my almost empty fuel tank. Placement was using up multiple refills of a full tank of fuel per week where as usually a full tank would last me a fortnight.'

Effect of a lack of money on the experience of being a student

A number of questions on the NSSWS survey explored the issue of financial stress impacting on study experiences. As shown in Table 3, in answer to question 5 about insufficient money to pay for educational resources, 54% of all students and 60% of full time students reported this as an issue for them.

The results of a more specific question (Q 7) about the effect on lack of money on the ability to complete studies is reported below.

Table 4: Does the amount of money you receive from the Government affect your ability to complete your studies in any of the following ways?

Question	% of all Survey Participants (followed by actual numbers)	% of Survey Participants who are Full time Students (followed by actual numbers)
<i>Not enough money for all recommended texts or educational resources</i>	52% (1200)	59% (961)
<i>Overtired from long working hours of paid employment</i>	47% (1083)	48% (778)
<i>Need to skip classes in order to attend a paid job</i>	34% (785)	39% (635)
<i>Need to defer a course or reduce study load in order to work</i>	29% (666)	23% (377)
<i>Problem with accommodation caused by a lack of income</i>	17% (394)	19% (316)
<i>Lower grades than I could have achieved</i>	47% (1090)	50% (824)
<i>Increases the likelihood of dropping out of the course</i>	27% (628)	26% (429)
<i>Pressure to plagiarise assignments</i>	4% (100)	5% (86)

Among full time students, 70% of respondents had some paid employment. Of these students, 44% were working 17 hours or more per week, and 24% were working 24 hours or more in paid employment.

This study also asked a specific question (Q 11) about the effect of any finance pressures on student placements. Responses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: In regard to your placement did you?

Answer choices	Percentage	Number
<i>Reduce hours of paid work to allow for placement</i>	46%	749
<i>Quit paid work to allow for placement</i>	31%	512
<i>Find yourself with additional financial burden because of the placement</i>	69%	1102
<i>Postpone placement because of the necessity of continuing paid employment</i>	13%	235

As can be seen in this presented data above, it appears that a significant majority of survey respondents reduced paid work to undertake field placement and found themselves with an additional financial burden. This increased financial burden of placement for social work students may explain in part social work students' increased financial vulnerability when compared to a general cohort of Australian tertiary students (UA, 2013) but point to even further vulnerability. This is consistent with findings by Brough, Correa-Velez, Crane, Johnstone, & Marston (2015) of the financial stress associated with social work and human service student placements.

Qualitative Data from Question 11

In addition to the quantitative data for questions 7 and 11 as discussed above, 614 students added qualitative comments to question 11. While similar to qualitative comments to previous questions, for respondents the financial stresses of placement featured strongly, as did the associated emotional and mental anguish of striving for work, study, and life balance in circumstances of acute and ongoing financial stress. A selection of the range of responses follow.

'In order to do placement 4 days a week I had to take 3 days a week leave (I have not been using for last few years in preparation of it being needed) and worked at paid work on Fridays and Saturdays. This meant I was at placement/work full-days for six days a week. On top of this of course study needed to be added. By the end of placement I truly don't know how much longer I could have continued at this pace; simply exhausted and, at times, brain dead.

I had to keep postponing my placement initially due to my son's developmental needs and the excessive length of the placements involved. This simply postponed the stress associated with placement until later.

I have gone down from about 20 hours per week to 10-15 hours per week which causes me a lot of mental anguish because 10 hours of work equals my rent and electricity bills per week, which does not leave me with anything else.

Risked losing my job in the social work field to do placement at another place.

Struggling to juggle the huge amount of commitments between placement, paid work, study (co-requisite topic), and unexpected family issues requiring time and consideration (death in the family). Feeling stressed and overworked, but also unwilling to cut down any further on paid work so that I can keep up with my obligations in my roles, and have a sufficient income.'

Discussion

The results of this study highlight that the rates of ongoing financial difficulty being experienced by social work students appear to be substantially higher than a cohort of university students in Australia as ascertained by considering these findings alongside the University Australia (2013) results. There is another equally large group for whom financial difficulty adversely affects their study from time to time, with significant numbers of students in both groups who report going without food, medication, educational resources or other necessities because they could not afford them.

It is concerning that such high numbers of students are having difficulties with fulfilling their own, and their families basic needs for food, accommodation, medication and transport costs, and this was particularly the case when they needed to undertake field placement. Additionally, it seems difficult to imagine how some students can achieve an adequate balance between work, life and study demands when studying a university social work course, particularly if they are not receiving support from family or partners. This is reflected in the high percentage of students who state they do not have enough money to buy all recommended educational resources and text books, as well as those stating that they have achieved lower grades than they could have achieved because of a lack of financial support (table 4). While findings in question 7 on the pressure to plagiarise resulted in only a small percentage of students acknowledging this pressure, the actual number of students, one hundred, may represent only a small number of students willing to admit such pressure given that plagiarism is serious academic misconduct.

Linked to the question of financial stresses is the complex question of hours that students are working in paid employment. Ninety per cent of students in paid work used the additional resources to pay for necessities and 47% to pay for educational resources. However, as well as providing finances for necessities, paid work had a number of other advantages for students with 30% of those students in paid employment agreeing with the statement that "My paid work gives me valuable experience" and 12% identified paid work as a welcome break from study. Paid work also helped some students pay for recreation and entertainment, or save for an overseas trip in the future.

However, the long hours that many students were working, appeared to impact on their studies in a variety of ways. Sixty-three per cent of working respondents reported being overtired from long working hours of paid employment and 45% reported the need to skip a class to attend a paid job.

Students who did not have paid work tended to be significantly worse off financially than students with paid work with 42% of full time undergraduate social work students stating that they had to go regularly without food or other necessities because they could not afford them. These contrasting findings indicate the difficult situation students find themselves in. While paid work, if a student is able to find it, relieves some of the financial pressure, it also increases the time pressure on students in other ways. Furthermore, field placements further complicate the situation, with 26% of students who were without paid work indicating that they had quit their paid work in order to undertake their social work field placement, hence placing them in a more precarious financial state.

While this study did not specifically measure the effect of low finances on the decision to either withdraw from studies or defer or reduce subjects, a number of questions asked students' about their perceptions and their decision-making. Among all students 27% felt a lack of financial support increased the likelihood of them dropping out of the course, and this figure increased to 45% for those students regularly going without necessities. It is understood that students drop out of a course for a wide variety of reasons and often it is perceived as a phenomenon that is particularly acute during the first year of study. However, a recent Australian study by Cardak and Vecci (2015) indicates that although the rate of

dropout reduces across the first 3 years of a course, after 3 years of study the risk of dropout increases for those students who are financially constrained. This is particularly pertinent for social work courses which are 4 year courses and which traditionally have a full time field placement during the last semester of their final year, a source of identified financial stress.

Worthy of further consideration is the finding that 29% of respondents who stated that they needed to defer a course or reduce study load in order to work. Such deferrals may be the first step in students dropping out altogether and even if students return, it delays students' timely progress for reasons other than academic capacity.

Finally, as identified, a common issue emerging from these findings repeated in both qualitative and quantitative data from in this study was the impact of student field placements on social work student financial status. While social work students may have been financially disadvantaged without field placements, it is clear that the field placements are adding substantially to the financial burden of large numbers of students. While these financial stresses for tertiary students are not unexpected, the severity of financial stresses for social work students appear to be substantial, and may need renewed and measured attention.

Conclusion

The NSSWS has provided valuable data on the impact of low income on social work students' tertiary studies, their ability to secure life necessities, and their life, work and study balance. Low levels of government allowances and support, and student ineligibility may be contributing to students' heightened financial stress.

The strength of the impact of low and inadequate income on the lives of social work students, as well as on their ability to make best use of their social work course may warrant further attention. The NSSWS is thus part of the growing evidence that there is a need for change to the level of allowances available to students. It confirms the importance of the AASW continuing to lobby for increases in allowances (Newstart, Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy), particularly for students who are required to undertake field placements. It is also clear that there are many tertiary students who would benefit from additional financial assistance who currently are not able to access it.

The findings of this study may provide valuable insight for social work educators regarding increased understanding of the circumstances impacting their student body.

The wide dissemination and support of these findings can assist with further advocacy and awareness of the current realities for social work students and can inform strategies for relieving increasing student poverty.

References

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