# Ready or Not: Workplace Perspectives on Work-readiness Indicators in Social Work Graduates

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## ABSTRACT

Social work graduates should have a range of capabilities they can integrate and adapt to different contexts and practice situations. Defining work-readiness indicators can guide the development, support, and assessment of students and new graduates. This pilot qualitative study was conducted with social workers in Australia in 2011. Researchers conducted 13 semi-structured interviews to explore what employers, supervisors and colleagues of social work graduates deemed indicators of work readiness. Four themes emerged: (i) reflective practice; (ii) understanding of and ability to enact a social work role; (iii) interpersonal communication and relationships; and (iv) organisational practice. These findings suggest social work education should maintain focus on critical thinking, reflective learning, theory–practice integration, and teamwork, and extend work-integrated learning beyond placements.

**Keywords:** *Work-integrated learning; Social work graduates; Work-readiness indicators; Capabilities; Preparation for practice; Social work education*

The relationship between university and the workplace has occupied a central place in social work education since its early development in Australia (Napier & George, 2001; Payne, 2005). There is a high level of engagement between university social work programs and the world of professional practice as evidenced by the integration of practice knowledge into the curriculum, and the pivotal role of practising social workers as field educators (Healy & Lonne, 2010). Over the past two decades, a broader focus on university–workplace relationships across disciplines has increasingly occupied the attention of policy makers and academics within Australia and internationally (ACEN, 2015; Patrick et al., 2008; PhillipsKPA, 2014). This includes a focus on graduate attributes and the resulting demand for university educators to balance generic and discipline-specific knowledge and skills (e.g., Baker, 2014). Alongside this is an expectation that graduates will preserve their profession's values, principles and practices while simultaneously meeting the demands of increasingly complex and challenging workplaces (Healy & Lonne, 2010).

This article outlines a qualitative study undertaken by social work researchers at a regional university in Newcastle, Australia. In semi-structured interviews, researchers asked social work employers, supervisors and colleagues of new social work graduates how they determined work readiness, to initiate some preliminary readiness indicators. This study was prompted by conversations with field educators seeking more specific indicators of successful students on placement to those provided in professional practice standards and learning plans, including less tangible (yet essential) qualities for practising social workers. It expands on earlier research at the University of Newcastle (UoN) (Agllias, 2010) in which final-year students and new social work graduates were interviewed about practice preparedness to compare the "anticipated and concrete practice reality for new social workers" (Agllias, 2010, p. 346). It seeks to broaden knowledge of the new graduate experience through the inclusion of employer, supervisor and colleagues' perspectives on work readiness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational reform in Western social work has increasingly focused on work readiness. In Australia, this has been fuelled by various forces such as public critiques and investigations in child protection suggesting failures of social workers (Lonne, Harries, & Lantz, 2013). Additionally, there has been a gradual erosion of social-work-specific roles in areas such as mental health, aging and child protection and competition from educational programs that offer professional pathways into the social service industry, including the Qualifying Masters of Social Work (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Cortis & Meager, 2012; Karger, 2012). A concrete example of this erosion was highlighted in 2010 when the Federal Government announced removal of mental health social workers as providers in one of its primary mental health initiatives (Medicare's *Better Access* Program). This re-ignited the argument that the profession needed to be clearer about its role, purpose, value and pedagogy (Allen-Kelly, 2010; Cheron-Sauer, 2013).

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has addressed these challenges with increased attention to professional registration, trademarking, improved practice and ethical standards as well as more stringent accreditation requirements (AASW, 2012). However, debate continues about the capacity of Australia's educational institutions, which

are increasingly required to do more with less, to prepare social workers who are 'ready' to work effectively in a fluid and complex socio-political milieu often featuring contradictory demands (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Karger, 2012). Added to this are differing views about whether workplaces continue development of graduate readiness, or if universities should provide graduates as an "end product" ready for practice upon workplace entry (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Bates et al., 2010; Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011; Sussman, Bailey, Byford Richardson, & Granner, 2014).

Social work's preparedness agenda is reflected in an expanding body of research that considers how universities are preparing students for the workplace and educational pathways (Cortis & Meagher, 2012; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004; Healy & Meagher, 2007; McLennan & Keating, 2008; Skilton, 2011; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004), the role of workplaces in lifelong learning (Bates et al., 2010; Edwards, Ranson, & Strain, 2002; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009), and graduate attributes (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004; Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Scott & Wilson, 2002; Seipel, Johnson, & Walton, 2011). Studies on preparedness have considered perspectives of students and graduates (Agllias, 2010; Wilson, 2013a), employers or field educators (Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004; Sussman et al., 2014), academics (Wilson & Campbell, 2013), or a combination of perspectives (Bates, et al., 2010; Healy & Meagher, 2007; Seipel et al., 2011).

Key concepts across the research include work-integrated learning (WIL) (McLennan & Keating, 2008), work readiness and employability (Glover, Law, & Youngman, 2002; Moriarty et al., 2011), work placement (Crebert et al., 2004), generic and specialist skills (Bath et al., 2004; Healy & Meagher, 2007), and student preparedness or preparation for practice (Agllias, 2010; Bates et al., 2010; Clapton, 2012; Cortis & Meagher, 2012; Wilson, 2013a). We will use WIL as the overarching concept because it encompasses elements across the preceding list.

Policy and research literature on WIL is concerned largely with promoting workplace relevance of university courses for student engagement and supplying a skilled workforce into the future. For social work, this growing focus on WIL recognises the core elements of curricula which, for decades, have combined field placements and other work-integrated activities. McLennan and Keating (2008) highlight the diverse definitions of WIL with a common denominator of "educational programs linked to work" (p. 5). Work-based placements are considered the showpiece of WIL. Some authors highlight tensions for universities, such as securing and resourcing placements as demand for WIL increases (McLennan & Keating, 2008), integrating WIL throughout university curricula, and defining clear learning outcomes and assessment (Shinnick, Doherty, Larkings, & Roberts, 2008).

The literature emphasises the critical importance of strong partnerships and shared knowledge between academics and the field, including suggestions for field involvement in curriculum development and supporting student learning (Cameron, 2003; Gonczi, 2001; McLennan & Keating, 2008; Wilson, 2013a). There is also recognition that employers, educational institutions, professional bodies and educators often have conflicting and competing agendas, selectively pursued or dominated by more powerful players (Taylor & Bogo, 2013). Research suggests there is often a dissonance between creative and reflective

pedagogy and functional priorities of the agency (Wilson, 2013a; Wilson & Campbell, 2013; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Related research seeks to define, critique, and understand how graduates demonstrate their readiness for the workforce, using an array of descriptors, including graduate attributes (Bath et al., 2004; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009), generic skills (Cornford, 2005; Crebert et al., 2004), competencies (Moriarty et al., 2011; Taylor & Bogo, 2013; Wilson, 2013a; Wilson & Kelly, 2010), skills and processes (Bates et al., 2010), and capabilities (Scott & Wilson, 2002; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004; Taylor & Bogo, 2013).

For our research, "capabilities" is useful as it provides scope for work-readiness indicators prioritised in social work, such as confidence, adaptability, initiative and teamwork (Agllias, 2010; Cameron, 2003; Healy & Meagher, 2007). It is commonly agreed that mapping capabilities across a curriculum and clearly describing the characteristics of work readiness is not straightforward (Bath et al., 2004; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004). Sumsion and Goodfellow (2004) argue that development of a clear set of work-readiness characteristics requires attention to the characteristic itself, the methodological rigour of identifying it, and the context of its development. They favour Stephenson's (1998) concept of "capability" because it expands the idea of competency (seen as the ability to perform effectively in a familiar context) to include adaptive skills to effectively understand and work in a range of new and often challenging contexts.

There is general agreement amongst researchers that a set of generic skills or capabilities is necessary across disciplines for work readiness but there has been a decided shift from competence – one does or does not have a skill – to capacity. The current focus tends towards contextually dependent "meta" (higher-order) competencies such as reasoning and critical reflection as well as procedural competencies (Taylor & Bogo, 2013). Priority capabilities are: communication; interpersonal skills; problem solving and reasoning; critical thinking; ability to use technology; teamwork; empathy; patience; adaptability to change; ethics; and creativity (Bath et al., 2004; Crebert et al., 2004; Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009; Riebschleger & Grettenberger, 2006; Scott & Wilson, 2002; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004). There is considerable agreement that work readiness is best developed in practice or work contexts and with a range of social and learning supports in place, such as supervision (Moriarty et al., 2011), building workplace capacity learning transfer (Cornford, 2005), structured induction, and use of reflective learning (Ruch, 2000) and communities of practice to support lifelong learning (Bates et al., 2010; Seipel et al., 2011).

An increasing managerial pressure in workplaces requires specific graduate capabilities (Gould & Harris, 1996; Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Napier & George, 2001; Ruch, 2000; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). This literature provides a more nuanced understanding of the learning context where social work students and graduates navigate often contradictory or ad hoc alignment of ethics, values, cultures and rules between universities and workplaces (Agllias, 2010; Birkenmaier, 2003; Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Wilson and Kelly's (2010) study highlighted an accidental rivalry between academic and agency expectations that proved unhelpful for integrated learning. Students and graduates face complexity and difficulty in workplaces where functional activities are prioritised over theory–practice integration and risk becoming "overly aligned with the work system that employs them" (Lafrance & Gray, 2004, p. 337).

The work-readiness indicators developed from our research needed to address this issue of theory–practice integration and the associated reflective and adaptive learning required to bring together university and workplace learning. Variations in views about work readiness also need consideration to create a sound framework of indicators with shared understanding and responsibility between educators, employers, and graduates.

## METHOD

### The study

Our key research question was: what do social workers who employ, supervise and work alongside social work graduates look for as indicators of work readiness? Purposive sampling was used to identify social workers from government and non-government organisations (NGOs) in the Hunter and Central Coast regions that provide placements and are major employers of University of Newcastle social work graduates. This was further specified by seeking social workers occupying different position levels in agencies – senior manager/director, middle manager/supervisor, and frontline practitioner – to understand their perspectives. While graduates are initially engaged by *senior managers*, they often report engaging more frequently with *frontline workers* day-to-day and interacting with *middle management* in relation to training and supervision. The study received ethics clearance in September 2010 from the University of Newcastle Ethics Committee, which operates in accordance with the Australian *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007*.

### Recruitment

Potential participants were identified using the University of Newcastle social work field education database, selecting organisations that had provided final year placements during the previous three years. This resulted in 11 agencies (six government and five NGO) and a potential 35 participants. The most senior person in each agency was invited to participate in the research as a "senior manager" and to forward study information to other social workers in their agency to consider participating as "middle manager" or "frontline practitioner". They were asked to contact researchers directly and no further contact occurred with senior agency staff.

### Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 13 practitioners. There were 10 women (nine government and one NGO) and three men (one government and two NGO). Participants were employed in a variety of fields including health (three), mental health (three), income security (two), child protection, juvenile justice, aged care, childhood disability and community support. Interviews were conducted with five senior managers (four government and one NGO), four middle managers (two government and two NGO) and four frontline practitioners (all government employees). Interview questions focused on: (i) employment of new graduates; (ii) expectations and indicators of work readiness; (iii) responsibilities for developing work readiness; (iv) transitioning from university to the workplace; and (v) the Bachelor of Social Work curriculum. This paper reports on data from the first two.

### Data analysis

Interviews were audio recorded, then thematically analysed consistent with a constructivist grounded theory approach. Trustworthiness, dependability and confirmation of coding and analytic decision-making were enhanced by employing several researchers to analyse, compare and contrast findings. Categories were initially coded by the researcher who conducted the interview. The four interviewers then met to compare and refine these codes. Finally, detailed analysis was undertaken by the first and second authors to determine the emergent and divergent themes reported on in this paper.

### Ethical issues and methodological limitations

Because this was a small, qualitative study results cannot be generalised. However, findings from this study are consistent with key themes in relevant research literature and signpost the potential for further research to test preliminary indicators identified here. In terms of ethical considerations, participants were provided verbal and written statements about voluntary participation, confidentiality and informed consent, and interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants. Limitations include possible sample bias. Practitioners familiar with, or with a strong opinion about, the University of Newcastle social work program were most likely to participate in the study. Similarly, the incidence of prior relationships between participants and the academic researchers was high due to the regional location. While attempts were made to pair researchers and participants who were unknown to or unfamiliar with each other, this was not always possible and may have contributed to bias. It is impossible to determine the influence of these conditions on current study findings so further investigation with comparative samples is warranted.

## FINDINGS

Participants suggested a spectrum of critical base indicators of work readiness when they were employing new graduates. They ranged from tangible and measurable skills to a number of less tangible factors, such as empathy, ethical decision making, reflexivity, critical reflection and teamwork. Four key themes were identified from participants' responses:

- reflective practice;
- understanding of and ability to enact a social work role;
- interpersonal communication and relationships; and
- organisational practice.

The following section will commence with a general exploration of these themes in relation to new graduate *recruitment and selection*. This will be followed by a deeper exploration of on-the-job, work-readiness indicators under each of the four themes, and some discussion of the variance between employers, supervisors and peers.

### Recruitment and selection

Many participants, particularly middle and senior managers, referred to recruitment and selection as the main contact point with new graduates. Some said initial thinking about

recruiting begins during field placement and they often employ graduates who had done a placement with their agency. During recruitment and selection, participants looked for new graduates who could demonstrate three main things: *key social work learning/knowledge*, the *transfer of learning to the new organisational context* and *appropriate job-seeking processes*.

Participants suggested that employability was initially related to a new graduate who could not only state their social work learning and knowledge from the classroom but could also detail examples from field placements. This capacity to demonstrate theory to practice development was very important to employers, and was tested in various ways in the interview situation. For example, new graduates were often expected to demonstrate more than their theoretical understanding of, say, "supervision", and provide concrete examples of its use in practice: "A key question we ask is 'what have you learnt about yourself in supervision?'. THAT is a defining question. If they can't go there, they are not ready" (Participant 3).

Further, new graduates' ability to transfer – or even attempt to transfer – their experience and knowledge into the potential employing agency's context, despite their often limited agency-specific knowledge, was considered a strong employability indicator. Some participants suggested they use the brief interview time to assess whether the new graduate could make quick and informed decisions under pressure.

Other considerations that informed recruitment decisions and indicated how a graduate might practise if employed, focused on appropriate job-seeking processes. Participants suggested the pre-interview period was important in demonstrating key social work capacities. They favoured new graduates who contacted their agency and sought information prior to interview, as well as those who submitted suitably informed, succinctly written and well-structured applications. Some stated they were looking for independent thought and practical relevance in applications, "not a sociological essay" (Participant 9), supported well with evidence from previous placements and referees. Employers' emphasis on demonstration of knowledge, transfer of knowledge to a new context, and job-application processes suggests the focus in recruitment can be as much (and sometimes more) on process and skills as it is on knowledge and information. This emphasis continued once employment commenced and is represented in the following themes.

**Reflective practice**

Participants stated that an understanding of, and commitment to, reflective practice was imperative to work readiness. They focused on three key indicators of sound reflective practice: *engaged reflection and ongoing learning*; *ethical decision making;* and *self-awareness and self-care.*

Participants stressed the importance of supervision, not only as a professional imperative, but that graduates should demonstrate knowledge about its purpose, and use supervision processes and relationships to develop reflective practice. Work readiness was indicated by an engaged new graduate who understood the importance of reflection, was open and willing to learn, and was cognisant of the ongoing nature of learning. The ability to make links between experiences, case examples, theories and other knowledge was considered a critical indicator and one which was consistently considered by participants post-recruitment. Participants said it was important for new graduates to be able to discuss

their thinking and reasoning processes. Particular emphasis was placed on willingness to acknowledge, describe and discuss practice challenges and tensions and to be honest about existing experience levels. As one practitioner stated, "I really worry about people where everything seems to be fine for them, because in this sort of environment everything is not 'fine'. Anybody, even the more experienced, will struggle with the complexities or situations they face" (Participant 8).

Some also thought it was important for new graduates to interpret and draw conclusions about client circumstances by considering existing knowledge as well as their own practice: *"seeing them be able to demonstrate empathy by responding appropriately to a client's practical and emotional needs and then being able to talk about how they did it, being able to deconstruct their assessment beyond needs"* (Participant 3).

Very few participants discussed *ethical* decision making specifically. There were, however, many related responses referring to decision making, drawing conclusions, and making judgements. Readiness was indicated when a new graduate recognised and took a measured and calm approach to managing ethical issues:

*[The] capacity to recognise when a situation needs particular care, for example, a reasonably new social worker challenged by use of terminology/phrase that was part of policy, demonstrated ability to name the challenge and use supervision to talk it through and determine a course of action she and the family may be comfortable with.* (Participant 10)

Participants suggested an indicator of readiness for practice was seeking guidance from others, and recognising the importance of consulting others in decision making:

*[to] consult with other people or talk about how their values are affected by a particular case, or how their values impacted on that decision... I think when we stop doing that, I think that's when we're at risk of making dangerous decisions.* (Participant 2)

In relation to self-awareness and self-care, some participants suggested a connection between personal and workplace stability and competence in drawing links between practice, thinking and knowledge. Readiness indicators included new graduates with sound understandings of stress and burnout and those who practised self-care strategies. Individual characteristics such as resilience, modesty, emotional intelligence and confidence were also cited as important indicators:

*...that level of also modesty, but subtle confidence, which I know is really subjective, but you get a sense of whether people have those foundation skills to be able to translate into the workplace, and that's what I look for, not necessarily their experience. I look to see if they've got those foundation skills.* (Participant 7)

Personal insight, comfort in exposing and questioning one's practice, and purposefully seeking growth and development were deemed indicators of work readiness. Others emphasised the importance of graduates contextualising their own practice as an indicator of good work and self-management. For example, "People who can relate their thinking

back to what they are doing don't tend to have frustrations in the workplace, including ability to reframe" (Participant 8).

**Understanding of, and ability to enact, a social work role**

Participants suggested it was imperative for new graduates to have a clear understanding of, and ability to enact, a *social work* role. This was underscored by a strong *social work knowledge, theory and practice base* as well as demonstrated *contextual application.* So, new graduates were expected to understand the general role and foundations of social work, make distinctions between social work and other professions, and determine agency-specific social work roles. There was some expectation of complementing this with understanding and maintaining a social work identity. One participant discussed balancing social work and agency knowledge while recognising the challenge this presents after entering the workplace: "Don't trade off social work learning or study for developing and understanding the workplace" (Participant 9). Another suggested that a critical understanding of social work's mission was important. She explained that new graduates needed: "to show a broader understanding [of] social work knowledge and have a broader understanding of a social and political context of the place they work in" (Participant 3).

There was also consistency in views about connecting theory and practice and applying learning, during recruitment and subsequent practice. One participant said, "naming theories or interventions is not sufficient" (Participant 9); however, no participants were explicit about particular theories that should be known and applied. Another participant talked about the importance of connecting professional role identity and a knowledge base, saying graduates need "an idea of what a social worker does, beyond that 'I just want help people' sort of thing, understanding that there is a structured theoretical way of working with others" (Participant 6). This supports participants' common view that graduates should define a theory or body of knowledge *and* demonstrate its relevance through case examples and across contexts.

A set of foundational skills was referred to by some participants. These were discussed in general rather than as a specific knowledge and skills base (for example, written and oral communication, interpersonal, organisational, analytical) to be used adaptively to: "highlight the transferability of skills across settings and agencies, for example, psychosocial assessment" (Participant 1). Another participant commented on this in a multidisciplinary context: "There's a difference between profession-specific skills because we all come from a different philosophy and ethos, but there's core professional skills we have and that links back to critical reasoning and translation of assessment into planning" (Participant 7).

**Interpersonal communication and relationships**

Interestingly, many participants did not discuss specific interpersonal behaviour and interactions; most referred to them in general terms, noting their importance in work with clients and colleagues. However, *sound interpersonal skills* and the capacity to be *appropriately autonomous and independent* were core. Connecting and engaging were cited as indicators of readiness, as were precursors such as approachability, empathy, listening for and picking up on messages, and sound use of language. An intrinsic interest in people

was also important. Participants did state new graduates needed to use these skills beyond connecting with others, suggesting readiness was also indicated by analytical processing, advocacy, public speaking and managing conflict.

The importance of *oral and written skills* was common in the majority of practitioner responses. One participant noted:

*Social work is still a profession that relies on the written word and capacity to write well and appropriate to the purpose of the writing ... [social workers] still need to handwrite in a lot of health settings; on-the-spot, in a hurry, legibly, and still in a way that reflects all of their learnings and understandings and values and things like that.* (Participant 10)

Participants also suggested that independence and autonomy were indicators of work readiness. They expected new graduates to become involved in all aspects of the work, and initiate work with little direction: "[They] need to take responsibility to speak about their learning and be proactive, taking initiative, being independent" (Participant 3). Balancing autonomy and independence with seeking assistance was also discussed as critical:

*Some new grads need way too much parenting and really want to check back with you on every detail, and don't have the confidence to make any, even small decisions by themselves and others know everything and really make decisions that are way outside what you would want them to be making. And then, some really get that balance.* (Participant 10)

**Organisational practice**

There was significant focus on organisational practice across participant responses in terms of practice skills and consideration of context. Workplace readiness was primarily connected to two aspects: an *authentic engagement with organisational practice* and the *capacity to work well with others*. Authentic engagement with organisational practice included indicators such as professional behaviours, developing a sound knowledge of the agency and participating in, and involving clients in, ideas, evaluations and decisions about the organisation and its services. Indeed, a number of participants talked about graduates engaging with their organisation through emphasising the systemic and structural focus of social work and discussing and taking action on broader issues, which is beyond (yet complementary to) clinical interventions. Interestingly, a number noted that practitioners should enjoy work, with no indication of what this might look like but implying a mindset or experience that may assist in workplace stability.

Participants from all organisational levels talked about graduates "fitting in", and some mentioned this more than once. Many said it is a priority during recruitment to select a practitioner most likely to "fit in" and "get on with others". One stated: "I need team players. I don't need strong individual social workers. I need people who can help out somebody else, and who are willing to go the extra mile for their colleague" (Participant 8). "Working with others" was viewed, not only in terms of organisational harmony, but was also associated with risks for the new graduate and their clients:

*...in terms of great fit for the team and you can see that, when people come in and they have the ability to fit in the team environment and you can see where people don't... people are fairly isolated and you can see the team doesn't gel with them, they're not accepted in the team... for new grads I think that's really dangerous because ... they're sitting out there on their own and then they don't feel like they can ask.* (Participant 7)

**Comparing participant responses by position level**

Not surprisingly, middle and senior managers provided more coverage of recruitment and selection because they are more likely to coordinate these activities. When discussing knowledge, frontline practitioner participants provided very little detail about the type of knowledge expected, only noting "knowledge around case studies" (Participant 1). Middle managers provided a number of specific knowledge examples.

Regardless of position level, all participants considered a critical determinant of work readiness and employability as graduates' ability to connect practice experiences or case studies with theory and knowledge, and to apply knowledge and skills across contexts. How they might consider these factors and what they might look for might differ between positions. There were no distinct differences across the interviews, although most senior manager participants talked about the theory–practice and context indicators in more detail. Some frontline practitioners provided more concrete and specific descriptions of interpersonal skills, while middle and senior managers described them mostly in broader terms. The nature of interactions and audience of practitioners at different levels does vary. Accordingly, the importance, relevance and use of fundamental skills to engage and build rapport might vary. It might also be that frontline practitioners are more conscious of using those skills in interactions with clients and colleagues due to the frequency or duration of such contacts. For example, if a frontline practitioner is more commonly providing brief interventions they are more practised and focused on making immediate connections. Comparatively, middle and senior managers may have longer-term connections with others and less frequent immediate outcome imperatives.

## DISCUSSION

The following discussion considers the aforementioned findings in relation to current research and literature, discusses a tentative set of work-readiness indicators for social work graduates, and suggests associated implications for social work andragogy. The findings of this small study align with existing social work and interdisciplinary research on work-integrated learning and work readiness, echoing consistent emphasis on adaptive inter-contextual knowledge, critical thinking and reflection, and the ability to integrate theory and practice (Bates et al., 2010; Healy & Meagher, 2007; Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Sussman et al., 2014). In terms of the previous study on student preparedness (Agllias, 2010) that we intended to build on, there is consistency with student and graduates' value of supervision and their views that "good social worker" capabilities include values, communication, self-awareness and reflective practice, autonomy, and theoretically informed practice (Agllias, 2010). This is important for conceptual alignment between students, graduates, employers and educators about work readiness and engagement of students and graduates in related learning.

Participants' emphasis on recruitment and selection in this study is consistent with contemporary shifts in social work around recruitment and retention (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Lonne et al., 2013). It also highlights the second of three platforms (university, recruitment, and employment) for demonstrating work readiness in reflective learning, self-awareness, and experience-knowledge-practice integration. A more explicit focus on recruitment could feature in social work teaching and learning, beyond providing employment suitability information to demonstrating thinking and practice capabilities and processes in recruitment-like scenarios.

Of some interest in this study were the tacit or assumed notions research participants did *not* identify specifically as work-readiness indicators. There was some mention of core social work values such as social justice and the importance of ethical practice. They were not explicitly identified as at the forefront of work readiness but were infused in discussions about other issues. The importance of social work education focused on social justice, ethics, and macro practice and students' capacity to make related practice connections has been highlighted by other researchers (Birkenmaier, 2003; Gray & Gibbons, 2002; Sussman et al., 2014). Further research on how social workers learn about and connect social justice and clinical or practice skills is recommended.

This study confirms a core set of capabilities can be clearly and consistently identified to indicate the work readiness of social work graduates. The themes identified help distil a set of readiness indicators that fall into three domains: (i) universal or foundational capabilities; (ii) teamwork; and (iii) willingness to learn and active engagement in reflective learning.

*Universal or foundational capabilities* include interpersonal skills and communication (written and oral), applying theory to practice across contexts, and personal and work organisation. Each of these feature in sets of generic skills or capacities identified in the literature (Bates et al., 2010; Bath et al., 2004; Cornford, 2005; Crebert et al., 2004; Moriarty et al., 2011; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009; Riebschleger & Grettenberger, 2006; Scott & Wilson, 2002; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004; Taylor & Bogo, 2013; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Many participants emphasised *integration* of foundational capabilities (versus outstanding achievement in one) during and after recruitment, and that this forms a solid premise for capabilities in the other two domains. This aligns with another study that identified interrelation of conceptualisation and self-awareness as a lynchpin that can support or inhibit graduates making connections between experience, knowledge, and practice situations (Sussman et al., 2014).

*Teamwork* was reported by participants as essential and dependent on the foundational capabilities outlined above. This is supported by other studies on generic graduate skills (Crebert et al., 2007; Glover et al., 2002; Scott & Wilson, 2002), and one conclusion in a social work study that, "a worker who is talented but does not get along with others, or is selfish or unethical, can get in the way of organizational success" (Seipel et al., 2011, p. 459). Participants in this study consistently prioritised an ability to successfully negotiate and participate in a team environment and indicated this is a primary driver in recruitment and selection decisions. Integration also featured in participants' ideas about teamwork by placing pivotal importance on finding a balance between bringing a unique contribution

to a team, establishing good rapport with work colleagues (social work and other disciplines), and respectful partnerships with others within and outside the agency.

*Willingness to learn and active engagement in reflective learning* were identified consistently by participants as significant indicators of work readiness. In a similar way to teamwork, willingness to learn was described as a higher-order capability reliant on effective interpersonal skills, communication, and the ability to apply theory to practice. Core indicators of work readiness after recruitment were reported to be graduates' willingness to ask questions, to seek guidance from colleagues, seek and use supervision, and to engage in reflective learning and practice development. Aligned with other research, this supports the view employers are increasingly seeking generic capabilities and the ability to communicate over technical knowledge and skills (Seipel et al., 2011). This also suggests participants in this study acknowledge employer responsibility for continuing development of graduates once they enter the workplace, rather than expecting extensive or context-specific knowledge on arrival (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Bates et al., 2010; Moriarty et al., 2011; Sussman et al., 2014). The importance of reflective practice as a work-readiness indicator in social work is highlighted in the literature over an extended period (Cameron, 2003; Gould & Harris, 1996; Ruch, 2000). Participants in the current research reported a capacity to reflect as inseparable from a willingness or openness to learn. This is consistent with literature that identifies reflective learning as a key generic capability for all university graduates (Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2007; Wilson 2013b) and one that is linked to ongoing or lifelong learning (Bath et al., 2004; Pitman & Broomhall, 2009; Scott & Wilson, 2002).

**Implications for practice and research**

A concerted, targeted and shared approach between universities and workplaces is critical to progressing knowledge about work-readiness indicators and incorporating them into social work curriculum and workplace learning initiatives. Workplace learning occurs for students and graduates, extending beyond field placements to other work-integrated learning activities established and supported by university educators and curriculum.

Findings in this study about foundational capabilities and their integration are significant for social work educators. Key questions emerging from participants' focus on integration and application include: how universities identify, support and develop foundational capabilities such as humility and openness to learning prior to graduation, and how social work programs can involve and work with practitioners to improve experience-practice-knowledge integration to strengthen graduate work readiness. While further work needs to be done, Australian social work programs using experience- or problem-based learning (Gibbons & Gray, 2002) and issues-based learning (Napier & George, 2001) have provided significant progress in better integrating university and practice-based learning.

Closer partnerships between employers and university social work educators (Cameron, 2003) can focus on curriculum and assessment design, field components in coursework to complement field placements (Wilson & Kelly, 2010), and development of learning activities which provide an immersed and integrated experience for students. These may take place across courses and year levels within a social work program and across disciplines within the university. Critically, these suggestions are not about increasing

time spent on field placement. Rather, social work curriculum should include a raft of practice opportunities to develop theory-integrated practice and practice-integrated theory appropriate to learning stages and foci, guided by the work-readiness indicators highlighted in this study.

The findings about teamwork mean social work educators need to examine learning design and processes to provide group experiences that help describe, analyse, and respond to the complexities of team dynamics. This may include extending the usual task focus of student group work to grappling with team dynamics and determining ways of tracking learning to the same level as task completion. The previously mentioned learning modes based on experiences, problems, and issues (Gibbons & Gray, 2002; Lam, 2004; Napier & George, 2001) generally occur in groups. These exercises could be extended to consider content of cases or scenarios and the group dynamics observed and experienced while working on the task and subject.

Findings from this study and the literature also point to the need for ongoing support for reflective learning and practice post-graduation, during the early stages of employment. The practicality, content, process, and impact of this requires further investigation. This should consider how university educators engage in this realm, and how reciprocal arrangements can be developed with agency-based social workers, to provide learning opportunities for the field and university programs.

Further research focused on how graduates develop and consolidate the capabilities identified in this study will provide guidance for social work educators and employers to support students achieving work readiness. Analysis of other data from this research that is not within the scope of this paper should contribute more knowledge about responsibilities for developing work readiness, transitioning from university to the workplace, and social work curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study help build increasingly specific descriptions of work-readiness indicators in social work graduates. As a small study, restricted to a select number of social workers and agencies, the findings are preliminary and require further research and application to practice in social work programs and workplaces. Cornford's (2005) argument about the importance of providing comprehensive and specific teaching, modelling and support for development of capabilities invites an analysis in social work of how transferable and integrated capabilities are learned and applied. Field placements remain the cornerstone of WIL in social work and are pivotal in developing work-ready graduates. Students on placement find themselves in complex practice contexts where communication, teamwork, enactment of theory in "real world" situations, and reflective practice converge. The findings from this study point to a range of other opportunities for social work educators to integrate theory and practice learning throughout degree studies and questions about how employers of social work graduates might better support ongoing workplace learning immediately following graduation. An important future project will be to draw connections between student, graduate, educator, and employer perspectives on work-readiness

indicators. This should help develop a shared understanding of how they are defined, assessed, and developed in, and between, university and workplace programs.

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