

Job Satisfaction and Workforce Retention of Newly Qualified Social Work and Community Services Workers: An Australian Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

Creating a sustainable community services workforce is a major concern for educators and employers in many countries (Australian Council of Social Services [ACOSS], 2013; Hussein, Moriarty, Stevens, Sharpe, & Manthorpe, 2014). This paper reports on findings from an Australian pilot study on job satisfaction and intention to remain in one's organisation among newly qualified workers (NQWs) in the not-for-profit (NFP) community services sector (see Hussein et al., 2014). Our study surveyed 59 NQWs working as social work and community service practitioners in NFP community services in one Australian state. We discuss the range of factors which emerged as important for promoting job satisfaction and intention to remain among these workers. While the study is one of the first on NQWs in Australia, it supports findings from two prior United Kingdom studies concerning the value NQWs place on values alignment in practice, a supportive team environment and opportunities for advancing knowledge and skills in the first year of practice. Our study also points to a strong sense of professional and occupational identity among NQWs in the community services sector and its importance for job satisfaction and workforce retention. This paper identifies directions for future research and provides tentative directions for promoting job satisfaction and workforce retention among NQWs.

Keywords: *Newly qualified workers; Community services; Preparation for practice; Professional identity; Job satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

Support needs of Newly Qualified Workers

Our study focused on NQWs in the non-government sector. We focused on this sector because of the employment growth arising from increased government out-sourcing of service provision to NFPs. In studying the needs of NQWs in this sector, it was important not to limit ourselves to only those with social work qualifications. In Australia, “social work” is not a government-regulated profession meaning that the title of “social worker” is not protected by law. A range of titles other than social worker are commonly used to describe professional workers in this sector and even those using the title social worker may not hold accredited social work qualifications. Indeed, the qualification base of those working in social work and community services roles is diverse and, while qualified social workers remain a significant group, they are not numerically dominant in professional and para-professional services roles in Australian community services (Healy & Lonne, 2010). Professionally qualified social workers often work in the same roles as practitioners with qualifications in cognate disciplines, such as human services, psychology and applied social sciences. Furthermore, there is a broad range of diploma- and certificate-level qualifications leading to para-professional roles in the sector. Recognising the diverse qualification base of the Australian non-government social and community services sector, for the purposes of this study, we define NQWs as:

- a) Workers who have completed a post-school qualification at Certificate IV level or higher as recognised by the Vocational and Educational Training (Vocational) Sector, or a degree-level qualification in a human services field, such as social work or social science (Professional); and
- b) Those in their first year of paid employment as social or community services workers since the completion of their post-school qualification; this includes workers with experience prior to gaining a formal qualification. The range of roles undertaken by these workers is broad and can include family support, caseworker or case-manager, and personal care worker.

In Australia, NQWs in the community services sector have received little attention in state or national workforce policy despite an overall concern with the sustainability of this sector as demand for services grows (see ACOSS, 2013). By contrast, governments in the United Kingdom have initiated a range of support strategies to assist NQWs in the transition to practice. For example in England since 2009, newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) in both government and non-government sectors are required to participate in an Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). During this initial period of practice, NQSWS have access to government funding to address their professional development and support needs. Furthermore, the Scottish Social Services Council (2011, p. 4) Code of Practice obliges employers of NQSWS to provide ongoing training relevant to their role and organisational context. These initiatives have been credited with increasing job satisfaction among NQSWS (Community Care, 2010).

Understanding job satisfaction and workforce retention

Our focus in this paper is illuminating the factors that contribute to job satisfaction and workforce retention among NQWs. Job satisfaction refers to the “positive emotional state resulting from appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). In this study we use the term “workforce retention” to refer to the intention to remain in one’s organisation.

Few studies exist on job satisfaction and workforce retention among NQWs. Two exceptions to this are the large-scale study of NQSWs in Britain conducted from 2008-2009 (Sharpe, Moriarty, Stevens, Manthorpe, & Hussein, 2011) and Hussein et al.’s (2014) study of job satisfaction and workforce retention among 280 NQSWs. Both studies found that most NQSWs reported being satisfied with their jobs (80%+). Both found that respondents’ perceptions of being able to put “social work” values into practice and job engagement (referring to opportunities for professional learning and development and for effective engagement with clients) were strongly predictive of job satisfaction. Indeed, this confirms findings of studies into the health and community services workforces more generally where the presence of shared values and beliefs is identified as an important predictor of job satisfaction (Campbell, McAllister, & Eley, 2012; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Haley-Lock, 2007; Tham, 2006).

Hussein et al.’s (2014) study identified that respondents’ perception of being well-prepared by their professional education for their current role was important also to job satisfaction. Indeed, they concluded that:

The interaction between perceptions of the quality of qualifying education and the quality of the work environment was a constant theme throughout this study and suggests the two cannot be separated.

This finding suggests that responsibility for promoting job satisfaction and intention to remain in social work and human service occupations should be shared between educators and employing agencies.

Hussein et al. (2014) found that job engagement which includes a combination of opportunities for professional learning, development and opportunities to make a real difference to clients’ lives was highly predictive of NQSWs’ job satisfaction. The importance of professional efficacy which refers to the sense of making a positive difference to service users’ lives is confirmed elsewhere as important to job satisfaction for both newly qualified and more experienced workers (Borzaga & Tortia, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2011). The two British studies of NQSWs also found that membership of a supportive team is a strong predictor of job satisfaction and intention to remain (Sharpe et al., 2011, p. 136; Hussein et al., 2014, p. 390). Again this is consistent with previous studies that point to the association between social workers feeling valued and supported by their team being more likely to intend to remain (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Glissen & Durick, 1988; Haley-Lock, 2007).

A review of the literature suggests that both newly qualified and more experienced workers are more likely to be satisfied and more likely to remain in circumstances where they have:

a sense of professional efficacy; a positive team environment; and sense of shared values within their team and organisation (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2007; Haley-Lock, 2007; Healy, 2009). However, NQWs also appear to have some specific expectations that differ from the social work and community services workforce more generally. Notably, Sharpe et al. (2011) found that job satisfaction and workforce retention were not statistically significantly correlated for NQWs suggesting that factors other than job satisfaction may be important in NQWs' intentions to remain in their role and organisation. Opportunities for job engagement, such as professional development, appear to be particularly important for NQWs' decisions about remaining with their organisation (Hussein et al., 2014). Notably also, while remuneration and workplace conditions are identified as factors in workforce retention across the social work and community services workforce (Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005, Victorian Council of Social Service, 2007) their importance to NQWs is unclear. Hussein et al. (2014) found that, for NQSWs, financial reward was not a statistically significant predictor of intention to remain. However, they found that those working in the private or voluntary sectors were significantly more likely than those in local government authorities to declare an intention to leave their jobs and the sector altogether. Hussein et al. (2014) hypothesise that, given that those in the voluntary sector expressed similar levels of job satisfaction to other NQSWs, other factors in the work environment, such as poorer job security and lower pay and conditions, might help to explain the higher levels of intention to leave among this group.

Professional identity is an under-researched, yet potentially important, variable in predicting job satisfaction and workforce retention among social work and community service workers. Adams, Hean, Sturgess, & Mcleod Clark (2006, p. 56) define professional identity as a form of social identity, which concerns group interactions in the workplace and relates to how people compare and differentiate themselves from other professional groups. Professional identity develops over time and involves gaining insight into professional practices and the development of the talents and the values of the profession. Furthermore, in their study of health and social care students in the United Kingdom, Adams et al. found that social work students had the weakest professional identities of all the groups considered. The issue of professional identity requires further exploration given that studies in nursing and social work have identified it as an important predictor of job satisfaction and, even more so, of workforce retention (see Cowin, Johnson, Craven, & Marsh, 2008; Shim, Myung, & Lee, 2008).

Overall there is limited research on job satisfaction and workforce retention among NQWs in the social work and community services workforce. The existing research suggests that, in common with workers across the social work and community services workforce, NQWs are more likely to be satisfied and intend to remain in circumstances where they experience professional efficacy, a positive team environment, and a sense of shared values. In addition, opportunities for professional development and learning are very important to NQWs and may moderate the importance of financial rewards and working conditions as factors in job satisfaction and intention to remain. Existing research on human services occupations suggests that aspects of job engagement are important in determining job satisfaction while organisational factors related to the perceptions of team and individual support enhance

workforce retention. A small body of research suggests that identification with one's profession or occupation may be important to job satisfaction and workforce retention. Further exploration of these factors is important to the development of workforce strategies aimed at NQWs.

METHODOLOGY

Pilot study: understanding a hidden population

The project team was awarded an Australian Research Council grant to study the career pathways and experiences of NQWs in Queensland, the third most populous state of Australia. The three-year study commenced in 2010 and was supported by two industry partners: Queensland Council of Social Services (the peak body for Community Services) and UnitingCare Community, which is the largest non-government employer of community service workers in Queensland. The project comprised a PhD project examining career pathways and a pilot study examining job satisfaction and workforce retention among NQWs; this paper reports on findings from a survey conducted during the pilot study. Ethical clearance was granted for the study and PhD project by the University of Queensland Behavioural and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

A pilot study was necessary because of the large range of unknown factors such as the size of the NQW workforce. While some information about the number of social work and community services graduates can be gathered from Schools of Social Work and colleges providing community services programs, there is no statewide or national data on the number of NQWs in government or non-government community services organisations. Information about the number of qualified social workers generally is unclear because the Australian Bureau of Statistics includes within its definition of "social worker", people with a broad range of degree- and diploma-level qualifications (Healy & Lonne, 2010).

Survey design

The pilot survey was designed to examine the influence of variables related to socio-demographic characteristics, professional identification, and workforce conditions upon job satisfaction and respondents' intention to remain in their current organisation. The survey comprised 56 items including scaled items and closed and open questions. Data collected on socio-demographic variables comprised age, gender, cultural identification, work experience, qualification level, organisational size, and union/professional association membership. To collect data on professional and occupational identification, we provided respondents with seven Likert scales measuring various dimensions of pride and belonging to one's professional or occupational group. We drew heavily on the scales designed by McLeod and her colleagues to measure professional identity and team understanding among health and social care students in the UK (Adams et al., 2006). Adams et al. report that both scales have high internal reliability with Cronbach's Alpha co-efficients of 0.79 for the professional identity scale and 0.81 for the team understanding scale.

We collected information on income and on workplace support related to the availability of supervision. Drawing again on the work of Adams et al. (2006) we collected data on respondents' perceptions of their team environment. We incorporated four scaled items

related to team membership including items regarding: active contribution; sense of commitment to and effectiveness in the team; and enjoyment of the team environment. We collected data on organisational size by asking respondents whether their organisation had 10 or fewer or more than 10 employees.

The dependent variable of job satisfaction was assessed on a 10-point scale, where participants were asked to rate their job satisfaction (with a score of 1 being very low, while a score of 10 referred to very high satisfaction). Retention was measured on a 5-point scale where participants were asked to rate how likely it was that they would remain in their current organisation in the next five years (1 indicating it was very likely with 5 indicating very unlikely).

Survey sampling, recruitment and analysis

The hidden nature of the NQW population in the community services sector complicated the sampling process. In the absence of a register of NQWs across the sector, we distributed information about the study through the list of institutional members of the Queensland Council of Social Services and through our Industry Partner, UnitingCare Community which is a service provider organisation. The ethical clearance protocol obliged the research team to distribute the information through a gatekeeper within each of the organisations on the list. The gatekeeper was the listed contact person for the organisation, such as the Director or CEO, who was then asked by the research team to distribute information about the study to any NQWs in their organisation. Information on the study was distributed to our partner organisations and to more than 276 organisations on the contact list provided by one of our partners. We found, however, that more than 10% of the organisations listed could not be contacted via the details provided. An information flyer about the study was distributed to the contact person for each organisation on the list and that person was asked to pass the information to NQWs in their workplace. We also distributed information about the study through the QCOSS e-newsletter.

A password-protected website was established for the survey and respondents accessed the site through a unique password provided to each organisation contacted for the study. Respondents were also given the opportunity to complete the survey by phone. All respondents chose to complete the survey on-line.

The number of respondents was small: a total of 59. To understand this small number of respondents, the research team contacted 276 of organisations on the QCOSS organisational membership list through which the survey had been distributed. From discussions with representatives of these 276 community service organisations, we found that 123 (44.5%) of those approached stated that there were no NQWs on staff and a further 81 (29%) reported that they did not know how many NQWs, if any, were on their staff. Our discussion revealed that some of the senior managers in the organisations we had approached did not regard NQWs with experience in the community services sector to actually be “NQW” and so had not considered those workers as eligible for the study.

Sample characteristics

The age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 62 years, with 26 (44%) of the sample being under 35 years. Three respondents (5.1%) of the sample identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Forty-seven (79.7%) of respondents were female while 12 (20.3%) of respondents were male. Thirty-six respondents (61%) of the sample worked full-time, while 23 (39%) work part-time. Twenty (33.9%) of respondents reported an annual income under \$39,999, while 38 (64.4%) of respondents reported an annual income over \$40,000. Thirty-three (33) of the respondents resided in Brisbane or the surrounding cities of Logan, Gold Coast and Ipswich. A further 24 resided outside these locations and two respondents did not provide information about their place of residence.

The educational qualifications of respondents were split between 34 respondents holding vocational-level qualifications, such as certificates and diplomas, also referred to as "VET" qualifications, with the remaining 25 holding Bachelor Degree or Qualifying Master qualifications. About one quarter of respondents did not nominate their field of qualification; nonetheless, the data show that the majority of respondents who held Certificate- or Diploma-level qualifications had undertaken one of the programs within the Community Services Training Package. Degree-qualified respondents identified the following as their primary field of study: Social Work (11), Psychology (4), Human Services (3), Social Science (3), Music Therapy (1), Counselling (1) and Commerce (1). The respondent who qualified in commerce was working as a financial counsellor.

While the sample was small, it reflected many of the key characteristics found more broadly in the sector. Indeed, the gender profile (79.7% female) and proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents (5.1%), the diverse qualification base and the older age profile are consistent with the demographics of the sector (AIHW, 2009).

Data analysis

We incorporate both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the data. The quantitative analysis is limited to descriptive statistics because of the small and non-representative nature of the sample. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS software. The small sample, coupled with the purposive sampling method limited our analysis to descriptive statistics and identification of correlations. Also, because of the small sample size and for ease of presentation, socio-demographic characteristics were consolidated into bi-variate categories around the median point of the data in each set, including income (under/over \$40,000 per annum); age (under/over 40 years), geographical location (Brisbane and surrounds/other). In this way, the integrity of the responses was maintained while also enabling statistical analysis of a small sample.

The answers to open-ended questions were analysed inductively and thematically. This involved identifying themes that emerged within the data and using constant comparison techniques to analyse whether these themes varied by sub-group, such differences according to geographical location or qualification type. Where these differences emerged in the qualitative analysis, they have been reported in the findings.

FINDINGS

Overall, survey respondents reported being satisfied with their job; indeed, 52 of the 59 respondents (88%) rated their satisfaction as 6 or higher on the 10-point job satisfaction scale. The majority of respondents, 35 of 59 (59%), indicated they intended to remain in their current organisation for the next five years, while a further 13 (22%) were unsure. Only eleven (11) respondents (18%) indicated they did not intend to remain in their current organisation for the next five years. The overall rates of job satisfaction and intention to remain are consistent with the high levels of both of these outcomes found in Sharpe et al.'s (2011) and Hussein et al.'s (2014) reports on newly qualified social workers in England.

We found that those living outside the capital city reported lower rates of job satisfaction and intention to remain in their current organisation than those living in Brisbane. Indeed, four (4) of the 24 respondents living outside Brisbane rated their job satisfaction as lower than five (5) on a 10-point scale, while only one (1) of the 33 respondents living in Brisbane indicated a job satisfaction rating lower than five (5) on the same scale. Similarly, six (6) of the 24 respondents living outside Brisbane indicated they did not intend to stay in the organisation for the next five years, while five (5) of the 33 respondents living in Brisbane indicated they did not intend to stay for the next five years.

Fifty of the respondents provided open-ended responses regarding the most and least satisfying aspects of their job. The dominant theme, present in 43 out of 50 responses, was a perception that making a positive difference to people's lives was the most satisfying aspect of their work. For example, when describing what gave her most satisfaction, one respondent stated:

The people work. I love making a positive difference to people's lives. I love supporting, empowering and advocating for people directly. I love the opportunity to facilitate social connectedness between people. I love the opportunity to challenge injustice. (Bachelor of Social Work graduate)

Respondents' perception that they were making a difference not only at the individual level but also at challenging broader social justices was central to their sense of job satisfaction. A range of other factors was also identified by respondents as the most satisfying aspects of their work: workplace autonomy and variety (3); working in teams (3); and improving the organisation's service system (1).

Even though the majority of respondents were satisfied with their job, there remained areas of dissatisfaction. Forty-five respondents provided open-ended responses regarding the least satisfying aspects of their work. The dominant theme within these responses was frustration with "the system", with 13 respondents indicating that aspects of the community service system frustrated them. Five of these respondents singled out excessive paperwork as a frustration for them. As one respondent stated:

I am concerned with my position that the amount of paperwork/data will override the client work. I am concerned that this may end up being out of balance. (Diploma of Community Services graduate)

In this response, the NQW indicates a fear that the quality of her direct practice will be comprised by excessive paperwork.

Other factors identified as negatively impacting on job satisfaction included: poor communication and conflict within the organisation or team (9); poor pay and conditions (7); underfunding of services and heavy workloads (7); dissatisfaction with the one's work role (3); managers or supervisions being perceived as incompetent (4); feeling underprepared for the work role (1); and competing family/work-life issues (1).

We turn now to intention to remain in one's organisation. As already reported, the majority of respondents' affirmed that they intended to remain in their organisation for the next five years. To an extent this is unsurprising given the high level of job satisfaction reported in this group. Three themes emerged related to this intention to remain in one's organisation. The theme of opportunities for advancement of one's knowledge and skills emerged as an important consideration in respondents' thoughts about whether they intended to remain or not in their organisations. Seven respondents identified the opportunities provided by their organisation to advance their knowledge and skill enhanced their intention to remain in the organisation. As one respondent stated:

The organisation gives me great support, career options and training opportunities. Clear work processes and easy to manage workloads. (Bachelor of Social Work graduate)

The importance respondents placed on opportunities for professional development as a key factor in their intention to remain was highlighted in previous studies with NQSWs (Hussein et al., 2014).

A second theme was "enjoyment of the work" and it emerged as a factor in seven respondents' intentions about remaining in their organisation or not. Further themes identified among respondents intending to remain included: feeling supported in one's workplace (5); feeling proud of the quality of one's services (4); and feeling a value alignment with the work (2). A combination of these factors was found among those who indicated a strong intention to remain in the organisation for the next five years, as the following example illustrates:

I am happy working for an organisation with such strong values and beliefs. They have been very supportive to me so far and stand by their values. There is room to room within the organisation and they encourage personal and professional development. (Diploma of Community Services graduate)

In this response we see that pride in the value orientation of her organisation and the support she received were important factors in her job satisfaction and intention to remain.

Analysis of the open responses for those respondents indicating an intention to leave the organisation in the five years revealed four major themes. Two of these were opposite of the themes associated with intention to remain, that included the absence of opportunities to advance one's knowledge and skill emerged in eight (8) responses among those who intended to leave and not enjoying the work (2 responses). Other themes emerged related to an intention *not* to remain were concerns about pay and conditions (6) and life stage issues (2). Among the respondents who intended to leave low pay emerged as an issue with two respondents also referring to the uncertainty of government funding contracts to the NFP sector as a factor in their intention to leave their current organisation. As one respondent stated:

[the] work load is high and job enjoyment is hindered by a lack of or underfunding from the Department of Communities. It is disturbing that most of the higher paid, management jobs in the human service sector are full time and place great strain on families. (Bachelor of Social Science graduate)

For these respondents, the disparity of pay and conditions between government and the NFP sector were considerable disincentives for them to remain in their organisation. This finding supports Hussein et al. (2014) proposal that the poorer pay and conditions of the voluntary sector may be an important barrier to NQWs remaining in the sector. The life stage issues mentioned by two respondents concerned the desire to travel overseas and to start a family. These personal factors were identified by these two respondents as influencing their career decision-making, seemingly independent of their level of job satisfaction.

We turn now to responses to the professional identity scale. We found strong and positive responses to all the items related to occupational identity. In the following table we present the items related to professional identity and the number and percentage of respondents who indicated they either strongly agreed or agreed with the item.

Table 1: Responses to professional identity scale items

Item	Number who strongly agreed or agreed	Percentage
I am pleased I belong to this profession/ occupational group	55	93.2
Being a member of this profession/occupational group is important to me	54	91.5
I feel I share characteristics with other members of the profession/occupational group	48	81.4
I feel like I am a member of this profession/ occupational group.	46	77.9
I feel I have strong ties with members of this profession/occupational group.	40	67.8
I can identify positively with members of this profession/occupational group	48	81.4
I find myself making excuses for belonging to this profession/occupational group	2	3.4

Overall, the positive scores in relation to the professional identity scale items indicate that respondents were strongly identified with their profession or occupation. The strength of this identification is underscored by the strong response to the negative item “I find myself making excuses for belonging to this profession or occupational group”, which only two respondents agreed with, though a further nine respondents provided a neutral response to this item.

Thirty-one respondents (52% of the sample) provided open-ended responses regarding their ratings on the professional and occupational identification scales; some responses contained more than one theme. The theme of passion for their role emerged in 10 respondents’ explanation of their response to the open-ended question. As a social science graduate stated:

I know in my heart that this is where I am meant to be and am committed to delivering the most appropriate services to clients in this sector.

In explaining their response to both the professional identity scales and job satisfaction, respondents often included terms like “commitment”, “in my heart” and “passion” for the work, indicating a strong emotional tie to their profession or occupation.

Among eight respondents, the theme of value alignment emerged in their explanation of their responses to the professional identity scale. For five respondents, this involved a sense of positive alignment with the values of social work and community services professions.

For example, one respondent who strongly agreed with the item “I feel like a member of this profession/occupational group” stated:

I do not have a strong need to be a part of the 'group' Social Workers, but I find that the world-view, approach, and insights shared by other Social Workers is often very closely aligned with mine. (Bachelor of Social Work graduate)

Analysis of the open-ended responses indicated that the perceived “world view” of community services professions and occupations mattered to many, particularly to those who indicated that they identified with their profession/occupational group. Most of respondents identified the world view of the community services professions and occupations as being associated with values of empathy, respect and social justice. For two respondents, the lack of values alignment either with their own profession or with the sector emerged as important to explaining their response to the professional identity scale.

In seven responses, respondents indicated that identifying with a profession provided them with emotional and practical support. One example of this theme was provided by a Human Services graduate:

It is extremely important to feel that you belong to the professional group you belong to at work. That is where support networks are made and maintained, information is shared, and so forth. (Bachelor of Human Services graduate)

This respondent suggests that identification with one profession in the workplace provided opportunity for information sharing and support networks.

Conversely, a small number of respondents provided negative responses to various professional identity items. Analysis of these responses indicated that the primary theme was a sense of misalignment with the perceived values or professional standards of the community services sector or of specific occupations within it. For example a new graduate working as a financial counsellor showed concern that a lack of “consistency in knowledge, skill and education” diminished standards in the sector.

We turn now to the team environment. Given prior research indicating links between the team environment to job satisfaction and workforce retention (Healy, 2009), we also asked about respondents’ perceptions of their team environment. The following table outlines the number and percentage who responded positively to each item.

Table 2. Positive responses to items regarding team participation

Item	Number who strongly agreed or agreed with the item	Percentage
I enjoy working in a team	58	98.3
I am an active member of some form of team	56	94.9
I know how to make teams more effective	53	89.8
I contribute more than my fair share to the teams of which I am a member	39	66.1

In the sample of 59, the vast majority of respondents reported that they experienced a positive team environment and made a positive contribution to team effectiveness. The survey did not include open-ended responses to this particular scale. However, as already reported, a positive team environment where NQWs felt supported and valued emerged as important themes in respondents' discussions of the most satisfying aspects of their work and in their intention to remain.

We turn now to responses regarding NQWs' access to supervision. We were concerned to find that a substantial minority reporting not receiving any formal supervision despite this being in their first year in practice. Indeed nine of the 57 respondents to this question (almost one fifth of the sample), reported that they did not receive any supervision. Of 48 respondents who reported receiving supervision, 39 respondents (81%) indicated this was from a more senior person in their organisation. Surprisingly, only 14 of those receiving supervision reported that it occurred fortnightly or more often, with the majority reporting that supervision happened once per month or less frequently. We also found that a higher proportion of those working *outside* the capital city of Brisbane reported not receiving supervision than those in the city. Six of the 24 respondents (25%) working outside the capital reported receiving supervision, while five of the 33 respondents (15%) working in the capital city indicated they did. This is concerning given that those working outside the capital city, particularly those in regional or rural areas are more likely to be working in isolated circumstances (Campbell et al., 2012).

DISCUSSION

Our study, though small, confirms the findings of larger studies in the United Kingdom. Consistent with previous studies (Hussein et al., 2014; Sharpe et al., 2011) we found high levels of job satisfaction and intention to remain in the organisation among respondents. NQWs who responded to this study valued the opportunities their work gave them to make a positive difference to service users' lives, participate in a positive team environment and to advance their knowledge and skills. As reported in our literature review, this is consistent with studies of job satisfaction and workforce retention across the community services sector more generally. Within our study we found strong professional and occupational

identification among respondents; this contrasts with the findings of a previous British study suggesting low levels of professional identification in the student population of social work and social care workers (Adams et al., 2006). We were concerned to find that a substantial group of respondents were not receiving any supervision and, further, that, where supervision was provided, it usually occurred monthly or less frequently.

Our study points to several areas for further study. First, our study draws attention to the low visibility of NQWs in Australian NFP community services. It was concerning to find that representatives of almost one third of the NFP agencies we contacted did not know if they employed NQWs. It appeared also that NQWs were difficult to identify because of the many pathways by which people become social work and community service workers. Social work and community services graduates tend to be older, on average, than other graduates and many have substantial work experience prior to graduation (Healy & Lonnie, 2010). Nonetheless within this group there is considerable diversity among NQWs with some school leavers and some NQWs in transition from unrelated occupations. In the absence of knowledge of about the number, background and roles of NQWs, community service organisations are limited in their capacity to understand the factors that contribute to their job satisfaction and workforce retention. Yet answers to these questions are vital for designing workforce strategies for achieving a sustainable workforce in the future.

Second, our study points to the urgent need for investigation into the experiences of NQWs in regional and rural areas. Even within our small sample, it emerged that respondents working outside the capital city reported lower levels of job satisfaction and intention to remain than those in the capital. We found these respondents received less supervision than those in the city. The NQWs in our study who were working outside Brisbane were less satisfied and more isolated than those located in the city as they made the transition to practice. Our study supports the call made by health workforce researchers for improved professional development and workplace support for practitioners in regional and rural areas (see Campbell et al., 2012).

Given prior international research suggesting relatively low levels of professional and occupational identification among social work students (Adams et al., 2006), we were surprised to find strong and positive responses to the professional identity scale items among respondents to our study. Our findings suggest that the nature of professional identity for these workers reflected alignment with a value set perceived to be held by social work and community services professionals. An important future direction for investigation is the examination of professional identity in social work and particularly how these evolve over the course of education and into the first year in practice, and examination of what associations, if any, exist between professional identity formation and job satisfaction among NQWs. This is important if, as prior research suggests, professional identity is an important factor in promoting job satisfaction and workforce retention (Shim et al., 2008).

RECOMMENDATIONS

While our study is small, it confirms many aspects of previous English research especially with regard to the factors associated with high job satisfaction and intention to remain

among NQWs (see Sharpe et al., 2009; Hussein et al., 2014). Drawing on this research base, we offer some tentative suggestions for how educators, supervisors and employing institutions might enhance graduates' first year in practice.

First, given the importance of values alignment expressed by NQWs in this and previous studies, it is important that educators, supervisors and employers assist NQWs to promote values alignment in their practice. While social work and welfare education supports students' capacity to critically analyse the gaps between values, aspirations and practice realities, we consider that educators need also to assist students to develop opportunities for value alignment. This is particularly important in areas of practice where such alignment might not be immediately apparent, such as roles that involve the exercise of authority or, conversely, which appear mundane. Using simulated learning and reflective practice strategies, educators can assist students to tease apart both areas of value dissonance and to develop practical strategies for achieving values alignment in practice scenarios (see Fook & Gardiner, 2013). Employers can also assist in achieving values alignment by providing a clear statement of organisational values and by establishing mechanisms, such as complaints mechanisms, for identifying and addressing inconsistencies between the stated values and the practices of personnel at all levels. Supervisors can assist students and NQWs by orientating them to the value stance of the organisation where they work or are placed and to involve NQWs in reflective learning opportunities for identifying and realising values in practice (see Fook & Gardiner, 2013).

Second, it is important to provide NQWs with a variety of practice experience so they can build a robust skill base and explore their aptitudes in practice. Medium-to-large organisations could consider "rotation" of NQWs through various units within the organisation during their first year of practice. Smaller organisations may give consideration to workplace exchanges for NQWs, so that they can experience a range of community services contexts. Professional development is important for NQWs in making the transition from study to practice. In this transition period, supervisors should seek to understand the career aspirations of NQWs and use this shared understanding to develop a professional learning plan.

Third, given the value of a positive team environment for NQWs as they orientate themselves to the community services field, work roles should be designed to create opportunities for team development. Haley-Lock (2007) suggests that tasks should be designed to facilitate team work and scheduling of shifts and staff meeting times should promote opportunities for interaction across the team.

Fourth, the community services sector needs to continue its campaign for greater parity in pay and conditions for community services workers. Our findings suggest some NQWs rate pay and conditions as important to their career decision making. The issue of adequate pay is likely to become more pressing with the proposed fee deregulation in higher education institutions.

Finally, more consistent attention to supporting the learning and development needs of NQWs is required. Our study suggests a marked variation of experience for NQWs. Some

were well supported while others, particularly those in rural and regional areas, experienced less opportunity for professional development and support. We recommend that the ASYE which has shown many positive outcomes for NQSWs in Britain could be trialed in the Australian community services sector.

We acknowledge this study was limited by its small sample size. The sample size may be a consequence of our attempt to recruit participants via gatekeepers, in this case, organisational representatives. Many of the organisational representatives stated they did not know if their organisation employed NQWs. We suggest that future studies might improve recruitment by working with educational institutions to distribute information to new graduates rather than through the employing agencies which, in our experience, may lack knowledge about, or the capacity to reach, NQWs.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the needs and aspirations of NQWs is a vital step towards achieving sustainability of the social work and community services workforce. While NQWs share many characteristics with more experienced workers, particularly a strong commitment to values-based practice, our study suggests that many NQWs may have specific support and professional development needs as they make the transition to practice. We invite further research into understanding and responding to the needs of this under-recognised group of social work and community services practitioners. Such understanding is vital for building a more satisfied and more sustainable social work and community services workforce in the future.

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