

## **The changing face of social welfare and social work in Australia<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents an historical and contemporary overview of social policy and social work in Australia tracing its history from the colonial settlement period, the emergence of the wage-earner's welfare, and the impact of neoliberal welfare reform. It argues that welfare in Australia has always been tied to work and shows the way in which contemporary neoliberal policy has reconfigured the wage-earner's welfare state and the 'work' of social work.

### **Introduction**

Historically Australia has evolved a unique welfare system but with welfare reform since the late 1990s, it increasingly bears the hallmarks of policy development in the USA and UK with whom it most identifies. For the most part, however, even in the face of economic globalisation, welfare policy remains the province of nation states, albeit influenced by international conventions and human rights charters. Claims that globalised capitalism has reduced the nation state's control of its territorial boundaries are overzealous. As noted by Hardy (2007), global capitalism 'has not necessitated the downfall of the nation-state for the reason that global culture fails to adequately decentre the ethnonationalist identity that citizens of a nation-state feel within their local community'. Instead, the nation state has become more open to multilateral transactions and accustomed to engaging with other nations and cultures.

Australia is a land of immigrants and a multicultural society with a strong sense of social justice (Gray & Agllias, 2010). The notion of a 'fair go' for all is deeply embedded in Australian culture and has always been part of its national identity. Further, there has always been a strong relationship between work and welfare in Australia. This has been coupled with an expectation of self-reliance on the part of those able to work, and compassion for those unable to do so. From the colonial settlement period, continuing with the erection of the wage-earner's welfare state and the welfare reform era of the present times, the pivotal issues and critiques in debates on welfare in Australia revolve around this relationship between work and welfare. While social spending on welfare has increased over the years in dollar terms, this does not mean that values are comparable across time mainly because of more recent improvements in data collection and reporting enabled by developments in computer technology (Whiteford, 2006). Unemployment benefits, which became the pivotal target for welfare reform, were never a part of welfare in the wage-earner's welfare state. In this respect Australia has always differed from other OECD countries in that income support for the working sick is provided through industrial awards that fall outside of public spending. In many other countries these are provided through the social

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<sup>1</sup> The first part of this paper is based on prior work by Mel Gray and Kylie Agllias (2009). 'The Australian welfare system and how its development has shaped contemporary issues and debates'. In Powell, J. & Hendricks, J. (eds). *The Welfare State and Postindustrial Society: A Global Analysis*. New York: Springer. 271-291.

security system (Whiteford, 2006). From 1990 onwards, OECD data for Australia included state and territory worker's compensation and, from 1995, public service pensions, which amounted to an estimated \$6 billion and \$9.3 billion in 2001 respectively (Whiteford, 2006). Welfare payments have always been 'residual', non-contributory, flat-rate entitlements financed from government revenue and applied only to those unable to work. So the patterns of Australia's welfare system were set soon after federation when the first welfare payments were introduced. They included the Commonwealth Age Pension introduced in 1909; Invalid Pension in 1910; and One-off Maternity Allowance in 1912.

Australia is a textbook example of a liberal or residual system (Schut, Vrooman, & de Beer, (2001). But over the years, government has assumed greater control of the welfare system, erecting a huge and costly welfare bureaucracy, which absorbs increased welfare expenditure that includes administration overheads as well as direct benefits to recipients. In the strictest sense, it is the latter which is the province of 'residual' welfare, i.e., mechanisms put in place for the social protection of citizens in times of need.

## **Historical overview**

### ***Colonial settlement period***

Australia's welfare system 'bears the hallmark of settler societies with strong labour movements' (Murphy, 2006, p. 44.03). During the colonial settlement period, the colonial governments and private associations assisting people in need showed a preference for a labour-related system wherein wage arbitration and the delivery of high wage outcomes were the *principle means* of social protection. Castles (1985) described this as 'Australian exceptionalism' or the 'wage-earner's welfare state' (p. 102). Hence Australia's welfare state is characterized by a strong relationship between industrial relations and social welfare policy (Ramia & Wailes, 2006) and a comparatively autonomous, highly fragmented nongovernment sector. The separation of the deserving and non-deserving rested on the logic that those who were fit and able to work did not need benefits, or if there were likely to be a gap between jobs then a fit and able person deserved some sort of social protection. As a result, a culture of charity and mutual aid remained underdeveloped in Australia, with some exceptions (see Murphy, 2006).

### ***Federation and beyond: 1901-1980s***

The colonial settlement period ended with federation in 1901 at which time, the Australian Constitution, approved by the House of Commons, established the political structure, i.e., a federal system of government in which the Legislature or parliament makes the law and the Executive or government, including ministers and the public service, administers the law. Independent of government is the High Court which deals with matters relating to the Constitution and the Judiciary or courts that interpret and apply the law. Federalism shares the political responsibility of governing between federal and state parliaments. Policy is administered through three tiers of government with different levels of responsibility: The national, federal or Commonwealth level of government, state and territory government and municipal or local government. Each tier of government has particular responsibilities as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Levels of government and responsibility for social welfare provision**

Federal Welfare Provision	State Welfare Provision (e.g., NSW)	Local Welfare Provision
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	Department of Aboriginal Affairs	Environmental, including refuse removal, water supply and upkeep of public facilities, such as libraries, parks, gardens, recreational facilities, and sports grounds
Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs	Department of Ageing, Disability and Homecare	
Department of Health and Ageing	Department of Community Services	
Department of Human Services	Department of Education and Training	
	Department of Housing	
	Department of Health	

***Wage-earners’ welfare state***

The “wage-earners’ welfare state” had two key elements:

1. Work-related benefits
2. Mixed economy of welfare

It emerged almost with federation at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was dismantled early in the 1980s. For most of that time it formed a distinctive set of institutional arrangements centred on a state-regulated labour market as an alternate system of social protection to the British welfare-state model.

***Wage-related benefits***

The wage-earner’s welfare state was built on four pillars:

1. Arbitrated minimum employment conditions to protect workers
2. Selective inward migration, perceived as a means to avoid migrants who would accept lower than Australasian-standard wages and working conditions
3. Industry protection as the main economic incentive for employers to maintain labour conditions
4. A market-oriented, ‘residual’ state welfare system designed as a last-resort safety-net for those (mainly males) whose living standards were not otherwise protected (Ramia & Wailes, 2006, p. 50).

These four pillars of the wage-earner’s welfare state remain central to contemporary debates on welfare and feelings of loss following better times.

***Compulsory arbitration***

The system of compulsory arbitration was set in place soon after federation by the establishment of the Commonwealth Court of Arbitration in 1907. As well as fixing the minimum or ‘living

wage’ – referred to as the Harvest Judgment – the compulsory arbitration system concerned itself centrally with wage fixing making a welfare-state system unnecessary, at least for wage earners or breadwinning males (F. G. Castles & Uhr, 2007; Murphy, 2006). Hence social protection depended crucially on the role of the arbitration system in dealing with those in work and who flowed in and out of paid work. It relied centrally on labour market or industry – or work sector – protections. As Murphy (2006) notes, the union movement had vested interests in maintaining gender distinctions in work and wages and in a system of social protection primarily delivered through men’s work, thus favouring a residual system of income support crucially determined by work tests, in terms of which unemployment benefits were introduced in 1945.

#### *Industry protection*

Industry protection rested heavily on the regulation of employment conditions, the unity and relative power bases of employers and employers’ associations and strong trade unions within the broader labour movement (Ramia & Wailes, 2006). The Harvest decision established the idea of a minimum wage and linked it to protection for relevant manufacturing industries.

#### *Selective immigration*

Given that Australian nation building rested heavily on successive waves of immigration, the skills of migrants were an important factor in developing the wage-earner’s welfare state. Immigration policies attempted to address skills shortages in the labour market and rested heavily on people’s ability to work and contribute to economic growth and development (M. Gray & Agllias, 2009).

#### *Residual state welfare*

The residual safety net for those unable to work and not expected to work, such as women raising children and disabled people, comprised tax-financed, residual, means-tested income support or social security benefits and a range of state welfare services. The wage-earner’s welfare state was strongly opposed to universal benefits – and a welfare-state system – believing strongly in a fair wage with residual welfare benefits only available to those with no labour market connections (F. Castles & Shirley, 1996).

#### *Mixed economy of welfare*

Work-related social protection mechanisms, together with residual welfare payments and services provided by the government and community-based voluntary welfare services formed the mixed economy of welfare, the second key element of the wage-earner’s welfare state. This mixed economy had a complex division of function between the public and private sectors, and the boundary between government and nongovernment provision – referred to in industry classifications as the community services sector – has always been fluid and subject to negotiation. Hence it is extremely difficult to get a handle on the ‘structure’ of this mix of state and private sector arrangements (Berman, Murphy, & Brooks, 2006; Murphy, 2006).

#### **Rise of professional social work**

A crucial feature of welfare provision – both government and private – was the rise of professional social work, which was heavily influenced by the feminist movement and Leftist welfarist sentiments.

Critiques of the wage-earners welfare state were based largely on the male breadwinner supporting a nuclear family drew attention to the interrelationship between welfare, the family and breadwinning, 'to the welfare role of the family, and to the gender of the providers and recipients of welfare services' (Murphy, 2006, p. 44.02). For the most part, those receiving welfare and those caring for welfare recipients were women. Feminists, especially, highlighted the value of this unpaid domestic – caring and parenting – *work* and subsequent policies began to take on the 'family first' ethos (Dalton, Draper, Weeks, & Wiseman, 1996; Weeks, 1994, 1995).

Nongovernment community services sector in Australia has been dominated by faith-based organisations and religious charities 'distinctly concerned with discriminating between the deserving and the undeserving' (Murphy, 2006, p. 44.3). Already established during the colonial settlement period, voluntary, largely church-based organisations had, in the wage-earner's welfare state, to deal with those without access to a living wage. This had been developed in an unsystematic, uncoordinated, fragmented, and disorganised way, in a welfare culture where state provision through fixed wages was the dominant idea.

Philanthropy and mutual aid remained undeveloped; then and now the nongovernment welfare sector has proved unequal to the demands of those falling through the cracks of formal welfare provision. Thus the nongovernment sector has to contend with deeply embedded egalitarian values in which everyone must have a 'fair go' while seeking moral upliftment for those who, for some reason or other, have been unable to earn their keep through paid work.

### ***1980s and beyond***

#### *Influence of economic rationalism*

During this period economic rationalism led to new ideas about citizenship and welfare entitlements. It was a period in which Australia was transformed from a 'social laboratory to a welfare laggard' (Murphy, 2006). Welfare reform reconfigured arrangements such that areas of provision which were not part of welfare in the wage-earner's welfare state, pivotally unemployment and work-related family benefits, became the central core of the discourse on state welfare provision.

#### *Welfare priorities*

The *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Act 1987*, which outlines the core areas of welfare provision in Australia in terms of which data is collected and reported, focused on five primary areas of welfare: Aged care, child care, disability, housing, and child welfare. It did not mention unemployment benefits nor did it include health and education as part of welfare thus reflecting the narrow residual view of welfare characteristic of the wage-earner's welfare state, which from its inception made provision for the elderly, disabled and single mothers. This focus broadened to encompass unemployment and family policy under welfare reform.

### **Neoliberal welfare reform**

#### *Changing ideologies*

The beginnings of neoliberal welfare reform arise in several interrelated critiques relating to the huge role government came to play in welfare provision during the twentieth century. While this played out differently in various international contexts, there were similarities in the arguments which began to steer welfare in the direction it subsequently took in most developed Western countries. These revolved *inter alia* around the level of government spending on welfare, the culture of dependency created by welfare provision, the role of the private sector, the

inefficiencies of the vast government bureaucracy, and its failure to address the problem of poverty. The changes which came about were influenced by several interweaving strands of thinking emanating from Third Way reconfigurations of the enterprising state (Considine, 2001), outcomes-based New Public Management, workfare programs, and the conservatism of the New Right. The seeds of these changes were already evident in the marketisation or contracting out of services previously provided by government which began in the late seventies. They flowered into the 'new' philosophy, values, and rules guiding welfare provision, most significantly cutbacks in welfare, increasing conditionality in welfare benefits, and the further entrenchment of unemployment programs as part of welfare. Welfare payments of all stripes came to be seen as 'unemployment' payments since all were received by recipients not in work and these recipients were forced to prove they could not work and, therefore, were rightly entitled to welfare benefits. The essential target of active welfare, however, is those of working age who claim income cash benefits. What neoliberalism does is push the onus of risk firmly onto the individual, removing state responsibility for the social protection of citizens. For example, individuals are expected to bear the financial risk of providing for their own retirement through retirement planning and superannuation contributions. It reconstitutes citizenship through the language of responsibilities and obligations rather than rights and entitlements. Those of working age who are entitled to benefits have the reciprocal obligation and responsibility to seek to become a full participant in the labour market.

While neoliberalism appears to attack welfare, Hartman (2005) argues that its anti-welfare rhetoric masks the importance of welfare to the very existence of the neoliberal regime. What the neoliberal welfare regime does is to create a category of low-paid workers whose incomes are supplemented by minimal benefits which are made contingent on the need to work for a minimum number of hours per week. It creates a casual workforce – with minimal work requirements – which suits employers who can then employ these largely untrained people who are obligated to the state, on low wages and casual work arrangements. Employers seem to be doing the right thing by supporting this work-based welfare system while benefiting from the flexible – unregulated – arrangements which the government has created. In this way, welfare maintains peripheral, low-wage workers in a flexible labour market that supports employers' profit margins (Hartman, 2005, p. 67). Those most affected by these new work-based welfare arrangements are women caring for children on parenting payments and disabled people in receipt of the disability support pension, which, as we shall see below, prior to the advent of work-based welfare, were not classified as unemployed.

Most significantly in relation to Australia, neoliberalism strikes at the very heart of the residual welfare system set in place by the wage-earner's welfare state and its integrated social protection mechanisms. But the changes were supported by the 'Australian union movement ... which ... helped to facilitate bargaining decentralisation from the Federal and industry levels to the enterprise level' (Ramia & Wailes, 2006, p. 61). The Workplace Regulations Act of 1997 built social protection into 'neo-corporatist industrial relations arrangements' (Ramia & Wailes, 2006, p. 58).

On the welfare reform front, 'active' welfare recommendations coming through the OECD guidelines suggested a restructuring of services and greater conditionality of benefits to accompany the workplace reforms discussed above, ostensibly in the interests of greater *economic* efficiency. According to Johansson and Hvinden (in Newman, 2005), they required that citizens played a more active role 'in handling risks and promoting their own welfare' (p. 101) but these activation reforms tended to 'rest on a fairly narrow understanding of relevant and

socially useful activity as they mainly recognise paid work and participation in the mainstream labour market' (p. 108). For many within the welfare sector, reform amounted to a program of retrenchment or rolling back of welfare as governments everywhere sought to find ways to avoid blame for social 'expenditure cutbacks made necessary by changing economic conditions and, in particular by pressures emanating from the global economy ... to control expenditure growth ... recalibrate the relationship between federal and state governments, [and] ... rationalise the process of intergovernmental relations'. As part of the rationalisation process, the Australian government commissioned a Welfare Reform Reference Group in 1999 to review the Australian welfare system. The outcome was the McClure Report (Welfare Reform Reference Group, 2000) which devised a 'framework of reciprocity' or mutual obligation 'matching responsibilities and duties with social rights and benefits' (Braithwaite, Gatens, & Mitchell, 2002), the best example of which is the Job Network, discussed below.

#### *Increased marketisation of services*

An offshoot of criticisms of big government and excessive public spending was the marketisation of welfare programs, which made services tradeable commodities delivered in quasi-markets (Considine, 2001). Through privatisation, the government sought to dismantle the vast welfare bureaucracy it had created through contracting out services it had previously delivered and transferring them to the private – nongovernment – welfare sector via a tendering process. In other words, the government entered into contracts with nongovernment agencies to deliver services on its behalf. This marketisation of services was accompanied by appeals for nongovernment welfare managers to run the sector more like a business following the influence of outcomes-based New Public Management (Hood, 1995), where continued funding is contingent on the proven delivery of concrete outcomes (Western, et al., 2007). Cox (2006) refers to Australia's approach as a 'gradualist corporatist inspired model' (p. 112) in which the State and Territory governments are responsible for state-based social *services*, which they increasingly purchase from nongovernment organisations. This gave the nongovernment services a new and important role in service delivery which would change its ethos from one of charity, social justice and compassionate care, to one of business-like efficiency. Many faith-based organisations who joined the Job Network in its early days later withdrew for this very reason.

#### *Emergence of the Job Network*

Two concerns motivated the emergence of the Job Network: The increasing number of people on welfare payments - over 2.5m people, an increase from 10% of workforce-aged beneficiaries in 1978 to 18% in 1998 (Newman, 1999) and the problem of long-term unemployed, i.e., those out of work for a year or more, which applied to over 21% of unemployed people in 2003 (Saunders, 2003). The Job Network replaced the Commonwealth Employment Services in 1998. It comprises about 360 contracted commercial – for profit – and not-for-profit community welfare organisations, including big charities like the Salvation Army and Mission Australia, which provide federally funded employment services. The emergence of work-based welfare is the single most important event that signalled changes in thinking relating to work and welfare in contemporary neoliberal society. Most significantly, the critiques of welfare outlined above had led to a reconstructed discourse on welfare dependency as a kind of addiction signalled in the notion of 'passive welfare'. To right this wrong what was needed was 'active welfare' and a policy in which there were reciprocal rights and responsibilities. These became enshrined in the notion of 'mutual obligation', which introduced the requirement that some categories of

unemployed people were required to work for a certain number of mandated hours in order to receive benefits – the jobseeker’s allowance. This was already a part of the US workfare phenomenon, and work-for-the-dole programs, which tied welfare to work or work-like activities. Australia followed with the introduction of the Job Network as a series of measures to deal with the problem of long-term unemployment, which would assist those who demonstrated attempts at self-reliance, i.e., who tried to ‘help themselves’, such as ‘the working poor, the casualised workforce, and those whose family responsibilities pose[d] especially difficult challenges for their work lives’ (Ramia & Wailes, 2006, p. 60) (see also Cass & Smyth, 1998; Considine, 2001; Edwards, Howard, & Miller, 2001; Johnson & Tonkiss, 2002; Productivity Commission, 2002).

Most importantly, what the Job Network did was to create a category of unemployed people from groups where there was previously no expectation that they needed to work and were, therefore, not seen as unemployed, such as mothers at home looking after children and disabled people. Thus unemployment statistics in 1999 reported that the number of people on unemployment benefits exceeded the number unemployed in labour force surveys by 19% (Whiteford, 2006). In other words, by forcing people ‘to seek gainful employment as a precondition of benefit’ (Castles & Uhr, 2007, p. 116), the Job Network created and enlarged the number of people classified as unemployed. At the same time it made labour market activity a marker of good social citizenship and the principle pathway out of poverty or social exclusion (Marston & McDonald, 2003).

Job Network members were assessed on their degree of employability, and allocated basic service or intensive case management on this basis (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2006). There was also the belief that many people, labelled dole-bludgers, did not want to work so incentives had to be provided, including punitive, disciplinary mechanisms if this were necessary, to get people off welfare into work, if they were able. Many argued that the Poor Laws had once again reared their ugly head with the division or separation made between the deserving in need of social care and the non deserving in need of discipline out of a sometimes generational culture of welfare dependency (see Marston & McDonald, 2003; McDonald & Marston, 2005; McDonald, Marston, & Buckley, 2003; Productivity Commission, 2002 for an examination of the social relations embodied in the Job Network process).

#### *Continued growth in welfare spending*

Australia has a positive international reputation in terms of quality of life indicators, ranking third on the United Nations Human Development Index, which provides a composite measure of life expectancy, educational attainment and standard of living (United Nations Development Program, 2008). Further, Australian wages are among the highest of the OECD countries and work remains the most effective means of social protection in Australia (OECD, 2008a; Whiteford, 2006). While the Australian government currently spends less on cash benefits than most OECD countries, it targets this spending on the poorest 20% of the population (OECD, 2008a). The average OECD social expenditure, which includes cash, in-kind service provision, and tax breaks with a social purpose, as a percentage of GDP was 21% in 2003, as compared with Australian spending of 18% in 2003 (OECD, 2008b), with a further reduction to 17.1% in 2005 (OECD, 2010). While relative income poverty has risen slightly in the last 10 years, income inequality in Australia is less than in many OECD countries due to publicly provided services, and a lower tax burden on low incomes (OECD, 2008a).

Despite neoliberal welfare reform, welfare spending in Australia has continued to grow and the OECD Social Expenditure database shows that public social expenditure rose from 14%



in 1990 to 18% of GDP in 2003 (OECD, 2008b) and only began to drop by a small amount to 17.1% in 2005 (OECD, 2010). Social security and welfare spending has increased more than any other area of expenditure, from around 20% in 1972-1973 to 41% in 2007-2008 (Laurie & McDonald, 2008). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007b) data from 2005-2006 provides the most comprehensive picture of welfare expenditure, including government and nongovernment sectors. This data, which excludes unemployment benefits, but includes benefits and allowances to families, people with a disability and the ageing, records total welfare expenditure of \$90 billion (or 9% of GDP) in 2005-2006. This figure would be larger if tax expenditure in the form of concessions and rebates were included (AIHW, 2007a). Cash benefits, which were solely provided by governments, accounted for 68% and welfare services accounted for 32% of this expenditure. Total expenditure on services and benefits for older people was \$34 billion, families and children \$27 billion and people with disabilities \$17 billion. The total spent on welfare services by government and nongovernment was \$29 billion spent on welfare services. The net value of services delivered by nongovernment organisations was \$20 billion or 10% of the total investment in welfare services (AIHW, 2007b) (see Table 2 and 3).

#### *Changes to benefit arrangements*

Australia directs more of its spending to the poor than any other OECD country achieving some redistributory effect through its targeted welfare system (OECD, 2008a). The richest 20% of the population receives only 3% of all transfer spending, while the middle 60% of households receive 56%, and just over 40% goes to the bottom 20%. Changes to benefit arrangements, especially the imposition of time limits, were designed essentially to restrict welfare to those who really needed it and to encourage those who could do so to return to work for a minimum of 15 hours per week.

This is the area of greatest change which has evoked the most ire from welfare activists, especially attempts to extend 'mutual obligation' or welfare-to-work to lone parents, mainly single mothers, and people with disabilities. Equally unpopular was the introduction of punitive penalties for non compliance. Research shows that these populations are most likely to require additional assistance from welfare services, which are not adequately funded to meet the increase in need (Australian Council of Social Services [ACOSS], 2008). While 'benefits are still available, and in some instances are more generous than in the past, but only where other resources are demonstrably exhausted, and where the good faith of recipients is demonstrated by compliance with stringent activity tests' (Castles & Uhr, 2007, p. 117).

#### *Weaknesses of welfare reform*

The new system has several weaknesses. First, it relies on after-school childcare places, which are limited and the costs of childcare in Australia are extremely high making it an unviable option for people on low incomes. Secondly, the new rules do not consider education and training as an alternative to work, so many recipients must choose between study or employment. Thirdly, it intrudes on the family sphere, and encourages women to accept unsuitable forms of employment to meet income support requirements (Gray & Collins, 2007). Fourthly, the most drastic change to benefit arrangements was the introduction of the punitive practice of 'breaching', i.e., taking welfare payments away from those who did not meet the minimal work requirements. This has created a huge increase in demand for emergency assistance from nongovernment 'charities'.

### Social work in Europe and Australia: A brief comparison

Social work is a highly context-based profession with several notable differences between social work in Australia and Europe, as shown in Table 2. The qualifying degree for social work practice in Australia is the four-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) whereas, with the exception of the Netherlands, most European countries since the Bologna agreement require a three-year undergraduate degree which might be followed by a two-year Masters qualification.

**Table 2: Comparing social work**

	Australia	Europe
Differences	4 year basic social work education	3 year basic undergraduate education (with the exception of The Netherlands which has a 4 year basic undergraduate program)
	Must have a social work specific undergraduate degree to practice (BSW)	Wider range of undergraduate programs appear to be considered appropriate for social work practice including sociology, social pedagogy, education and social work
	Distinctions made between social work and youth work, welfare work, child care. Social workers tend not to be employed in these areas.	Less distinction between areas of practice – all considered to be social work
	Very limited involvement in education, childhood or child care	Strong focus on education, childhood and child care
Similarities	Concern about social justice	
	Shared areas of concern – refugees & asylum seekers, migration, violence, disability, youth, young offenders, human rights, substance use, aging, health issues, mental health, social research, race, unemployment, poverty	

A wide range of undergraduate programmes appear to be considered appropriate for social work practice in Europe, including sociology, social pedagogy, education, and social work. Australian postgraduate study in social work, too, requires a basic BSW before proceeding to a Masters or PhD by research. A two-year qualifying Masters degree has recently been introduced in social work in Australia which requires a three-year undergraduate degree not necessarily in social work.

In Australia a distinction is made between social work, youth work, child care, welfare work, and community development whereas in Europe all of these might be considered social work, including educational science or social pedagogy. Despite these differences, social work in diverse contexts shares a common value base and works with marginalised and oppressed peoples across a wide range of problem areas, including migrant, refugee and asylum seeker

settlement, violence, disability, youth, young offenders, human rights, substance use, aging, health issues, mental health, social research, race, unemployment, and poverty.

While in Europe most social workers are employed at the local government level or in nongovernment services, in Australia, most social workers are employed by Federal or State rather than local government, mostly in the health and community services sector. The most reliable estimate of the number of people who have completed an accredited social work degree is from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2008), which estimated that there were 19,300 qualified social work professionals in Australia. Given social work is not a registered profession and no system of professional registration exists, and the voluntary membership of the AASW of approximately 6000 social workers, the majority - of over 13,000 - practise outside the jurisdiction of the professional association which sets ethical, educational, and practice standards. Nevertheless, the AASW sets standards for social work practice.

There are several worrying trends relating to the social work workforce not least the static membership numbers of its professional association; its ageing workforce with only modest growth in the number of enrolments in entry level social work degree courses; the increasing competition for employment from non social work degree qualified welfare professionals; the absence of protection of title for social work and lack of registration for the profession; the lack of a sector-wide workforce strategy; and generally poor understanding of the role of social work by the community, government, and industry as well as a generally low profile for the profession (Cheron-Sauer, 2011).

Nevertheless, social workers continue to play an important role in health and community services in Australia. Health involves mainly hospital-based work and includes mental health services in community-based agencies, while 'community services' refers to the industry sector for welfare services. Here social workers might variously be engaged in child protection, disability and aged care services, homelessness, income support, welfare-to-work programs, and so on, mostly in the government sector. For the most part, they work with allied health professionals, mainly in the health context, and other welfare and care workers working in the community services sector. Interdisciplinarity and interprofessionalism continues to be an important part of the social work ethos, especially in contexts where service partnerships between public and private providers are the norm. Despite the increasingly restrictive neoliberal welfare system, social workers continue to work across varied practice domains, including work with individuals (particularly single session and short term), families and partnerships; groupwork; community work; social policy; research and evaluation; organisational practice, management and leadership; as well as education and training, and continue to adapt to changing welfare needs in these service contexts.

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