

# AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK GRADUATE AND POST-GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES 2004

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## Introduction

Discussion of labour and skill shortages is currently topical and bodes well for current undergraduate students in terms of future employment possibilities. However, students want, and need to be provided with, more specific factual information on their chosen employment field to facilitate these employment pursuits. Undergraduate students for example, might be interested in knowing the range of different comparative occupational salaries, the work patterns common to their chosen occupations, as well as information on whether further study following an initial degree is desirable for promotional opportunities, or expected as part of continuing professional development. One source of such information is the annual Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) survey. Each year the GCCA surveys all recently completed university graduates and postgraduates regarding their employment status, and various other employment related information. The 2004 Graduate (GDS) and Postgraduate (Postgrad) Destination Surveys results, with a response rate of 57%, are available from the GCCA Gradlink website or the more comprehensive GradsOnline web site (GCCA 2005). The occupation of social work is one of the many occupations listed on both websites, and employment outcome information on Bachelor of Social Work graduates as well as Master of Social Work (by Coursework and Research), and Social Work Doctoral graduates is provided. As an indicator of the educational activity of social workers in Australia, and the outcomes of that activity, some of this graduate, and the less often reported postgraduate, survey information, with brief comment, is provided below.

## What are you worth?

The media usually report on these surveys when they are released each year, but their focus is often predominantly on comparative salaries for graduates from varying disciplines. The Melbourne Age newspaper for example reported on starting salaries for new graduates from the 2004 surveys under the heading 'What are you worth?' (Age 2005). As might be expected, Dentistry, at a starting salary of \$60,000, and Medicine, at \$45,300, are among the highest occupational starting salaries. The median social work starting salary, at \$37,700, trails slightly behind many occupations in Education, Health,

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This salary 'slippage' by social work graduates contrasts somewhat with average weekly earnings (full-time, before tax) of all social workers where social workers' earnings are 'above average', and in the seventh decile of all occupational earnings. That is, 70% of workers on average earn less than social workers (DEST 2004). Also, the starting salaries in the GDS comprise income from all sources and thus include overtime and shift allowances which favour occupations such as medicine. Nevertheless, the gap in starting salaries for social work graduates compared to other graduates seems an area needing further investigation.

### Survey Data

Turning to the survey data, the Bachelor of Social Work and Postgraduate educational activity and outcomes illustrate some interesting similarities as well as differences in employment status. Table 1 compares all BSW graduates and postgraduates on a range of employment-related factors. BSW graduates are divided between those aged 'less than 25 years', and 'all ages' BSW graduates. (The GCCA collects information on graduates under 25 years for all occupations to report on graduates who may be in their first full-time professional job.) Table 1 also separates MSW by coursework and research, with the latter being grouped with doctoral graduates. Table 1 also lists similar employment characteristics for Psychology graduates, for comparative purposes.

**Table 1: Australian Social Work Graduate & Postgraduate Employment 2004**

Employment Variable	BSW <25	BSW (All)	MSW Course- work	MSW Research, & PhD	Psychology Graduates*
No. of Graduates/Postgrads	686	1300	220	41	2766
% male	10.9	13.1	24.5	24.5	19
% female	89.1	87	75.5	75.6	81
Median starting Salary (\$)	37000	38000	50000	54300	37000
Hourly rate (\$)	18.72	19.23	24.04	26.10	18.72
Median male salary (\$)	36300	38200	45000	61000	38000
Median Female salary (\$)	37100	38000	50000	54000	36400
% in Full-time Employment	73.7	79.5	85.7	89.3	67
% studying after graduation	24	10	6	0	42
% employed in Health	48.3	57.7	47.6	36	19.4
% employed in Government	27.7	24.7	13.5	8	21
% employed in Education	4.1	3.9	19	52	13.9
% employed in Private	12.4	6.3	11.1	4	38.9
% employed in Other	7.4	7.4	8.7	0	6.1

*Source: Author derived from GCCA (2005); Round figures to 100%;\*For comparison only.*

From Table 1, we can see:

- Quite a substantial number of students graduate with the BSW (1300) each year, and about half are under age 25 years. This age structure however varies by State, as shown below. On the other hand, compared to Psychology, social work graduate numbers are much smaller (about half).
- In terms of gender composition, social work education at all levels remains predominantly female (75% or more). The male proportion however increases with postgraduate education, and in the BSW the small proportion of males appears to be more mature age. A greater proportion of Psychology graduates are male, however like social work, that profession is also predominantly female (81%) at the under-graduate level.
- Starting salary increases substantially with higher level postgraduate courses. This is similarly reflected in the hourly rate. Salary by gender is a mixed bag with females showing high starting salaries from coursework programs but males earning more from research degrees.
- The proportion in full-time employment also increases with higher degree educational activity in social work. Psychology on the other hand has a much lower initial full time employment status, but this is offset by the substantially large number of psychology graduates who continue to study following graduation. Social workers under 25 years are also more likely to continue studying after graduation.
- In terms of industry sector employment, social work has a very high proportion starting in the Health sector, and particularly for more mature age BSW graduates. Around a quarter of BSWs are employed by government following graduation, whereas postgraduates are much less likely to be employed by government. The postgraduates with research degrees, compared to those with coursework degrees, are more likely to work in the education sector. The other outstanding figure in table 1, compared to social work, is the larger proportion of psychology graduates (almost 40%) who go to work in the private sector.

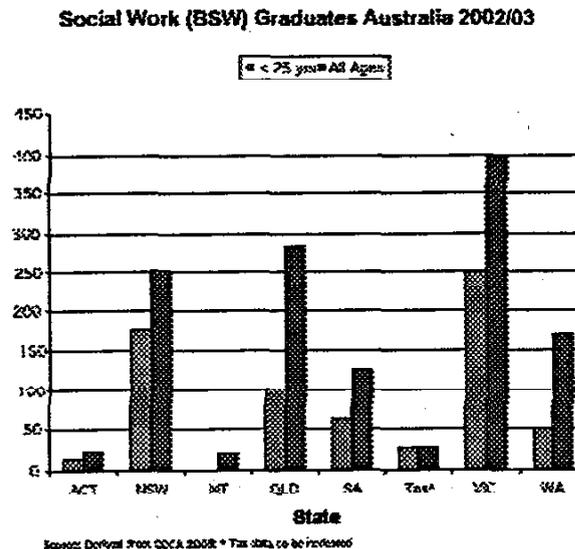
Overall, BSW social work graduates and postgraduates, while somewhat similar in certain labour market characteristics, such as gender composition and industry sector employed, also display considerable differences such as the greater financial payment associated with higher level educational activity, and different employment for those with research degrees. The relatively high employment rate (75% or more, and increasing with educational level) for all social work graduates however is consistent with previous local studies of social work graduate, and general, employment trends (Hawkins et al. 2000; McCormack 2001).

### **Regional Differences**

The GradsOnline website also provides data on social work graduates by geographical State, however the current data on the website refers to an earlier period, so the numbers and State relativities may have changed somewhat for 2004. The chart below shows Victoria, with six schools of social work producing the largest number of BSW graduates, followed by Queensland for 2002/03. The chart also shows the age pattern differences in the graduates by State, with NSW having 70% of its BSW graduates aged less than 25

years at that time. The age structure of social work graduates is influenced considerably by course configuration (two year graduate or four year undergraduate entry) and, as more States introduce the four year undergraduate social work degrees, this will eventually increase the proportion of younger social work graduates.

**Chart 1: Number of Social Work Graduates by State 2002/03**



If we take the current distribution of under age 25 BSW graduates shown above in Table 1 as indicative of students' future educational pursuits, we can see that this group is more likely, similar to the psychology graduates, to enrol in further study following graduation. Further study is usually undertaken to gain a particular type or level of skill training for example. Making these younger students more aware of the substantial salary increases associated with higher social work education, as shown above, may be a useful additional marketing tool educational institutions could use to encourage higher level training in social work. This information could also be used to advise school students as to the possible future employment outcomes if they pursue a social work degree.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the GCCA's graduate and postgraduate surveys provide us with interesting and useful information on educational activity and outcomes in the profession of social work. We can see there is both similarity and difference between social work graduate employment conditions and postgraduate employment, as might be expected. This brief report, by putting numbers to the different levels of social work training provides a measure of the scale of difference which is large for some employment characteristics, and not so large on others. The lower rate of starting salary for graduate social workers appears as an issue to pursue, and the higher pay of postgraduate social work graduates supports the idea that all social workers should continue to enhance their educational standing not just for the skills and knowledge but they will also be rewarded financially for this pursuit. If labour and skill shortages persist in the future, occurring in conjunction

with an ageing workforce, the education and professional work life of social workers will need to be attractive to younger workers and those people retraining, to maintain a healthy supply of skilled social workers. The survey described above can help us identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of our current occupational experience.

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