

Social work education under pressure: Access, workforce sustainability and the limits of acceleration

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ABSTRACT

Recent revisions to the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) Education Standards 2026 mark a significant shift in social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand, removing time-based requirements and enabling shortened qualifying pathways, including the potential compression of postgraduate routes to registration. Drawing on the SWRB's Official Information Act response and sector scholarship, this paper examines the implications of this shift for professional preparation, equity, and workforce sustainability. While the SWRB frames flexibility and compressed timeframes as a response to student financial hardship, declining enrolments and, most notably, workforce shortages, we argue that accelerated qualification pathways risk misdiagnosing the workforce crisis and positioning educational design as the primary lever for resolving what are fundamentally structural and political challenges. In doing so, costs and risks are displaced across the profession and sector, signalling concerns for workforce capability, organisational capacity, student learning and progression, and public safety. The paper contends that equity is not served if shortened pathways become diminished pathways and calls for coordinated system-level responses that preserve rigorous and coherent professional education.

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Introduction

Decisions by the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) to reduce qualification length requirements represent a consequential moment for social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand. This statement responds to the Board's revised Education Standards 2026 and the rationale outlined in its recently released Official Information Act response related to programme length and flexibility.¹ Together, these changes signal a broader shift in how qualification length, professional preparation, and workforce supply are being conceptualised and regulated.

As university-based Heads of Schools and Programme Leaders who oversee the academic quality, professional integrity, and long-term sustainability of social work education within our qualifying

programmes, we welcome this opportunity to engage constructively with this shift. Our purpose is not to resist change, but to clarify what is required if flexibility is to strengthen, rather than fragment, the profession and to ensure that workforce pressures are not addressed through educational compression alone. Our concern is not with flexibility per se, but with the risk that regulatory validation is being treated as educational adequacy, and that workforce pressures are being addressed primarily through changes to education rather than through coordinated system-level responses (O'Donoghue, 2024).

Scope and Implications of the Revised Education Standards

A defining feature of the revised SWRB Education Standards is the removal of

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explicit time-based requirements for qualifying programmes, replacing minimum duration expectations with a competency-based model of preparation. While this shift is intended to increase flexibility and responsiveness to workforce pressures, it also represents a substantive redefinition of what constitutes sufficient preparation for professional practice.

Recent scholarship, including Matthewson's (2025) analysis of the reintroduction of the 3-year Bachelor of Social Work, provides useful context for these debates. Matthewson's paper is concerned specifically with undergraduate education and makes a principled case for the 3-year BSW as pedagogically defensible and ethically necessary in the context of student financial hardship, participation barriers, and inequitable access to longer qualification pathways. His argument centres on who can enter and complete social work education, and on the burdens that extended study places on those with caring responsibilities, limited financial resources, and existing community obligations. These are important and legitimate considerations.

The SWRB's revised standards, however, extend beyond undergraduate provision and reshape the entire qualification pipeline. The OIA response indicates that flexibility in programme length is now permissible not only at the BSW level but also within postgraduate qualifying routes to registration, including the potential to shorten master's degrees from 2 years to 1 year, subject to providers demonstrating alignment with competency standards. This represents a substantive change in how professional preparation is defined and raises questions not only about access, but about educational depth, field readiness, professional formation, and longer-term leadership and research capacity within the profession.

Taken together, these contributions clarify that there is broad agreement about the nature of the problem: financial hardship,

constrained access, and a fragile workforce pipeline. Where greater scrutiny is needed, however, is in how shortening qualifying programmes is being positioned as the primary mechanism for resolving what are fundamentally structural and political drivers of workforce instability.

Our statement does not argue that a 3-year BSW is inherently inadequate, nor that all 4-year pathways are inherently superior. Rather, we maintain that reducing programme length without addressing the political drivers of the workforce crisis and without protecting robust educational and postgraduate pathways, risks reproducing inequity in new forms and shifting costs and risks onto students, employers, the social work profession, and the wider public. We are especially concerned that accelerated postgraduate pathways are being enabled without clear evidence of sector-wide consultation or systematic assessment of their implications for competence, supervision, and public safety. The issue, then, is not duration alone, but what is lost, displaced, or reconfigured when time-based expectations are significantly reduced across undergraduate and postgraduate social work education.

Workforce shortages and political drivers

The SWRB's response to this OIA request confirms that the primary evidence informing the move to flexible qualification length relates to student hardship, declining enrolments, and workforce supply pressures, rather than any analysis of educational outcomes or graduate capability (see pages 3–5 of their response). While these access concerns are real and serious, they do not, in themselves, address what is required for professional education, nor how reduced programme length may reshape responsibility for training once graduates enter practice, and they do not address the system challenges identified concerning sustaining and developing the social work workforce (O'Donoghue, 2024; Social Work Alliance, 2025).

The Board draws on literature that documents student stress, financial hardship and attrition (Bartley et al., 2025; Kim, 2024) to indicate workforce recruitment and retention challenges and its statutory obligations to avoid imposing undue cost on those seeking registration. There is widespread agreement that Aotearoa New Zealand is facing a significant shortage of qualified and registered social workers. These are legitimate and serious considerations that align with concerns raised by Matthewson (2025) and others across the sector (O'Donoghue, 2024; Social Work Alliance, 2025).

However, workforce shortages in social work are systemic and not simply a function of qualification length. They are the result of longstanding structural issues: chronic underfunding of social services, high workloads, limited capacity for supervision, pay inequities relative to comparable professions, public perception of the profession and burnout-driven attrition (Beddoe et al., 2023; SWRB, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024, 2025). The chronic underfunding of social work qualifying programmes by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) also plays a role, with the level of funding per student well below the level of other professional programmes, limiting the scope of educational offerings, student/staff ratios, and the level of support offered to students. Simply stated, educational reform that focuses primarily on accelerating supply risks misdiagnosing the problem (O'Donoghue, 2024; Social Work Alliance, 2025; Yeung et al., 2020).

The wider issue of the inadequacy of the student allowance and student loan amount (living costs) is also significant, particularly when students are on placement and struggle at that time to supplement this income with part-time work due to the hours requirement. This is particularly important because the principal sources of student hardship identified across the sector relate to the structure and resourcing of professional training, most notably unpaid

field placements. Not acknowledged in the SWRB's analysis is the considerable work undertaken to secure political support for paid placements, which feature strongly as a pinch point for many social work students (see, for example, Howells, 2024; Watson & Howells, 2025). Leaders and supporters of a highly visible campaign for paid placements lodged an ultimately unsuccessful petition to the New Zealand Parliament with over 16,000 signatures, seeking government support for social work, nursing, and other students required to complete long, unpaid placements as part of their degrees (Paid Placements Aotearoa, n.d.). By contrast, a similar campaign in Australia resulted in the introduction of the Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP), which provides AUD \$338.60 per week in 2026 (benchmarked to the single Austudy rate on 1 January each year) to eligible students undertaking mandatory placements in bachelor's or master's degrees in teaching, nursing, midwifery, or social work (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2024).

Compared to essential workers in paid training, the retention rate for social work students is low due to the cost of living crisis and challenges related to an inability to sustain paid work while on field practicum (Watson & Howells, 2025). The field practicum component of social work programmes is funded as a 'health-related profession'; if this tuition subsidy rate were in place for the entirety of the qualification, then financial sustainability challenges would be reduced.

While the Education Standards themselves were subject to consultation, the implications of enabling significantly shortened postgraduate qualifying pathways were not the subject of targeted sector consultation, nor were they supported by documented educational analysis. The SWRB acknowledges this in their OIA, and this distinction matters. Consultation on competency standards is not the same as consultation on how those standards can be

meaningfully achieved within substantially compressed programmes. For the postgraduate pathway, this reduction could be as much as half.

The OIA response also confirms that no formal assessment, curriculum mapping, or external educational advice was undertaken to determine whether significantly shortened postgraduate qualifying pathways, including a potential 120 credit master's degree, could realistically meet the professional formation expectations set out in the revised Education Standards. Within their OIA response, SWRB states that discussions may have been made informally in sector hui, for which no transcripts or recordings were kept. The SWRB then concedes that coverage of required content "could mean that a Master's programme at less than 240 credits may not be possible." This is a somewhat extraordinary admission, seeing that the SWRB's recent documentation (also provided in the OIA response) as well as the recently adopted SWRB guidelines suggests that 120- and 180-point pathways are possible.

As university heads delivering accredited postgraduate qualifying programmes, we can confirm that no such dedicated discussions or consultations occurred with us regarding accelerated pathways. This raises significant and pressing concerns about how qualifying postgraduate pathway changes (currently only offered by universities) are being considered and whether the implications for professional development, leadership capacity, and research training have been adequately examined.

It is important to emphasise that this position is not unique to university-based social work educators. This position was unanimously endorsed at the most recent CSWEANZ Annual General Meeting. The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) and the Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association (TWSWA) have provided support to this statement, indicating broad sector agreement regarding

the infeasibility concerns held about a 120-credit master's route.

Shortening qualifications may increase the throughput of social work student completions in the short term, but it does not address why social workers leave the profession, nor why many graduates struggle to sustain long-term practice. In this sense, the shift to a 3-year BSW (and potentially fast-tracked postgraduate pathways) risks functioning as a technical fix for what are fundamentally political and structural problems. When regulatory change is framed as a workforce solution, without parallel commitments to working conditions, social work education becomes the supposed magic lever through which broader systemic pressures are inappropriately diagnosed, understood and managed.

In this sense, the current policy direction risks conflating participation challenges with professional preparation challenges. Both are real, but they require different solutions. Educational reform may improve access, but it cannot compensate for underfunded services and challenging employment conditions that contribute to burnout and early exit from the profession. Nor can it adequately address the income shortfalls students face while studying.

Equity, access, and the risk of diminished pathways

Matthewson (2025) rightly foregrounds equity concerns, particularly the disproportionate impact of longer qualifications on Māori, Pacific, and mature students. Financial hardship, caring responsibilities, and placement pressures are well documented barriers, and shorter undergraduate pathways may reduce obstacles to entry and completion. However, neither Matthewson nor the SWRB acknowledge other support mechanisms, such as NGO study awards (funded by the Ministry of Social Development from 2005 to 2016), which

have been shown to strengthen both student confidence and competence while providing financial relief to students and placement backfill support to agencies (Yeung et al., 2020). Such initiatives suggest that targeted investment, rather than programme compression, can significantly address participation barriers without reducing educational depth.

Framed as flexibility and access, the revised standards that allow for acceleration can also redefine what is considered sufficient preparation for professional practice. Shortened pathways risk limiting advanced practice capability, research training, and leadership development, particularly for Māori and Pacific social workers seeking academic or policy roles. In 1991 the Māori Caucus of the New Zealand Council for Education and Training in the Social Service argued for social work education to be the best in the world for Māori, while reflecting Māori aspirations and Treaty obligations (Benton et al., 1991). Equity must therefore be understood across the full educational and professional lifespan, not solely at the point of entry. If marginalised students are disproportionately channelled into shorter qualifications that constrain progression to postgraduate study, research, or international mobility, then inequity is reconstituted rather than resolved.

There is also a risk that faster pathways will become stratified in a mixed-provider environment, where universities, wānanga, polytechnics, and private providers may adopt different programme lengths in response to the same regulatory settings. Without strong sector-wide norms and transparency requirements, students may not be fully informed about the long-term implications of different social work programmes. At a minimum, these considerations must be clearly communicated to students at the time of deciding which programmes to pursue.

Equity must also be evaluated alongside public protection. Social workers practise

in complex, high-stakes settings where decisions have profound consequences for individuals and communities. The public must have confidence in the depth and rigour of professional preparation. The SWRB's acknowledgement that no documented sector consultation has occurred regarding fast-tracked postgraduate pathways raises serious concern. Proceeding without broad engagement with educators and the profession leaves questions of competence, readiness, and safety insufficiently examined and risks weakening public trust. Regulatory decisions that weaken perceived educational standards may carry long-term reputational consequences for the profession. Equity is undermined if acceleration is prioritised over clarity.

A more sustainable equity strategy would focus on addressing structural barriers within higher education itself, including targeted financial support and incentives to recruit and retain Māori and Pacific students and other underrepresented groups. Such approaches strengthen participation and completion while maintaining educational standards, rather than shifting risk onto students, employers, and the public.

Educational depth, field education, and professional formation

Social work education is not simply about meeting competency checklists. It is a developmental process that integrates theory, values, ethics, cultural positioning, and practice wisdom over time. For this reason, universities remain committed to 4-year undergraduate programme designs, not as a regulatory requirement but as an educational commitment to reflective practice, research literacy, and readiness for complex practice contexts. We acknowledge a 3-year BSW, however, may be capable of meeting minimum standards for registration. Historically, 3-year BSWs were recognised, but this does not mean it is automatically educationally equivalent. More concerning is the lack

of analysis by the SWRB as to how fast-tracked postgraduate pathways may impact graduate readiness for the complexity and diversity of social work related roles.

The loss of time has consequences: fewer opportunities for consolidation, less space for critical engagement with policy and structural injustice, and reduced flexibility to respond to student learning needs. Field education remains a cornerstone of social work preparation. It is also one of the most resource-intensive components of any programme. Shortening academic pathways does not address or reduce the complexity of practice environments or the supervision needs of students. Reflection, identity formation, and the ability to sit with complexity are not easily compressed.

Earlier sector debates recognised these issues. Arguments supporting the move to a 4-year BSW included greater academic rigour, stronger preparation for practice, improved research capability, and enhanced international portability (Beddoe, 2014; Beddoe et al., 2004). These considerations remain salient. With 900 hours of practicum required, a 1-year qualifying postgraduate programme leaves very little time to develop the critical and theoretical foundations necessary for complex practice.

This is particularly important in Aotearoa New Zealand, where social work education must support deep engagement with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, bicultural practice, and work with diverse communities. These are not discrete content areas that can simply be intensified; they require time, relationship-building, and iterative learning.

There is also concern that compressed programmes shift the burden of professional formation onto employers and supervisors post-qualification (Beddoe et al., 2019). Graduates may be registered, but potentially may be less work-ready. This is not a neutral outcome. It requires agencies, many of which are already stretched by extensive funding cuts, to invest more time and resources in

training, supervision, and risk management (Beddoe et al., 2020). In effect, some of the costs saved within the education system could easily be displaced into the workforce.

This displacement is particularly problematic given the financial realities facing the sector. Many statutory and NGO services operate under constrained and uncertain funding arrangements, including short-term contracts that limit forward planning and continuity of supervision (Social Service Providers Aotearoa, 2019). Funding instability contributes to high staff turnover, reduced supervisory capacity, and fewer opportunities for sustained professional socialisation. In such contexts, the relational and reflective learning that supports the development of confident, ethical practitioners is harder to embed, raising questions about both fairness and the long-term sustainability of the workforce.

Such broader concerns have implications, not only for individual graduates, but for the profession's future capacity to sustain specialist expertise, policy leadership, and academic renewal. It also risks repositioning social work education from a public good focused on developing reflective, ethical, and critically engaged practitioners to a throughput mechanism designed primarily to meet labour-market demand, with significant consequences for curriculum depth, field education, and expectations of graduate readiness. The question is not whether learning outcomes can technically be met in fewer credits, but what kind of professional is being formed, and at what cost.

Conclusion

We recognise that the SWRB's statutory mandate is centred on public protection and proportional regulation, and that it does not control many of the structural levers shaping workforce instability, including pay equity, service funding, or tertiary education subsidies. Workforce shortages are real and pose risks to service continuity and to the safety and wellbeing of communities. Our

concern is not that the Board is responsible for these broader pressures, but that educational reform risks becoming the primary mechanism through which structural and political problems are understood and managed. When regulatory flexibility is positioned as the primary response to workforce pressures, there is a danger that responsibility for systemic underinvestment is subtly displaced onto qualification design.

The reintroduction of a 3-year Bachelor of Social Work should not be understood as a simple corrective to past policy mistakes. Nor should it be rejected out of hand. What is required instead is a careful, collective, and principled response that keeps the long-term health of the profession in view. The real challenge is to design pathways that are accessible without being reductive; flexible without being fragmented; and responsive without being expedient.

A 3-year BSW has a place within a genuinely coherent system of social work education. But coherence requires shared principles, transparent pathways, protected field education, and a commitment to maintaining robust postgraduate options. It also requires acknowledging that education reform alone cannot resolve workforce crises rooted in political and economic decisions.

We also acknowledge that competence, rather than time alone, is the appropriate regulatory threshold. There is no simple linear relationship between credit volume and professional capability. However, duration does influence and shape the conditions under which competence is developed, consolidated, and sustained over time. While we accept that undergraduate programme length can be legitimately debated, we cannot endorse or support the SWRB's current approach to postgraduate qualifying pathways, which has been framed as administratively permissible rather than educationally justified. The Board's own OIA response acknowledges uncertainty as to whether coverage of required content below 240 credits may be feasible. Thus,

the suggestion that substantially shortened master's degrees may be sufficient for professional recognition has not been accompanied by transparent educational analysis, sector-wide agreement, or a clear strategy for safeguarding advanced learning, leadership development, and research capability within the profession.

For these reasons, our primary concern lies not with flexibility in principle, but with system design in practice. Regulatory permission does not operate in a vacuum. It can powerfully shape educational provider design and delivery, student decision-making, and sector norms. If accelerated postgraduate pathways become structurally normalised without shared agreement about their purposes and consequences, there is a risk that the standing and substance of social work as a profession may be diminished rather than consolidated.

However, this moment also presents an opportunity. If flexibility is to be retained, it should be accompanied by much closer and more transparent collaboration between regulators, education providers, employers, and professional bodies to ensure that postgraduate pathways remain rigorous, coherent, and genuinely developmental. Co-design approaches, shared evaluation of graduate outcomes, and explicit agreement about the purposes of postgraduate professional education would provide a far stronger foundation for reform than reliance on minimum regulatory thresholds alone. Equity is not served if shortened programmes become diminished pathways. Workforce sustainability is not achieved if educational costs are shifted downstream.

As social work educators and leaders, we have a responsibility to look beyond immediate pressures and to ask harder questions about what kind of profession we are shaping, who benefits, and who bears the risk. That responsibility is collective. Our strength, as ever, lies not in individual or siloed solutions, but in shared deliberation and action.

Note

- 1 See the Official Information Act request response by the Social Workers Registration Board on 23 January, 2026. <https://fyi.org.nz/request/33133-revised-social-work-education-standards-2026-qualification-length-and-programme-design?nocache=incoming-137694#incoming-137694>

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