



**Parallel Process in Final Field Education: A Continuing Education Workshop to Promote Best Practices in Social Work**

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# Fields of Practice in Post-Degree Social Work Employment

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*Schmidt and Hemingway*

## Abstract

This research used a survey and brief telephone interviews to determine if social work practice interests changed during and after completing a MSW degree. The participants represented five years of graduates from a small School of Social Work in British Columbia, Canada. Prior to starting their MSW studies, the largest number of social workers were employed in child welfare (31%). After graduation with the MSW degree 16% were employed in child welfare while 39% were employed in mental health and addictions. Information gained from the study is useful for planning curriculum as well as continuing education programs.

## Introduction

Research on employment outcomes for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) qualified social workers is scarce. Similarly, there is a lack of research on how the practice interests of MSW students remain static or change during the course of their graduate studies. This study examined employment outcomes for MSW students prior to receiving their MSW degree and after receiving their MSW degree. The research sought to determine whether practice interests changed during the course of MSW studies and what, if any, aspects of the MSW degree studies were useful in the graduates' current field of practice. The study also looked at changes in employment before and after MSW degree completion as well as the strengths and areas for improvement in this particular MSW Program. The students were graduates of the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC, a small university with the main campus located in Prince George British Columbia, Canada). The purpose of the research was to provide information for curriculum development and planning, continuing education,

and accreditation requirements.

## Literature Review

The published research on employment outcomes is limited and much of it is based on work conducted several decades ago (Biggerstaff & Koelvzon, 1980; Hanson, McCullagh, & James, 1995; Quartero, 1978; Rogers, Smith, Hull, & Ray, 1995). Biggerstaff and Koelvzon (1980) found that BSW graduates were more likely to be employed in public welfare and child welfare while MSW graduates were typically employed in mental health settings and supervisory roles.

Other research literature examined the expressed interests of students in fields of practice while the students were enrolled in degree studies. For example, Csikai and Belanger (2002) surveyed 143 BSW students and 33 MSW students to determine their attitudes and interests toward specific practice areas. They found some similarities and differences between BSW and MSW students. Both groups of students expressed interest in children's services. However, MSW students were more interested in medical social work and mental health while BSW students were interested in school social work and child welfare services.

Choi, Urbanski, Fortune, and Rogers (2015) surveyed 246 MSW qualified social workers nine to 15 months after they graduated. The researchers considered a variety of criteria such as the type of organization that hired the graduates, the degree to which the educational program prepared the graduates, the field of practice in their employment setting, and post-graduate mobility. The majority of the graduates worked in the area of direct or clinical practice providing psychotherapy and counseling (83%) with the largest number working in non-profit settings, followed by government and for-profit organizations (Choi, Urbanski, Fortune, &

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Rogers, 2015, p. 485). In the study by Choi et al., 51% of the respondents changed jobs within 15 months of graduating with their MSW degree.

Earlier research by Fortune and Hanks, (1988) surveyed graduates that worked 18 months to nine and half years. They also found a high degree of mobility as 69% of their participants held at least two different jobs after graduation.

Rubin and Johnson (1984) looked at the practice interests of MSW students at the point of admission to eight different American Schools of Social Work and found that 86% of the students wanted to enter private practice in a psychotherapeutic, clinical role. Subsequently, Rubin, Johnson, and DeWeaver (1986) conducted further research to see if the actual program of study exerted an influence over the type of employment that students wished to obtain after graduation. The researchers were primarily interested in seeing if interests in private practice and psychotherapeutic work changed during the course of MSW studies. They noted various obstacles in arriving at a definitive analysis but stated that the degree of change in interest between admission and graduation was at best extremely modest.

Similar research at the University of Toronto in Canada arrived at different conclusions. Bogo, Michalski, Raphael, and Roberts (1995) found that students experienced a modest shift in interests toward what they called the more traditional mission of social work that involved working with poor groups of people through broader social action as well as individual casework.

The research that examines employment outcomes and shifts in practice interests during the course of MSW studies is fairly limited. It also tends to rely on the distribution of survey questionnaires rather than personal interviews.

### **Methodology and Sample**

Gathering employment data is difficult. The Federal Government records employment information and categorizes it under National Occupational Classifications (Government of Canada, 2011). Most social workers (but not all)

fall under the Social and Community Services Worker classification. This particular classification contains 115 job titles such as mental health worker, addictions worker, and community development worker. The problem with these data is that the classification is based upon the type of job rather than the professional qualification. For example, a mental health worker could be a social worker, a registered nurse, a registered psychiatric nurse, a licensed practical nurse, an occupational therapist, a psychologist, and so on.

Another possible source of employment information is the regulatory body; in the case of the Province of British Columbia this is the British Columbia College of Social Workers (BCCSW). However, the BCCSW is a public body that operates within the parameters of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. As such the BCCSW must limit its collection of information to the minimum required for registration. A further problem in British Columbia is that not all social workers are required to be registered. As a result, the BCCSW does not have complete or reliable employment data.

This research study used the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) alumni distribution list to contact participants that graduated from the UNBC MSW Program between 2011 and 2015. The UNBC MSW Program admits students through two entry routes. Students who hold a BSW degree are admitted to two full-time semesters of course work followed by a practicum or a thesis. Students with a non-social work undergraduate or graduate degree are admitted to a full-time foundation year, including a 450-hour practicum. This is followed by a second year of two semesters of full-time study. Once the course work is completed the non-BSW students move on to complete a thesis or a second practicum. The five-year period from 2011 to 2015 produced 51 MSW graduates. Permission to conduct the research was provided by the (UNBC Research Ethics Board.

All graduates receive a UNBC alumni email address. The alumni email addresses were used to

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contact graduates and invite them to participate in the research. The email message to the alumni distribution list provided background information on the study and asked graduates if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Graduates contacted the researchers by email and then an interview was arranged. A total of 33 graduates responded and participated in the research from among the 51 that completed the MSW degree between 2011 and 2015.

Participants completed a brief questionnaire and answered interview questions. A structured interview guide was used to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions. Probe questions were also employed to clarify information that was unclear or required further explanation. The interviews were audio-recorded and written notes were taken during the interview. Descriptive data were used to identify the characteristics of the sample as well as employment outcomes. The interview notes were read and analyzed to identify common responses. Audio recordings were available to confirm any questions arising from the interview notes.

## Results

Table 1 provides a description of the graduating groups broken down by year of graduation, numbers of graduates, responses, gender, diversity group identification, and type of undergraduate degree on admission to the UNBCMSW Program.

Females comprised the largest number of graduates (74.5%). The School of Social Work encourages diversity and apart from the 2015 graduating group, diverse populations accounted for 23% (2013) to 73% (2014) of the MSW graduates. Diverse groups included First Nations students, LGBTQ students, newcomer students, and students with disabilities.

Table 2 presents the average age at admission and at degree completion and the average years of employment between graduating with an undergraduate degree and being admitted to the MSW Program.

The total sample of participants had an average age of 35.45 on admission to the MSW Program and the students took about five years to complete the degree requirements. Students admitted with an undergraduate degree that was not in social work were on average about seven years younger than those with a BSW degree.

**Table 1. MSW Graduates 2011-2015**

Criteria	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
<b>Number of Graduates</b>	15	10	9	11	6	51
<b>Responses</b>	10	6	7	7	3	33
<b>Response Rate</b>	66%	60%	78%	64%	50%	63%
<b>Male</b>	4	2	0	4	2	12
<b>Female</b>	11	7	9	7	4	38
<b>Other</b>	0	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Diversity Group</b>	6	5	2	8	0	21
<b>Percentage Diversity Groups</b>	40%	50%	23%	73%	0%	41%
<b>BSW Degree</b>	8	5	7	5	4	29
<b>Other Degree</b>	7	5	2	6	2	22

Note. Gender and diversity group are based on the total number of graduates.

**Table 2. Average Age and Years of Employment Post Undergraduate Degree**

M= Mean

Degree Type and Gender	Age at Admission to MSW <i>M</i>	Age at Graduation <i>M</i>	Years of Employment Post UGrad <i>M</i>
<b>BSW Male <i>n=3</i></b>	40	44.7	3.3
<b>BSW Female <i>n=15</i></b>	39.5	43.5	5.0
<b>Combined BSW <i>n=18</i></b>	39.6	43.7	4.7
<b>Non-BSW Male <i>n=7</i></b>	31.7	35.9	3.9
<b>Non-BSW Female <i>n=7</i></b>	33.6	38.3	6.4
<b>Non-BSW Transgender <i>n=1</i></b>	28	31	3
<b>Combined Non-BSW <i>n=15</i></b>	32.3	36.7	5
<b>Total Sample <i>n=33</i></b>	35.45	40.5	4.86

After completing their undergraduate degree, 31% of the participants reported that they worked in child welfare, 21% worked in the field of addictions and mental health, and 17% worked with disability services. The remainder worked in areas such as First Nations organizations, women’s organizations, schools, corrections, community development, health care, and research.

The field of practice and work changed after graduation with the MSW degree. The largest source of employment was in mental health and addictions (39%), followed by child welfare (16%), disability services (14%), and health care (9%). The remaining 22% of MSW graduates worked in a variety of fields of practice including First Nations organizations, coroner’s services, school districts, women’s centers, community development, corrections, research and post-secondary education. MSW graduates were also fairly mobile in terms of employment as this group of participants reported an average of 1.8 different jobs post-graduation. In this sample, 60.5% of participants reported having held two or more jobs since their graduation from the Master of Social Work degree. At the time of reporting only two graduates indicated that they were employed on a part-time basis. Several respondents noted that they had a number of jobs that added up to a full-time position.

Graduates were asked if their practice interests changed after they entered the MSW Program and if change occurred, what contributed to that change? Seventeen participants indicated that their interests did not change during the course of completing their MSW degree.

*No. I was always interested in mental health and addictions and this interest was maintained through the program. There was a good focus on this practice area.*

*I knew when I came into the MSW that I wanted to work in the area of mental health and addictions. My interests stayed the same but I was able to focus my studies and specialize.*

*I was always interested in working with seniors so my interest and focus did not change.*

Four participants indicated that they experienced some minor or partial change in interests while 12 of the graduates noted that their practice interests did change during the MSW Program. Several comments illustrate the nature of the change in practice interests.

*I was always interested in children and*

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*families but not from the child protection perspective. The MSW opened my eyes to possibilities with community development, child and youth mental health, and clinical practice.*

*Yes it did. It improved my skills and I also developed an interest in research and social work supervision.*

*Yes my focus did change. From the outset I became very interested in mental health. This was stimulated by a practicum at the First Nations Centre, volunteer work with the Canadian Mental Health Association, course work, and the professors.*

The participants were asked about strengths of the Program as well as areas that could be improved. A major strength was the small size of the Program. Students liked the small size of the classes as this provided easy access to professors and enabled good contact with classmates. For example, one graduate stated:

*I think the small school and smaller classes are strengths. This allowed easy access to faculty and promoted good relationships with classmates. I felt it was a comfortable environment. I am fairly shy but the smaller size created a sense of safety for me.*

This sense of safety was apparent in the classroom and students felt safe to express themselves and disagree with faculty members as indicated by the following comment:

*I felt free to express thoughts and opinions even if they were at variance to faculty members. There was never a sense of absolute right and wrong. Faculty offered a breadth of experience and style.*

Another graduate said:

*The small program means that there is close contact with faculty and colleagues. There is a lot of one on one mentoring and this was ideal for me.*

Graduates also noted elements of the UNBC MSW Program that might be improved. Most of the comments regarding improvement pertained to the need for more clinical courses. As previously noted, 39% of the graduates worked in the field of addictions and mental health after obtaining their MSW degree. This area of practice requires strong clinical skills. The need for more clinical courses was reflected in the following comments:

*I'd like to see more clinical content as that is where the positions are for MSW social workers. A lot of social workers don't get hired because they lack the clinical knowledge.*

*I'd like to see more emphasis on counselling and development of concrete skills. There need to be more clinical courses. They should be core and required.*

*The program needs more clinical options with a good grounding in counseling skills. It would also be good to have a course on working with older adults, which includes things like adult guardianship legislation.*

One respondent said:

*I'd like to see more on management, leadership, and supervision. For example, how do social workers manage in a multidisciplinary environment?*

Another graduate raised a concern about course scheduling.

*I'd like to see more options in scheduling course delivery. For those of us working full-time it would be good to have more evening courses and weekend courses.*

Overall, the responses were very positive regarding the quality of the MSW Program. A chief strength is the small size of the university and the Social Work Program and what that means for access to faculty, contact with classmates, and building a sense of a safe and comfortable community.

### **Discussion**

The findings are consistent with some aspects of earlier research by Biggerstaff and Koelvzon (1980), who found that BSW graduates were more likely to be working in child welfare and public welfare while MSW graduates were employed in mental health settings and supervisory roles. In the UNBC research 31% of the respondents reported working in child welfare prior to entering the MSW Program. After completing the MSW Program the area of child welfare practice dropped to 16% of participants while practice in mental health and addictions accounted for 39% of the graduates. The field of mental health and addictions requires workers to have well developed clinical skills. As a result, it is not surprising that graduates noted the need for more course content focusing on counseling or clinical practice.

Graduates from the MSW Program also tend to be very mobile in terms of employment. Earlier research by Fortune and Hanks, (1988) found that 69% of MSW graduates held at least two different jobs after graduation. In this just over 60% of graduates reported holding two or more jobs since their graduation.

Research by Rubin et al. (1986) and by Bogo et al. (1995) found that MSW students experienced a modest shift in practice interests during the course of degree studies. In the UNBC research, 12 of the 33 participants noted a change in practice interests after they entered the MSW Program. This appears to be the result of course content as well as practicum opportunities.

Research of this nature is helpful in developing curriculum and organizing course content. It also provides useful information for the development of continuing education, including post-degree certificates. The results indicated interests in mental health and addictions that need to be further developed in the UNBC curriculum. At the same time the results highlight key strengths such as the small class size and access to professors. The sample size is small but it represents good participation from five years of MSW graduates. A survey of this nature can be useful for social work educators in planning

continuing education initiatives that are informed by the social work practice community.

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