

Transplanting TISSA: “New Voices” in Trans-Tasman Social Work Research

New Voices

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Abstract

In this article, we reflect on the development of *New Voices in Social Work Research*, a PhD research symposium that has been transplanted from the European TISSA (“The International Social Work & Society Academy”) model to the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand contexts. We also explore our experience of working collaboratively with academics, researchers, and the emerging community of doctoral scholars who are engaged with the Australia and *New Zealand Social Work, Welfare and Research* (ANZSWWER) organisation. In our reflection, we consider the early stages of the New Voices in Social Work Research symposium and argue the importance of a space for PhD and Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to build research capabilities and provide opportunities for research dissemination. Finally, we introduce ideas for further research in order to strengthen the *New Voices in Social Work Research* initiative to better support doctoral researchers in social work education in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords: *Doctoral research; Social work research; Research capability; Dissemination*

Introduction

Social work is a profession and an academic discipline. Academic disciplines rely on research and knowledge generation as part of their claim to disciplinary identity. As Tilbury et al. (2017, p. 2218) suggested, “social work research generates and adds to knowledge about social work and human services, highlights the nature of the lived experiences of service users and the ways in which inequality and diversity shape experiences, and promotes social justice and social inclusion”. Higher Degree by Research (HDR) scholars play an important role in this ongoing production of new knowledge, however in social work this often happens “on the job” as many social work qualified staff undertake doctoral education as they teach on qualifying courses. In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, the emphasis of our national accrediting bodies, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and Social Work Registration Board (SWRB) respectively, has primarily focussed on qualifying degrees, leaving post-qualifying education to the purview of individual institutions. As such, accreditation processes in both countries emphasise the academic qualifications of social work staff (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2021; Social Workers Registration Board, 2021). In Australia, the focus on staff qualifications within Higher Education Providers (HEPs) became more pronounced with the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (2020). It was this experience of teaching while undertaking doctoral research and being involved with the other peak body for social work education, ANZSWWER, that led us to consider the needs of doctoral scholars within our discipline.

Unlike the United States where the *Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education* in social work (GADE) has been established since 1977, there has been little attention to supporting doctoral scholars in social work outside of individual institutions. We recognise the cohort of social work doctoral students is likely to be small although we know little about them. Brownlow et al. (2023) describe the health, society and culture fields make up 35.1% of HDR students in Australia. It is difficult to know how many doctoral graduates in social work are located within specific fields of study, but we can surmise that the cohort is likely to be small and mirrors the qualifying graduates in terms of drawing students who have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage. We might consider the cohort to also be similar in gender representation given the feminised nature of the profession generally (Jones et al., 2019) who often report a sense of isolation (Brownlow et al., 2023). Reported experiences of isolation contrast with PhD students located within STEM-based disciplines where research is more likely to be full-time, team based and undertaken in a laboratory setting. While current data is not available, anecdotally, in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, most doctoral researchers in social work are enrolled on a part-time basis while continuing their paid employment. Therefore, it can be challenging to collaborate with other researchers and engage with communities of practice. There are few opportunities available to engage with academic networks or receive feedback outside of existing supervisory structures and reviews. To address this, we therefore propose the need for a forum to facilitate trans-Tasman research connections in social work programs across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

Haidee:

In August 2014, I travelled to Bulgaria to attend the TISSA PhD Network Conference hosted by the University of Sofia at the St Kliment Ohridski campus. Established in 2003, the PhD Network Conference is an international symposium where PhD students present their “work in progress” to a panel of experienced research supervisors who provide detailed feedback in response. I attended the forum with my doctoral supervisor, *Professor x, who had been a panel member for many years. The strength of the TISSA model is that participants can present at any stage of their candidature. Being at an early point of my candidature, I was intrigued by the unique opportunity to attend a dedicated PhD research conference and the opportunity engage with research colleagues in Europe. Over the course of three days, 24 PhD researchers presented their “work in progress”, each presenting for 20 minutes, followed by feedback from members of the panel and robust discussion with the audience. This format offered participants a rare opportunity to discuss and disseminate their findings. Participants had travelled from all parts of Europe and represented a community of practice for researchers who are “geographically dispersed” (Bickle et al., 2021, p. 9).

On reflection, the journey to TISSA created an opportunity for a deeper engagement with my research and the negotiation of an emerging academic identity (Mu et al., 2018). To this end, engaging with other PhD researchers offered a welcomed sense of belonging with the scholarly community in social work. As my contact with other PhD students was limited, attending TISSA was a unique and unanticipated opportunity, given its dedicated focus on doctoral research. Drawing on my interest in Bourdieu’s conceptual tools, participating in the PhD network started to create a “scholarly habitus” (Usher & McCormack, 2021) through reflecting on the “positive dispositions relevant to being a doctoral student” (p. 322).

An unanticipated outcome of attending the TISSA PhD network conference, however, was the opportunity to collaborate with ANZSWWER colleagues to establish a “transplanted” TISSA, provisionally named “TISSA Down Under”. Lynelle and I presented an overview at the ANZSWWER symposium in 2016, highlighting the aims and scope of the newly named *New Voices in Social Work Research*. This forum aimed to provide a space for PhD and Early Career Social Work researchers to receive feedback from an invited panel of research supervisors. Secondly, the forum was intended to promote doctoral research in social work and critically examine the ways in which it could be disseminated and embedded into critically informed social work practice. In September 2017, the *New Voices in Social Work Research* was officially launched at the University of Auckland at the annual ANZSWWER symposium. Six doctoral researchers presented their work to a Trans-Tasman panel of Higher Degree Research supervisors.

Offering an annual forum for PhD researchers in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, *New Voices in Social Work* research has been a significant development for doctoral researchers where there had been few opportunities for connection across institutions, states or in the unique Trans-Tasman higher education context. As such, this forum responds to the challenge posed by Hodgson et al. (2021) who argued the need for strategies to develop “future research capacity” (p. 96) through the “advancement of research knowledge and skills” (p. 96) in doctoral education contexts in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. In doing so, it further strengthens ANZSWWER’s research agenda and commitment to doctoral communities of practice.

Lynelle:

I became involved in the New Voices in Social Work Research project after attending an ANZSWWER symposium in Melbourne in 2015. At this event, Professor Charlotte Williams discussed the need for a significant change in doctoral education within Australia. She highlighted the importance of providing support to doctoral students and shared her experience of TISSA, a European doctoral network. At that time, I had just joined ANZSWWER's Committee of Management and was also working on my own doctorate. My colleague Associate Professor, Sharlene Nipperess, ANZSWWER President, and I discussed the dearth of support for both PhD scholars and Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in Australia. We saw ANZSWWER as an opportunity to address this issue by offering resources specifically tailored to these cohorts of researchers. Working together, Sharlene and I, along with Haidee and Dr David Hodgson, initiated two key developments: incorporating dedicated sessions at future symposia for presenting research conducted by PhD candidates and ECRs, as well as the development of a blog for doctoral students to share their projects on social media under ANZSWWER's auspice. The *New Voices in Social Work Research* blog quickly gained traction while our efforts led to the inclusion of specialised themes during subsequent ANZSWWER symposia. This innovation provided valuable opportunities for emerging scholars from various stages of their academic careers to present their work and make connections within the doctoral communities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, 28 blog posts have been posted with 15,604 views of the site from across 123 countries. We are also pleased that more than 80 presentations have been made since the *New Voices In Social Work* panel was first convened in 2017 in Auckland. Given the engagement with our community of practice, the value of a PhD network and online blog are demonstrated to be an important contribution to the doctoral space in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond. The *New Voices in Social Work* initiative has started to develop greater cross-institutional collaboration while elevating the importance and visibility of PhD research students. Our aim, however, remains to promote and support PhD candidates in social work programs across Australia and New Zealand in a collaborative and inclusive way.

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