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## Putting the Economic Back into the Social (Work Curriculum)

Angela Barns and Alison Preston

### Introduction

In recent years numerous social work texts have documented the radical shifts within the delivery of social work services and the provision of social work education (Mullaly 1997; Pease and Fook 1999; Healy 2001); shifts ensuing from the rising dominance of neo-liberal philosophies and orthodox economics within the policy development process (Crineen and Wilson 1997; Mullaly 1997; Healy 2000; Reisch and Gorin 2001; Shera and Bogo 2001). As economic globalisation continues to demand highly educated/skilled workers, tertiary education facilities are often 'forced' to abandon traditional 'thinking' courses and subjects in favour of those focused on 'doing' (Neville and Saunders 1998; Hough 1999). Of the texts concentrating on social work education, many have explored the ways in which social work curriculum has interacted with the global changes, highlighting the decline in interdisciplinary collaboration and the increasing emphasis on vocationalism and 'professionalisation' (Reisch and Gorin 2001, p. 13). Evidenced through the narrowing of subject choice, course-content and research programs (Berg-

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Weger and Schneider 1998), the diminution of cross-disciplinary understandings has meant that theories relating to the social world are frequently taught with minimal attention to the economic implications of and within people's everyday lives (Prigoff 2000); economics is limited to shallow explorations of 'the market' and generalised discussions of 'globalisation' and economic rationalism.

Reflecting upon the results from a survey of a group of fourth year social work students at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia, this paper considers the repercussions that such shifts in curriculum may present for social work practice and in particular, its engagement with social policy formation within the public domain. Our discussion is set against a parallel shift in the undergraduate economic curriculum, as reflected in an almost singular focus on orthodox (neo-classical) theory and the limited course offerings in business, trade and financial economics (Zweig and Dawes 2000, pp. 30-31). It is our contention that the reduction of economic understandings within undergraduate social work degrees and the corresponding disintegration of social/welfare frameworks within the economic curriculum, places significant constraints on the ability of graduates, from either discipline, to adequately challenge and disrupt dominant economic framings and resultant policy recommendations. Such a proposition is echoed in Reisch and Gorin's (2001) comments relating to the lack of economic content within the current (North American) social work curriculum:

Given the magnitude of contemporary economic and social changes, it is puzzling how schools can satisfy the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) requirements (1995) to teach students to work toward economic and social justice when most students lack an understanding of how the economy works or how it developed (p. 15).

Such constraints, alongside the ensuing lack of public critique, contributes to the growing silence within alternative policy discourses; a silence which could be read as a 'nod of approval' or endorsement of current policy directions (Reisch and Gorin 2001, p. 9).

Discussing the complexities and intricacies of these issues, the paper is organised as follows: beginning with a discussion of the neo-liberal ascendancy within the western context, the paper proceeds to a discussion of undergraduate curriculum content, with a particular focus on the streamlining and compartmentalizing of course offerings within economic and social work schools. Thereafter, the paper continues with an interpretation/analysis of social work students' perceptions, opinions and understandings of economic theories and practices; this discussion is related to a broader dialogue concerning the gendering of social work as a profession as well as the implications for social work practice and its engagement with social/public policy formation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the benefits to be gained from interdisciplinary collaboration between social work and economic understandings.

### A Disclaimer!

In writing of social work's lack of engagement with economics, a generalised notion of social work is envisioned; a notion which not only assumes the existence of a universal

discourse of social work, but is predicated upon a view of social work to which all social workers have agreed! Not only is such a proposition problematic in its 'one size fits all' framing but such a universalist edict ignores the work of social workers who actively engage in negotiating the economic on the level of the everyday/everynight (Smith 1999). As such, this paper does not seek to berate or condemn social work as a body of knowledges and practitioners. Rather as a social worker and an economist respectively, we reflect upon the progressive potential of social work as both a site and means, of enacting change through the reinstatement of a 'social-economic' merger. In focusing upon social workers and social work education we heed the advice of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussian military historian, Carl von Clausewitz, who said, 'economics is too important to leave to the economists'.

### **Background: The Neo-Liberal Ascendancy**

The last three decades have witnessed a remarkable transformation in Australian social, economic and political life (Saunders and Fincher 2001; Edwards 2002, pp. 10-18). Since the 1970s, in keeping with developments in other western contexts, the Australian political landscape has shifted from one informed by social democratic principles, to a nation underpinned by rationality and conservative morality; a social world which privileges 'the market' as the prime regulator of all economic, social and political life (Mitchell 1999, p. 153). Within this rationalistic context a new cultural discourse has been created; a cultural narrative which represents a shift from a 'culture of welfare to the culture of work... (a) move away from the politics of entitlement into the politics of responsibility' (Tony Abbott - Minister for Employment Services cited in Smith 1999, p. 25).

Whilst space precludes a detailed analysis of the disadvantage perpetrated through the 'new economic ruthlessness', evidence of its enactment is overwhelming; increases in wage and income inequality (Saunders and Tsumori 2002); extended working hours (Campbell 2002); the shift towards non-standard employment arrangements (MacDonald and Burgess 1999; Campbell and Brosnan 1999); increased financial and economic insecurity for women (Barns and Preston 2002); and a rise in the incidence of poverty (Raper 2000).

Although the neo-liberal policy agenda and its resultant effects have been the subject of considerable debate, it is increasingly apparent that both the span and sphere of influence held by those in opposition (social workers - feminists - political-economists included) has been significantly curtailed. As Saunders and Fincher (2001) contend:

There is still a vociferous lobby in support of increasing the size and generosity of the welfare system in Australia, but it is no longer setting the reform agenda... it has become increasingly re-active rather than pro-active (p. 6).

Whilst disappointed by both economists' and social workers' apparent lack of engagement with countering dominant social policy processes, particularly at the levels of government, we are particularly puzzled by social work's silence, given its history as the (irrational) 'Other' to the rational social sciences, such as economics. Positioned as the 'Other', social work was and continues to be, immersed in the 'everyday/everynight-ness' of people's lives (Smith 1987; Hartman 1990 pp. 3-4). Social work was largely informed by a commitment to holistic practice which distinguished social work from the narrow criteria of support assumed by other helping professions (Reisch and Gorn 2001, p. 13); a notion of holism which is enshrined within the professions ethical code and its 'allegiance' to 'working with (people)... in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic and political resources' (AASW 1999, p. 1). This emphasis on holistic and multidisciplinary practice in conjunction with understandings of people's lives as discursive and contextually bound, not only acknowledges the economic as a site of and space for social work practice but affirms its strategic role in 'putting the economic back into the social' (Dawes 2000, p. 15). Given this historical context, social work's current predicament invites further discussion: what might explain the shift in focus? Where are social workers within the current context? Why are today's social workers seemingly less vociferous and less engaged in the public policy development process, than previous generations? Is there a greater acceptance of prevailing orthodoxy? Or, are there significant constraints to their involvement; constraints such as weakened employment protection and the associated risk of retrenchment from speaking out? Is the social work silence a reflection of economic illiteracy and the consequent inability to engage in economic policy debates?

Whilst the reasons for social work's apparent shift to a re-active rather than a pro-active position within public policy discourse are undoubtedly complex, we suggest that current forms and methods of engagement are affected by shifts in the social work curriculum and, in particular, the dilution of economic content. If social workers are to re-engage in presenting alternative stories of economic and social justice, an understanding of orthodox (neo-classical) and heterodox (e.g. feminist, Keynesian and Marxist) economic theories is not only critical but essential. Edwards (2002) describes this engagement with economic knowing as a threefold bridge between policy makers and communities:

The task of bridging the divide between the policy experts (sic) and the wider community is threefold. First we have to convince the economic rationalists that their framework is not the 'scientific value-free tool' they think it is. We must illuminate that it is based on a worldview and expose its values. Second we must highlight its blindspots... we must pinpoint why its oversights create bad policies... and third, we have to come up with an alternative framework (p. 27).

### **Streamlining Education: The Case of Social Work and Economics**

#### *Economics*

Economics has always been labelled the 'dismal science', a reference to the content and focus on ominous topics such as depressions, unemployment, and inflation. In recent

years the dismal label has also been used to refer to the disappointing student up-take of the subject (Haslehurst, Hopkins and Thorpe 1999). Although commerce degrees are 'flavour of the month' and enrolments in marketing and management degrees are experiencing an upward trend, preferences for economics are in sharp contrast (Haslehurst et al. 1999; Keneley and Heller 2001). Between 1995 and 2000 economic enrolments in Australia fell by 8.5 per cent - this followed a 12 per cent decline between 1991 and 1996 (Millmow 2002, pp. 61-62). Given this bleak predicament, many economic departments throughout Australia now face closure. Of the students who do study economics, few pursue it beyond the compulsory first year requirements and, of those who continue, it is often undertaken as part of a finance degree (Azzalini and Hopkins 2002). Related to this, student interest in economics tends to be narrowly defined, often limited to vocational requirements or ambitions (Keneley and Heller 2001). Very few undergraduate students express an interest in reading subjects relating to social policy, social welfare and/or the history of economic thought. Business oriented topics, such as international economics (e.g. trade), business strategy and financial markets repeatedly rank highest in surveys of student interest (Azzalini and Hopkins 2002). Consequently, economic departments seeking survival in business faculties are increasingly compartmentalising the discipline; offering new, relatively narrow, majors, which align with student interest (e.g. Strategic Economic Analysis) (Bloch and Stromback 2002).

The trend towards a more streamlined course of economics has ramifications for both the depth and nature of debate relating to both micro and macro economic issues. Currently, the frameworks used to deliver economic content within higher education are limited (Zweig and Dawes 2000). In most first year courses the economic content is determined by, and reliant upon, a single reference source, with universities typically prescribing standard texts such as Gans, King, Stonecash and Mankiw's *Principles of Economics* (2000) or McTaggart, Findlay and Parkin's *Economics* (2003), with their privileging of orthodox neo-classical economics. Guided by these texts, few students are introduced to alternative theoretical frameworks or taught to unpack, analyse and critique the implementation of orthodox economics in the everyday. Rather, students are invariably taught the *Ten Principles of Economics*' (i.e. people face trade-offs; rational people think at the margin; people respond to incentives; trade can make everyone better off; a country's standard of living depends on its ability to produce goods and services; society faces a short-run trade-off between inflation and unemployment) as universal and absolute 'truths'.

The exclusion of social issues from the economic/business curriculum means that many commerce graduates enter the 'business world' with little thought, scope or capacity to engage with the complexities of the social world and broader public policy issues (Zweig and Dawes 2000). According to Zweig and Dawes (2000), the lack of social content within economics is in keeping with the notion of economics as an apolitical science; a position reflected in the words of one Yale University academic, 'economics as it's

taught at Yale, is not an ideological subject. We don't talk about whether capitalists are greedy but rather about the benefits of say, a fixed exchange rate' (p. 31). This proposition provides some insight into the silence of many economists and/or their endorsement of the current social policy framework and confirms the necessity of turning to other disciplines, such as social work, in the search for alternative framings and 'solutions'.

#### **Social Work**

Until recently economics was regarded as an implicit component of social work education and practice (DeMaria 1993; Mullaly 1997; Healy 2000). Interpreted as another site for social inquiry, 'the economic' was conceptualised as a 'natural' extension, dimension, aspect or inherent discourse for understanding the social world (Boulding 1992, p. 23). Tracing social work education trajectories within the North American context, Reisch and Gorin (2001) affirm social work's alliance with the economic, 'social work practice and education have long been influenced by developments in the broader US economy' (p. 9). Citing numerous social work practice contexts, Reisch and Gorin (2001) illustrate the social-economic synonymy:

the Settlement House movement, the Charities Organisation Society, the welfare capitalism developed through union-based services programs and the later construction of a limited welfare state reflected the central concern of social workers with the labour market, particularly its economic, social and psychological effects (p. 9).

Despite this practice legacy, recent years have seen a dramatic shift in the curriculum content of many social work degrees within the western context. Emphasis, both in terms of resources and 'value' has been transferred from political-economy framings to an emphasis on what Fraser and Strong (2000) refer to as 'technical competence'; a transfer which reinforces 'the dichotomy between "practice subjects" and "more academic subjects" (such as social policy and those related to social work theory)' (p. 28).

From the authors' brief review of the Social Work units offered, over the past seven years, within Australian universities, references to economics are limited to the popularised 'social, economic and political context' trilogy. Although contextual analysis is a crucial factor within any critical interpretation of the social world, the tripartite investigation emphasised within such a statement often lacks both depth and rigour. Whilst this shift in emphasis may, in part, reflect social work's desire for mainstream professional acknowledgement and status, it also reflects the discipline's response to 'market-as-client' demands; forces similar to those driving change in the economic curriculum (Keneley and Heller 2001). The corollary of this transition or transformation means less space for more politically-oriented content such as economics.

Despite the pervasiveness of educational marketisation within the social work curriculum the consequences of these shifts for the discipline, its students and social policy formation are, as yet, inadequately understood. Given this, we sought to understand the predicament

at a grassroots level; from the perspectives and experiences of those positioned at the cusp of social work education and the practice field.

### Economics and the Positioning of Social Work Students

#### Survey and Sample Characteristics

In August 2002 the authors invited fourth year undergraduate social work students at Curtin University to complete an informal questionnaire seeking their position on key economic debates and the linkages between the social and the economic. The rationale for selecting fourth year students rather than other undergraduates was twofold: (a) the students had recently completed their final field placement and would, therefore, have a reasonably informed view of welfare policies, practices and fields; and (b) having nearly completed their degree it was thought that these students were well-placed to reflect on the usefulness (or otherwise) of some economic content within their undergraduate training.

Out of a total of 68 fourth year students, 58 (or 85 per cent) participated in the survey. The demographic characteristics of these students are detailed in Table 1. Comparisons are made with data drawn from a survey of undergraduate commerce students (students who undertake economics as part of their degree) published in Azzalini and Hopkins (2002). The purpose of the comparison is to illustrate how markedly different the two student groups are in terms of composition and orientation.

As is clearly evident, both groups are highly gendered, although in opposite ways: women account for 86 per cent of social work students and only 30 per cent of commerce students. The two groups also differ markedly when compared across other dimensions such as age and ethnicity. Whereas 55 per cent of social work students could be classified as 'mature' students (aged 26 or more), less than 10 per cent of commerce students were classified as such (94 per cent were aged less than 23).

One of the strongest and expected differences between the social work students' responses and those of their commerce counterparts is in relation to site of future practice. Slightly more than half (52 per cent) of social work students identified the public sector as their most likely place of work; 34 per cent indicated 'not-for-profit' and 14 per cent envisaged themselves in the private sector. In contrast, only 15 per cent of the Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) respondents envisaged themselves in government (the main site for policy development). The majority, 61 per cent, clearly envisaged themselves in the private sector.

**Table 1: Characteristics of social work and BCom students, Curtin University**

	4 <sup>th</sup> Year Social Work Students, 2002 (n=58)		2 <sup>nd</sup> Year BCom Students, 2000 (n=72)*	
	Number	Per cent	Per cent	
Never studied economics	36	62%	0%	
Sex				
Female	50	86%	30%	
Male	8	14%	70%	
Age (yrs)				
17-21	7	12%	94%	
21-25	19	33%		
26-30	12	21%		
31-40	7	12%		
41-50	11	19%		
50+	2	3%		
Is a Parent	14	24%		
Has Worked For Pay	57	98%		
Intends to Practice as a Social Worker on Leaving University	57	98%		
<b>Desired Sector of Employment</b>				
Not for Profit	15	34%		
Government	23	52%	15% <sup>+</sup>	0% <sup>++</sup>
Private	6	14%	61% <sup>+</sup>	94% <sup>++</sup>

Notes:

- (a) These figures are from Azzalini and Hopkins (2002, p. 13) and are not exactly comparable; 94 per cent of the sample were aged less than 23; 75 per cent were international students (which suggests that the balance, 25 per cent were either citizens or permanent residents);
- (b) + indicates those commerce students who are majoring in economics, while ++ indicates those with a non-economic major.

In keeping with the theme of sites of practice, social work students were also asked to indicate specific areas or domains of social work within which they intended to practise after graduating. This was a closed question with students being invited to circle more than one area of practice. According to the responses given 54 per cent of respondents indicated they may seek a career in family services; 51 per cent believe their future career may be in the area of domestic violence whilst 46 per cent envisage a career in health (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Intended areas of social work practice**

Area	%
Multi/Crosscultural	35
Justice	33
Mental Health	39
Health	46
Child Protection	42
Family Services	54
Substance Use/Misuse/Abuse	35
Domestic Violence	51
Unemployment/Income	28

**Analysis - Interpreting the Survey Responses**

Defining economics

The survey contained a mixture of open and closed questions on key public economic issues. In the first open-ended question students were invited to share their own meanings or definitions of economics. According to their responses, most students regarded the study of economics as a study of money, with 27 (or 46 per cent) of the respondents specifically mentioning money in their definition (e.g. economics: is a study of 'the distribution of money'; is about 'money management'; is a study of 'the way money is divided'; is about 'money and its distribution i.e. government and organizational spending (where the money goes and how it is used)'; is about 'dealing with the way money is used throughout the world'; 'it's all about money'; is 'to do with money'; is 'related to issues of money within the state and the distribution of it'; is about 'utilising the dollar in the most cost effective beneficial means without compromising areas of greatest need'.

Whilst 46 per cent of students specifically mentioned 'money' or the 'dollar' in their definitions, many more inferred a reference to money and/or regarded economics as an arm of capitalism. Student definitions, for example, regarded economics as: a study of 'balancing the books – user pays, fee for service, minimum welfare safety nets'; a 'form of attempting to balance the income and expenditure of a country. Recent economic rationalistic policies have privileged the haves over the have nots'. Other students defined economics as: 'a method or ideology to sustain wealth and power by elite government and individuals at the expense of others (America/English) etc.'; the 'organisation of money, business and trade. Emphasis is on profit and this is seen in very quantitative terms – social "economics" are not measured'.

Linking the social with the economic

Although the majority of social work students considered the scope of economic inquiry to be limited to matters of money and profits many (76 per cent), nevertheless, could see

a link between economics and areas of social work practice. Only 17 per cent of students agreed with the statement 'economics is irrelevant to social work practice'. Students' perceptions of the linkage between economics and social work practice, however, centred largely on the area of unemployment, with 93 per cent indicating a link between economic policy and unemployment. The area of practice perceived as being least influenced or affected by economics was mental health with only 51 per cent of respondents indicating a relatively strong linkage (see Table 3).

However, whilst the majority of students (84 per cent) believed that 'understanding economics would enhance (their) understanding of social issues', only 37 per cent indicated that they would choose economics if offered as an elective. This relatively low response may reflect students' perceptions of the current content and pedagogy of economics education in the business faculty. Bachelor of Commerce students similarly reported negatively on economic content and pedagogy (Haslehurst et al. 1998). In Azzalini and Hopkins' (2002) study of *What Business Students Think of Economics* many reported that they thought it 'too hard', 'too theoretical' and 'too abstract from the real world'. Hence, if business students, who generally have a generic understanding of economics and finance, experience difficulties in making the connection between economics (as taught) and the 'business world', consider how social work students might experience and perceive economics (as taught).

**Table 3: Perceptions on relationship between economics and areas of social work practice**

Do you think there is a relationship between economics and...	% of Respondents Indicating Yes/Yes, Definitely
Substance Use/Misuse/Abuse	60
Domestic Violence	69
Unemployment	93
Mental Health Issues	51
Chronic Illness	64
Child Protection	74
Offending Behaviour	71
Government Refugee/Asylum Seeking Policy	83

Note: students responding to this question were given a five point scale (1=yes, definitely; 2=yes; 3=somewhat; 4=no; 5=definitely not).

Other factors contributing to the social work students' reluctance to study economics may include educational socialisation and the development of discipline-specific 'learning communities' (Berg-Weger and Schneider 1998, p. 99; Ward, Crossing and Marangos 1999, p. 77), alongside a perceived awareness of the demographic and cultural

differences between social work students and business students. This issue was evidenced in the students' responses to a closed question: 'How do you feel about Economists?' (on a scale of 1-5). Only 25 per cent of the social work students indicated 'good/very favourable'; 56 per cent had no position and 20 per cent indicated 'bad/very unfavourable'.

Reflecting upon these responses, the issue of 'informed knowing' is highly pertinent. If social work students understood basic economic concepts, followed economic debates and were comfortable using economic language, it would be easy to be more sanguine about their reluctance to read and engage with economics. However, as was reported in the survey, less than half the sample (42 per cent) of students indicated that they understood basic economic concepts; a small proportion (14 per cent) indicated that they were comfortable using economic language; and only 17.5 per cent said they followed economic debates. Whilst not seeking to produce generalist statements, it is interesting to reflect upon the responses of final year social work students in this sample, and the possibility of these responses being applicable to other social work students and practitioners. If the results were replicable, it could be suggested that there is some linkage between 'economic literacy' and the observed silences of social workers in relation to key economic debates and a lack of economic interest/literacy.

#### Economic positioning

In exploring social work students' positionings in regards to public economic debates, the survey invited students to indicate their attitude towards wealth distribution, minimum wages, labour market deregulation, trade unions and monetary and fiscal policy. As summarised in Table 4, the results show that social work students are strongly positioned with respect to some key issues such as inequality, minimum wage laws (72 per cent of respondents favour imposition of minimum wage laws) and support for welfare programs (84 per cent view government support for social welfare programs in a positive light). Paradoxically, however, the students were 'less positioned' in relation to broader/macro (but closely related) debates. For example, 37 per cent of students held 'no opinion' on the issue of labour market deregulation (see Table 5).

Students were, similarly, less 'positioned' in their views on key macro-economic policy issues such as: governments running a budget deficit; the use of trade barriers; reliance on monetary policy to manage the economy; and increasing taxation to fund public health and education. Students' neutral positioning on these vital areas is rather surprising given their stated awareness of the link between economics (i.e. public economic issues) and social work practice, as indicated above. Although unexpected, the students' lack of positioning with respect to these issues is indicative of the economic/social schism as reflected in the proliferation of 'boundary issues'; boundaries which ignore the connection between micro and macro economic policies; and boundaries between social work and economics which prohibits students' access to knowledge of the theory, policy and practices within these broader economic fields.

Table 4: Social work students' attitudes to public issues

	'How do you feel about the following ...' (1=very favourable; 2=good; 3=neither good nor bad; 4=bad; 5=very unfavourable)	
	Good/Very Favourable	Neither Good nor Bad
Volunteering	80%	14%
Banks	11%	37%
Trade Unions	66%	30%
Government supporting social welfare programs	84%	10%
Full-fee paying for university	2%	5%
Minimum wage laws	72%	16%
Governments running a budget deficit	7%	52%
Affirmative action policies	64%	34%
Trade barriers	22%	69%
Reliance on monetary policy to manage the economy	8%	58%
Increased taxes to fund public education	43%	38%
Increased taxes to fund public health	47%	35%
Current levels of income inequality in Australia	2%	17%

Table 5: Social work students' attitudes to labour market deregulation

'With respect to the deregulation of the labour market, do you ...'	Response (%) (n=51)
Approve	2
Disapprove	61
No opinion	37

#### Out of touch

The final question asked of the fourth year students related to average wages in Australia. In answering a question regarding financial distribution, the students clearly indicated that they were critical of the levels of income inequality in Australia (81 per cent report them as 'bad' or 'very unfavourable') and strongly supportive of minimum wage laws (72 per cent support). Their perceptions and positionings were perhaps reflective of their own experiences and/or their work/field placements. However, identifying an approximate current value of the average male full-time weekly wage the students, on average, reported a figure of \$592 per week, an amount well below the actual figure of \$910.90 per week (at the time of the survey) (see Table 6).

The importance of both being aware of and understanding 'average weekly earnings' cannot be underestimated within social work, particularly in the current context where economic disadvantage is escalating and the growing hysteria in relation to welfare dependency has led to the tightening of access to income support (Saunders and Fincher

2001, p. 1; Barns and Preston 2002, pp. 19-20). Whilst it would be doubtful if many (or any) social workers considered current wage levels, industrial regulations (particularly the predominance of contracting) and government provided income support (Centrelink Allowances and the 'Family Tax' systems) to be fair, adequate or appropriate, it is essential that this position is understood, argued and counteracted economically and socially. The link between income and marginalisation has been understood and documented by social workers for decades (Healy 2000). As Australia increases its involvement within the globalised context, and the effects of privatisation, competition and marketisation are enacted and experienced within the everyday, social workers should understand, even in generic terms, the relationships between the consumer price index and affordability; rates of inflation and budgeting; interest rates and periodic and/or relative 'poverty'; and the current account deficit and the delivery of community supports. Such knowledge is equally essential for understanding the practice context and the increasing use of contractual employment arrangements, performance appraisals and measurable outcomes (Davies 2003, pp. 93-94).

**Table 6: Estimated average weekly earnings**

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Relative Standard Error	Average Weekly Ordinate Time Earnings February 2002*
Average Wage	\$250	\$960	\$592	24%	\$910.90

Note: \*AWOTE seasonally adjusted. ABS Cat. No. 6302.

### Reflection

From the material gathered through the fourth year students' responses to the survey, and whilst acknowledging the limited scope of the research, two tentative issues can be raised. Firstly, reflecting upon the observed discrepancies between students' recognition and understanding of economic concepts and their relationship with social work discourses, it appears that the students were only partially informed on the range of contemporary economic issues which impact significantly within social work fields of practice. Related to the above, the second theme refers to the notion of 'neighbourhoods' or 'communities' of knowledge and the effect that disciplinary boundaries have on students' perceptions and understandings of socio-economic issues (Zweig and Dawes 2002, pp. 30-31). In the absence of mediation within and between the current social/economic schism, the authors suggest that social work (as a body of practitioners, educators and researchers) will remain marginalised from the policy making process; a 're-active' rather than 'pro-active' force.

### Re-Engendering Gender

Whilst the themes identified above raise numerous concerns, it is essential that the issue of gender, and more specifically, the gendering of economics and social work be

considered. Although the number of women traditionally entering economics has never been high, the recent (last decade or so) shift in the economics curriculum (as reflected in the quantitative emphasis and increasing marginalisation of heterodox framings and a streamlining of offerings in the business/finance field at the expense of other units such as welfare economics) has further discouraged female entry (Haslehurst et al. 1998; Mumford 2000). Research conducted by Haslehurst et al. (1998, pp. 109 & 117) shows that female economics students compose less than 50 per cent (42 per cent) of the total economic students population, citing issues such as a dearth of 'female economists' as role models and a lack of confidence in their ability, as mediating factors. Exploring this issue further, Ferber (1995) and Nelson (1995) argue that the 'biased subject matter and the narrow approach of traditional neo-classical economics...deter women from pursuing studies in economics'. In keeping with the low number of female economics students, only 41 per cent of economists are women (CDEWR 2003a). Equally disturbing is the number of women working as economists within university economic departments. According to research findings presented by Mumford (2000), in 1999, of the 68 economic professorships in Australia, women held only two such positions and only 31 per cent of economic lecturers are female. However, the figures for women's participation increase in the 'lower grades' of academic staff with 41 per cent of Assistant Economics Lecturers being women (Mumford 2000, p. 19).

While economics has been, and continues to be, the preserve of men, social work is overwhelmingly dominated by women (particularly at the grassroots level) (Gibelman 2003; Gibelman and Schervish 1993). Reflecting the gender composition of the social work field and the clients of social work services, the social work student population is overwhelmingly female (for instance 86 per cent of the fourth year social work students participating within this research were female [see Table 1]). However, this position is reversed in relation to social workers who become managers and administrators of social support services – positions which are overwhelmingly held by men. According to the findings of a survey conducted by Gibelman and Schervish (1993) a 'glass ceiling' within social work is a reality:

male social workers disproportionately hold managerial positions, assume such positions earlier in their careers and earn more money in these positions than do their female counterparts (p. 443).

At the management/administrator level economic training is considered essential, as welfare agencies become increasingly involved in competitive tendering, submitting grant applications and policy development, hence the high number of male social workers undertaking MBA (Masters of Business Administration) and/or other graduate business courses (Gibelman and Schervish 1993).

### Summary and Conclusion

A broad-based question underpinning the research was the issue of social work's voice, participation and engagement with the public policy process. More specifically, we



sought to understand why, within a context of rising conservatism, the field of social policy was dominated by re-active rather than pro-active participants. Our particular interest centred upon social workers, given their mandate of enacting social change and demanding the recognition of human rights through a commitment to holistic practice (AASW 1999). Reflecting the work of Reisch and Gorin (2001), we suggested that the apparent invisibility and silence in relation to social policy direction amongst many in the social work body reflected, in part, the lack of economic knowledge, literacy and interest.

The research conducted with the particular group of fourth year social work students illustrates that (potential) social workers express a strong sense of disconnectedness in their understandings of economic and social phenomenon. The majority of respondents in the sample viewed the scope of economic inquiry in rather narrow terms and defined economics as the study of money/profits/capitalism. Similarly, the students viewed the relationship between economics and areas of social work practice narrowly; for example, while 93 per cent of respondents could see a link between economics and unemployment, only 51 per cent could see a link between economics and mental health. Consistent with the above, few students were comfortable using economic language and followed economic debates (14 per cent and 17.5 per cent, respectively). In a similar vein the students were out of touch with key economic outcomes – such as the level of the minimum wage. Given this predicament, and if, as suggested previously, these patterns reflect the economic understandings of the broader social work body, it provides valuable insight into social workers' diminished involvement in the policy formation process.

The statistics produced from the survey responses suggest that the absence of economic content in the social work curriculum may significantly constrain social work's ability to influence public policy and effect social change. Given this, the case for 'putting the economic back into the social' is clear; in engaging with economics from an 'insider position' or 'position-within', social work can better challenge and disrupt economic sites of marginalisation and disadvantage. Economic knowledge when read alongside the social, provides a powerful and holistically informed discourse from which to launch action (Edwards 2001, pp. 30-37). As such, it is crucial that social workers can argue with policymakers, employer groups and politicians 'bilingually'; to identify the implicit connections between labour market deregulation, the lowering of trade barriers and tariffs and the dismantling of protective frameworks and the increasing levels of stress experienced within workplaces, families, schools and communities.

Moreover, the future of the discipline and of the social work profession seems inextricably linked to the adoption of a more eclectic and progressive curriculum. As Ann Hartman (1990) claims 'social work education must provide leadership for practice effectiveness and the critical evaluation of social policy and programs' (p. 3). In creating a more informed and aware approach to 'knowing and being' and 'educating and practising' within the social world, we consider that the inclusion of economic content

within the social work curriculum is integral. A proposition confirmed by Mizrahi (2001), who reflects upon the social-economic merger in the following way:

the inclusion of economics within social work education ... (is not) a move from the simple to the complex, but rather we could reconfigure it as a kaleidoscope ... a whole new vision of possibilities. This is our challenge, our chance our charge (p. 185).

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