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**Ready to Practice?**  
**Graduates' Experiences of Competency-Based**  
**Social Work Education**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy  
At Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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## Abstract

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This research examines the extent to which graduates of competency-based social work education (the National Diploma in Social Work) are ready to practice in their first six months of post-course employment.

The study is exploratory and outlines the experiences of seven graduates. In particular it focuses on perceptions of their education and its role in preparing them for social work practice. Analysis was undertaken using a grounded theory approach, which highlighted a number of themes from their experiences. These themes illustrated that the graduates generally enjoyed their training and perceived themselves to be adequately prepared for practice. Graduates also considered that their courses needed greater focus on the social work field of practice related to their chosen employment.

Further analysis utilised Secker's (1993) three-stage typology of the integration of theory. Application of this model showed that graduates' level of theoretical integration was lower than that considered to be educationally desirable. In addition, graduates' comments regarding the social justice aspects of social work reflected a poor level of interest, understanding and application.

These results suggest that competency-based educational approaches may reduce the tension or gap typically experienced by graduates between finishing courses and beginning practice. The results also support criticism that competency approaches may result in a focus on skills and techniques as opposed to underlying theoretical knowledge. The lack of theoretical knowledge particularly relates to social service practice theory, critical analysis and social justice concepts. Based on the research a number of recommendations are made for further research and for competency-based social work educators.

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This research has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/24.

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