Introduction

The well-established professions rank high in the social structure of modern Western societies. Entry is restricted by the cost of the basic training and the intellectual capacity required, their practice tends to be surrounded by a certain mystique, they are used extensively by the ruling and propertied classes, and their members are generally in the higher-income groups.

In a recognised profession such as medicine, law, architecture, or engineering, there are seven notable characteristics. First, members of the profession and the rest of the community understand that it is a distinct occupational group with certain rights and duties. Second, a general common purpose, for example healing the sick, guides the members’ work, and this is in accord with the goals of the wider community. Third, there are shared intellectual techniques which are acquired only after prolonged training at a tertiary educational level, and which require originality and judgement, not routine application. The development of technique is the responsibility of the group. Fourth, the fundamental knowledge, or theory, at the basis of the group’s practice is capable of being set forth systematically, is scientifically based, and is at a level of difficulty requiring tertiary education. The group recognises a responsibility to define, develop, and systematise its theory, and is free to do so. This is a direct responsibility with regard to the members’ own clinical or practitioner experience. For the part of their theory borrowed and adapted from other groups, it is an indirect responsibility to support the work of those groups.

The fifth, sixth and seventh characteristics relate to the group’s general ethical position. Fifth, the group conforms to certain standards of behaviour, because its practice involves them in private affairs and they are experts advising non-experts. Sixth, in their dealings
with clients, service to the client and the community rather than
gain to the practitioner or the group is stressed in their ethical code.
And seventh, the group accept collective responsibility to use their
knowledge for the benefit of the community, over and above services
to individual clients.

Two kinds of institutions are necessary to the professions: training
bodies and professional associations. The training body usually
transmits intellectual techniques, theory, and ethical position, and
formally tests the competence of a person for professional practice.
The professional association watches over the rights and duties of
the profession and is concerned generally with the professional
competence of its members. It plays an important educational role,
for the intellectual basis of professional practice calls for a continued
mutual interchange of ideas and information.

Training bodies and professional associations had an especially
important unifying role if the Australian social work group were to
acquire the features of a profession – the training bodies, because
there could be different ideas as to what constituted adequate training
for social work, and the professional associations, because the group’s
members, scattered among many different agencies, needed a sense
of unity.

This study concentrates on three main things: the development of
social work training bodies and their courses; the spread of qualified
social workers into various employment fields; and the growth of
professional associations and their programmes. It is roughly divided
into pre-war, war, and post-war, since each of these periods had its
own set of influences.

Social work’s goals may be achieved in a number of ways: by helping
individuals and their families; by helping groups of people with personal
and social problems; by helping social agencies to work together; by
influencing the community’s social policies; by administering social
welfare programmes; by undertaking social welfare research; and by
teaching people who will perform these tasks. Of these, the first, social
casework, retained its importance throughout the period (although,
as will be seen, the other methods did gain some ground) because of
a natural early concentration upon the units of social breakdown, the
greater theoretical formulation of social casework, and the continued
identification of social work with women who, primarily for culturally determined reasons, tended to leave the broader aspects of community organisation to men.

From its inception, the group had two characteristics that had widespread effects on the nature of its development: the majority of its members were women, and it depended upon social agencies for its employment. The first characteristic, in what was still very much a man’s country, had important status repercussions for the group and its work. The second, to some extent, limited the group’s freedom of practice and kept remuneration comparatively low. Yet there was no apparent desire for private practice, mainly because it was more effective to work through agencies, and because the group’s clientele were not accustomed to paying a professional fee for this kind of help.

Among social work fields, medical social work took the lead. For a time it had its own training bodies and its own specialised professional association, but these were additional to, not substitutes for, the general training bodies and the general social workers’ association. In Australia, as in the United Kingdom and the United States, a concentration of the community’s social problems was found in the large public hospitals. The connection, in many instances obvious, between the patients’ health and social conditions led to an early recognition of the need for medical social work. It was not surprising, therefore, that the medical social work group advanced first along the road of professionalism, encouraged by their close association with the well-established medical profession.

Why, in general terms, did professional social work begin to develop in Australia during the late 1920s? Briefly, the answers are urbanism, industrialisation, social and economic change, a large social service expansion, particularly in the government sector, overseas example, and the stimulation provided by qualified social workers themselves.

In Australia, as in the United States and Britain, professionalism in social service work began in the larger cities, and by the later 1920s Sydney and Melbourne, each with at least a million inhabitants, were large by any standards. There were always people with problems in

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1 For a serious study of the place of women in Australia society, see Norman MacKenzie, Women in Australia.
big industrial urban communities, and the inadequacy of ill-informed, usually part-time or spare-time, attempts at helping them was obvious earlier than in smaller communities. The resources of a large city could maintain social agencies employing trained social workers, and also support a training body. In addition, the need for the co-ordination and rationalisation of social services in a large city was evident, and trained social workers were seen, among other things, as instruments of coordination.

As part of each community’s social service system, or series of systems, professional social workers, with trained observation and working full-time, were in the best possible position to know the actual needs of individuals and groups, and the extent to which the community’s social services were adequate. This generally meant that the professional social workers were keen to coordinate and rationalise the social services, to extend them to all needy sections of the community, and to remove the stigma of charity, to broaden the concept of need to include other than material want, and to emphasise preventive rather than palliative measures. They were not, of course, alone in furthering these things. The depression years, war, the post-war reconstruction, unprecedented industrial growth with concomitant inflation, a large-scale immigration programme creating a more culturally diverse society, a population growth of over three million during the 30-odd years and its even greater concentration in the capital cities, and a beginning to scientific inquiry into the precise nature of Australian society – all these played a part in stimulating interest in social conditions and the adequacy of social provisions. During the period there was an enormous expansion of social services. The professional social work group, despite its small numbers, played its part in stimulating this expansion.

The earlier growth of professionalism in social service work in the larger and more industrialised communities in the United States and the United Kingdom provided the Australian group with useful experience, and they used it freely. In the early stages, this was a source of strength, for already overseas the basic training issues had been defined, a modern framework for social work had been developed, and teaching material, with at least a rough relevance for any Western industrial society, was in existence. The great part of the published experience was American, which meant that the Australian group was very strongly influenced by both American and British ideas.
Towards the end of the period, reliance on overseas experience began to be an impediment, for a local literature was very slow to appear, questions as to the degree of cultural relevance of much of the overseas material were still left unanswered, and, in addition, the constantly unfavourable comparison of Australian professional conditions with those in America was causing, in some quarters, despair rather than stimulus.

As its numbers grew, the group became status conscious, and this was closely linked with the question of salaries. The members did not look for high professional remuneration, for the voluntary service past of their work was not far distant and lived on in many parts of the community. The idea of becoming rich in such work repelled them. They began to realise, however, that salaries had to be competitive with other professional salaries to attract sufficient people with the requisite talent, particularly men, and they found, especially in government service, that low salaries and low status for themselves and their work were closely linked. Further, they could see no reason why, in the practice of such stressful work of direct social usefulness, which required a difficult and expensive preparation, they should not enjoy at least a comfortable standard of living.

Because the general conditions were favourable for the development of professions in Australia, it is possible that this period will become notable for the number of aspiring professional groups it produced and the extent to which existing groups were strengthened. It is hoped that this account will not remain isolated as a study of a profession in Australia.²
