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Growing the workforce: New entrants and early career professionals

Research findings from the Addiction Workforce Review reveal that, unlike other professions where a sizeable portion of new entrants are under 30 and fresh from education pathways, the age of people entering the addiction sector is fairly evenly distributed across age groups.

16% of new entrants to the addiction sector are under 30, a further 29% between 30 and 39 years, and 39% between 40 and 54 years. This distribution may contribute to the older age profile of the addiction workforce overall, with 75% over 40 years and 54% over 50 years.

The review indicates that younger addiction practitioners (20-24 and 25-29 year olds) are leaving the sector at much higher rates than other age groups (21% and 19% respectively), which is consistent with other allied health professions. However, unlike other professions where the exit rate drops off significantly after the late 20s, exit rates from the addiction workforce remain higher than expected, right through to the 40-44 year old age group (15%). (see snapshot 2 for further detail about entry and exit patterns)

Some of the factors impacting new entrants to the workforce and leading to these higher than expected exit rates may be related to proximity to graduation and the training received not adequately preparing for entry to practice. Further, for new entrants across different ages and life stages, the demands of the role may not align with other life and family commitments or career aspirations.

Employers and sector leaders need to work alongside new entrants to practice (no matter their age and stage) to gather an understanding of the specific challenges they face and to stem this flow of early career professionals leaving the addiction workforce.

Challenges that require new approaches from educators, funders, employers and other sector decision makers include:

Higher risk of stress

- A review of the international literature on the addiction workforce indicates that younger workers are at greater risk of stress relative to their older counterparts, due to less developed coping mechanisms and a lack of work readiness for the demands of the roles in the addiction sector.

Academic preparation

- Dapaanz members maintain that qualifications have become more academic and less applied, impacting on graduates' level of preparedness when taking on new positions and adjusting to therapeutic environments they may be inadequately prepared for.

Impact of remuneration

- Low pay compared to other health roles has been identified as a factor contributing to fewer younger people taking up addiction professions. The 2023 dapaanz survey found that remuneration was by far the top reason for those



aged under 45 years leaving or anticipating that they may not remain in the sector in the next two years.

Skills training

- New graduates can feel out of their depth due to a lack of applied training or placement experience in the skills required for their specific work setting and role specifications.

Mentoring support

- Research indicates that “new entrants do not receive the necessary support or mentoring from senior clinicians due to resourcing issues.”

Promoting when ready

- Early career professionals may also be promoted to leadership positions before they are ready, due to staffing shortages. Their under preparedness for management and leadership roles may combine with relatively newly acquired practice experience to compound work pressures and also lead to burnout and/or exiting the sector.

“We’re losing some of our brightest people because they haven’t got the structures around them.”

“They’re often working outside of their scope both in terms of knowledge and skills. It’s no wonder to me that people are getting burnt out.”

“When I started in addictions ... years ago that was such a youthful workforce and you can see that we’ve just aged. It’s obvious to me that we are not doing succession planning. No one’s thinking about who’s going to be taking over our programmes.”

“I think in healthcare in general we’re an ageing population. Who would want to come into this workforce when you know the cost of living is so high and the pay is not great?”



Other snapshots in this series:

1. The addiction workforce in Aotearoa | 1a. Profile of the addiction workforce | 2. Unpacking the workforce shortage
3. Why are people leaving? | 4. Ways to improve workforce retention | 5. Opportunities for growing the addiction workforce
6. Growing the workforce: Recruitment ideas and challenges | 7. Growing the workforce: New entrants and early career professionals

About dapaanz and the 2023 addiction workforce review

Dapaanz represents the professional interests of people working in addiction treatment. We are dedicated to supporting our members in their mahi and careers, while fostering excellence in addiction practice.

We oversee the addiction intervention competency framework, which defines the addiction scope of practice, and we are kaitiaki of Tikanga Matatika, the code of ethics for the sector.

Our current focus is ensuring our members feel supported and nurtured so that they are excited about being addiction practitioners today and in the future.

In 2023, dapaanz commissioned a mixed methods review of the addiction workforce in Aotearoa. Drawing on multiple datasets, both published and unpublished, from a range of sources including Te Whatu Ora, Te Pou, and dapaanz, the data were organised into a coding framework and triangulated to identify overlapping patterns. A series of workshops and discussions were undertaken with sector representatives to gather additional insights and further feedback on the data findings. The review also distilled a number of findings from national and international literature.



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