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A depth of data: research messages on the state of social work education in England

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Abstract

In the light of extensive media coverage of social work education, this article uses information from the Department of Health funded three-years multi-method evaluation of the social work degree qualification in England to discuss areas in which qualifying education might be improved. It argues that too great a concern with the 'A' level performance of social work applicants risks not paying enough attention to the non-academic qualities that they will need to work in the changing world of children's and adult services. Better partnership working between employers and universities will help students make the transition into the workplace. This includes greater opportunities for employers and practitioners to be involved in candidate selection and teaching on qualifying programmes.

Keywords: Social work education, higher education, academic achievement, employment, evaluation

Introduction

Since the news of the circumstances around the death of Peter Connelly ('Baby P') became public in November 2008, media coverage of social work in the United Kingdom (UK) has been extensive. Included among this has been the assertion that social work programmes attract poorer quality applicants than other subjects (Goodwin, 2009) and are harder to fail (Newman, 2009). Following the establishment of the Social Work Task Force (Hansard, 2009) with a remit to "undertake a nuts and bolts review of frontline social work practice and make recommendations for immediate improvements to practice and training as well as long-term change in social work", the first Task Force report (Social Work Task Force, 2009c) observed:

We have been told that new social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job and that the education system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation. Many people have told us that new entrants to social work can lack the mixture of practical, analytical and report-writing skills they need to become effective professionals. (p.4)

The previous year, the Department of Health had published the results of a three-year multi-method evaluation of the new social work degree qualification in England (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008a, 2008b) following the major changes to social work education (Department of Health, 2001) which had resulted in the decision to make social work a degree level qualifying profession. The evaluation showed that there had been substantial

increases in the number of students on social work qualifying programmes, that there had been some increases in student diversity, and that students and educators were broadly pleased with their experiences thus far, although they identified some problems, for example in securing sufficient good quality practice placements and in mixed experiences of inter-professional learning. It might, therefore, be concluded that the new degree would be considered a success in policy terms. However, as the opening lines of this article show, the extent to which this viewpoint is widespread appears to be in question.

This article draws on the research team's submission to the Social Work Task Force in response to the Task Force's Call for Evidence. Our submission addressed two of the themes raised in the Task Force's first publication (Social Work Task Force, 2009c): Theme 3 – perceptions that new social workers are not being prepared for the demands of the job; and Theme 6 – concerns that the profession is under-valued and poorly understood. Specific concerns over training and education were raised:

- Lack of readiness for working on the frontline among newly qualified social workers;
- Questions about the quality of entrants to degree programmes;
- Questions about the content and quality of social work programmes;
- Problems with the availability and quality of practice placements, especially in the statutory sector.

Other issues identified by the Task Force were beyond the remit of the Evaluation. We developed our submission into three main questions, using data from the multiple sources outlined below. In doing so we take the opportunity to consider areas where there are limits to the research evidence and draw on some of the content of the Task Force's interim (2009b) and final reports (2009a). It is striking that, of the 15

Recommendations made in the Task Force's final report, four relate directly to social work qualifying education (strengthening the calibre of entrants to social work education, overhauling the content and delivery of social work programmes, setting up new arrangements for securing sufficient high quality practice placements, and more transparent and effective regulation of social work education) while a further two (setting up systems for forecasting levels of supply and demand for social workers and developing an action programme to improve public understanding of social work) have implications for recruitment and retention on social work programmes. Finally, two further recommendations, the creation of an assessed and supported year in employment as the final stage in becoming a social worker and a more coherent and effective national framework for the continuing professional development of social workers, imply the need for the development of closer partnerships between employers and higher education institutions. It is worth noting that the former Government (2009) accepted all 15 recommendations of the Task Force and undertook a commitment to carry forward a new reform programme for social work over the next five years.

This article complements other detailed information drawing on the study data including the perspectives of practice assessors (Moriarty *et al.*, 2010a), applications (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2009, advance access-b), admissions (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2009, advance access-a), student motivations (Stevens *et al.*, in press) and comparisons with nursing (Moriarty *et al.*, 2010b).

Methods

The Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree Qualification in England was a multi-method longitudinal study combining national data with case studies of six higher education institutions offering nine social work qualifying programmes. Detailed

accounts of the methodology are available elsewhere (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008b; Orme *et al.*, 2009). Data collection took place from 2004-2007. Taken as a whole, the data on which the study findings were based included: anonymised enrolment records on 12,925 degree students and 12,565 students on the predecessor qualification, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), representing the total population of social work students enrolling between 2001-2006; 15,090 records of practice placements; 3,944 responses from students to an online survey administered over seven waves; face-to-face group interviews with 168 students; 64 face-to-face individual interviews with social work teaching staff; face-to-face individual and group interviews with 58 people with experience of using services and/or caring, who were involved in social work education; 195 responses to a postal questionnaire from practice assessors; 98 telephone/email surveys with staff from universities offering the social work degree; surveys and interviews of 62 employers; and 352 written answers to two scenarios, or vignettes, completed by students at the beginning and towards the end of their social work qualifying programmes.

How are students selected?

The Task Force expressed its concern that the selection processes for social work qualifying programmes attract applicants without the intellectual and personal skills they will need to be effective practitioners (Social Work Task Force, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). In doing this, it repeated concerns that social work students are less academically qualified (with all the implications of this in terms of intellectual ability) than students on other qualifying professional programmes, such as teaching or nursing. Results from the study suggested that the UCAS tariff (UCAS, undated) - the system for allocating points to qualifications used for entry to higher education - of applicants accepted for social work has risen

in the years since the degree was introduced, although it is still generally lower than the tariff of acceptances for higher education as a whole. Information from admissions tutors suggested that they now had a larger pool of applicants from whom to select and, in some cases, they had raised the tariff scores applicants were expected to achieve. However, in common with the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee's (JUCSWEC) submission to the Task Force (2009), we argue that there are three key reasons why comparisons between the previous educational qualifications of applicants for social work, teaching and nursing professional qualifying programmes need to be contextualised.

Firstly, social work programmes recruit from a wider range of applicants, including those who may have been disadvantaged by negative experiences at school. As has been pointed out (Green Lister, 2003; Dillon, 2007; Gibbons *et al.*, 2007), this is consistent with the value base of social work. Students such as these may have considerable personal commitment to success which helps them adjust to the levels of academic work required on a degree programme.

Secondly, there is no maximum tariff score and improvements in performance in 'A' level examinations and an increase in the average number of subjects taken mean that the most academically able younger students are likely to have achieved a higher UCAS tariff than their equally academic able older counterparts. This emerges clearly in UCAS data on all degree acceptances which show that applicants aged 25 years and over are over-represented among those without a tariff score or with lower tariff scores. In 2008, of the 38,516 acceptances for *any* undergraduate degree in England among people aged 25 and over, just 32 had a tariff above 360. Although social work programmes have seen rises in the number of applications from people aged 18-24, two thirds of those enrolling on

social work qualifying programmes are aged 25 and over. This is in contrast to nursing and teaching which have higher proportions of applicants aged 18-24. Consequently, socio-demographic factors, such as age, need to be considered when comparing tariffs across these three subjects. Furthermore, subject tariffs do not only reflect applicants' previous educational achievements. In subjects such as medicine, they reflect a greater demand than there are places available. This demand is influenced by a number of non-academic factors, including perceptions about the earning power of graduates from a particular subject.

Thirdly, UCAS figures exclude the 20% of students enrolling on social work degree programmes who are already graduates. In addition, the proportion of applicants for whom there is no tariff score varies considerably by subject, making it harder to draw comparisons. It is possible that some of these applications are from people who did not provide details of vocational qualifications. Puzzlingly, a high number of social work acceptances are recorded by UCAS as having a tariff score of '0' but this is at variance with data from the GSCC supplied to the evaluation team showing that the overwhelming majority of social work students do have qualifications at the equivalent of 'A' level or above.

Furthermore, if too great an emphasis is placed on social work applicants' UCAS tariff scores (typically 'A' levels), these scores may not give a true reflection of anyone's potential to be a good social worker when considered in isolation from other factors. This was a point echoed by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) whose own submission commented:

To be a successful social worker requires more than purely academic abilities and any alterations to the entry requirements for qualifications should reflect the need

for a social worker to have the required maturity and resilience for the role that they hope to undertake. (ADCS, 2009, para 1.3.1.1)

It is also consistent with Australian research (Ryan *et al.*, 1995, 2005) suggesting that it is non-academic qualities, such as resilience, which are the key to success among social work students and subsequently once they enter practice. This is not to imply that academic abilities are unimportant: the changing nature of social work has highlighted employers' expectations about the need for IT literacy (Peckover *et al.*, 2008; Parton, 2009; Peckover *et al.*, 2009) as well as reinforcing the need expressed in earlier research for social workers to be proficient in maintaining records, writing reports (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002) and communicating effectively with other professionals and people using services (Trevithick *et al.*, 2004).

Comments focusing on the apparent ease with which students can be selected for social work programmes are also at variance with data collected from students and staff directly involved in selecting applicants for social work programmes. While many other subjects offer applicants places on the basis of their UCAS form and a personal statement, the majority of social work programmes have rigorous procedures in place for the selection of students which involve testing by written exercises and individual and/or group interviews (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2009 advance access-a, advance access-b).

It is exceptional for social work programmes to only minimally follow the standards laid out in the *Requirements for Social Work Training* (Department of Health, 2002). Instead, a multiplicity of factors make up a decision to offer an applicant a place, including professional suitability, literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 2, motivation, and commitment to

social work. In addition, applicants are often asked to provide a commentary on a written scenario or video depicting a situation in which a social work intervention might be needed. The accounts from students and from admissions staff showed that, in addition to applicants' previous academic achievements, the interview covered areas such as their motivation and understanding of the social work role. Many students pointed out that it was their personal experience of using social care services, or those of a family member, which had motivated them to go into social work. Service users and carers said that they particularly valued personal experience and capacity for empathy as desirable qualities among students. Other students had experience of paid social care work, perhaps as a family support worker or community care assistant. While most social work programmes had developed ways of including employers in the recruitment and selection process, the extent of their involvement varied as indicated by student and social work educators' accounts of the selection process. This contrasted with developments for involving service users and carers which appeared to be more consistent.

As there are over 80 higher education institutions (HEIs) in England offering social work qualifying programmes, ranging from research intensive universities to local further education colleges attracting students following mainly vocational courses, it would be unrealistic to expect that they would all use the same criteria for student selection.

Another of the Task Force's themes - the poor understanding of social work and negative media coverage - also impacts upon recruitment and selection. Unfavourable comparisons of social work (Leslie, 2003; Green, 2006) with other subjects in terms of academic achievement means that schools and parents may be less inclined to encourage potential applicants to

choose social work. This appears to be reflected in data on trends in applications prior to the new degree, particularly among those aged 18-24 (Sanders, 2000; Perry & Cree, 2003; Moriarty & Murray, 2007). However, the national social work recruitment campaign is thought to have been very successful (although funding has never been made available to evaluate the extent to which enquiries are translated into applications for qualifying programmes) and recent years have seen increases in the popularity of social work as a subject among higher education applicants (BBC News, 2006). Even in the context of negative media coverage, applications for 2009-2010 appear to have remained stable (UCAS, 2009). In order to maintain these improvements, there may be potential to tailor recruitment campaigns - including advertising using those media that are most popular among young people - to coincide with the times at which they are considering their UCAS applications.

What are the availability and quality of practice placements?

Not surprisingly, the Evaluation observed that the availability and quality of practice placements in statutory settings were important for students and HEI staff alike, and were critical factors in contributing to the overall quality of programmes. However, it heard from practice assessors that they too need access to training and support and to be assured that their responsibilities for supervising students are considered in light of their caseload allocation and workload. An increasing number of placements take place in voluntary and private organisations. This means that it is important to consider the quality of placements in these settings too, especially as these organisations may be in a strong position to prepare students to deliver personalised support in adult services or to work preventively with children and families.

The Evaluation found that most students were able to undertake at least one placement in the statutory sector. However, competition to secure good placements was high, particularly where several universities were trying to obtain placements in the same locality. There may be regional variations in the provision of placements in children's services, highlighting the importance of developing good partnership arrangements between HEIs and social work agencies. These difficulties often meant that students had to travel long distances, adding to the pressures they reported in balancing completing their placement portfolios and college-based assignments.

Students valued practice placements for the greater understanding they developed of the social work role and of inter-professional working, the opportunity to develop communication skills, and the chance to work as a member of a team. They were least content when they felt they had not been given an opportunity to develop sufficient understanding of statutory work, particularly if they thought this would impact on their chances of securing employment. Students' understandable beliefs that to gain employment they needed to have statutory experience chime with the views of statutory employers that experience in the sector is a necessity for newly qualified social workers. However, these views highlight the tensions faced by many programmes in obtaining sufficient statutory placements and also conflict with the reality that many private and voluntary practice learning opportunities do equip students with the skills, experiences and challenges that they may need in the changing world of adult social care and children's services. Research will not provide the answers to these multiple imperatives but it does expose the nuances of balancing demand, expectation, wish, and supply.

Practice assessors strongly supported the requirement for 200 days to be spent in

practice. They were broadly pleased with students' performance, especially during their final placement, but wanted HEIs to ensure that students were given clear ideas about what would be expected of them in the workplace and for any concerns with issues such as literacy or interpersonal qualities to have been addressed before students arrived on placement. They valued the opportunity to attend workshops and receive advice from HEI staff. Some also illustrated ways in which they had tried to improve the quality of placements, such as creating more opportunities for students to have 'placements within placements', by spending time with other members of a team or giving students discrete pieces of work to help hone their practice skills.

Do programmes prepare students for the workplace?

The extent to which social work qualifying programmes prepare students for the workplace is clearly of central importance to the future of social work. Student satisfaction with teaching and learning was generally high and analysis of the teaching and learning methods showed that teaching staff had adopted a wide range of methods designed to prepare students for the workplace, such as role play, case scenarios, and skills workshops. Students appreciated most those topics they rated as being 'relevant to practice' and there are clearly opportunities in some higher education institutions (HEIs) to better tailor the content of modules such as psychology or social policy so that their significance for social work is made more explicit. This may help counter some of the concerns expressed by employers that learning tailored to changing service provision, such as the impact of personalisation (Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, 2009) or multi-agency working and child development (Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd, 2009) has been slow to develop. Presentations from service users and carers and social work

practitioners were particularly valued. By contrast, inter-professional learning was the main area in which student feedback was mixed, highlighting the challenges of finding effective ways of developing the knowledge-base students will need in their future professional practice. There is clearly a need for a continuing debate about where and how inter-professional learning should take place (MacIntyre & Orme, in press).

However, teaching staff commented that the curriculum could sometimes feel overloaded because of the number of topics that needed to be covered. Students also felt that programmes were pressurised. However, few students and none of the teaching staff expressed a preference for separate adult and children's social work degrees as a way of concentrating learning into certain areas. The generic approach to initial qualifying training is dominant in most countries, as the response of the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUCSWEC, 2009) to the Task Force observed. However, there were ways in which students might be helped to be better prepared for work in specialist areas. Legislation, mental health, working with children and families, and human development featured highly among the topics students thought were important but programmes faced pressures in matching the teaching timetable to practice placements so it was not always possible or feasible to ensure that students had received teaching on a particular area before going on practice placement, thus limiting students' opportunities to link theory and practice.

As well as identifying HEIs' responsibilities, it is also important to clarify the role that practice placements play in preparing students for the workplace. Practice assessors pointed out that the increase in the proportion of students without direct paid experience in adult or children's services (because more were recruited straight from school) meant that students on first placement were often

unfamiliar with procedures and the nature of the work and so practice assessors had to adjust their teaching accordingly. They wanted this need for additional teaching to be recognised in allocating their caseloads.

In the second round of focus groups with students, held shortly before they completed their qualifying programmes, almost all considered their social work education to be worthwhile and relevant. Although some felt nervous about moving into the workplace, they saw this as appropriate to the stage of their development and not a reflection of lack of preparation. They were also strongly committed to the notion of continuing professional development. Final year students completing the online survey also thought that undertaking the programme had increased their motivation to do social work and expressed a strong intention to seek employment in social work.

The enhancement of analytical skills was an intended outcome of the move to a degree level qualification (Orme *et al.*, 2009). Students' progress in developing practical, analytical and report writing skills was mainly measured through analysis of answers to a set of two vignettes, one relating to children's services, the other to adult services. Analysis of the answers completed towards the end of the programmes showed that students had acquired a greater familiarity with the social work role, were more familiar with the legislative frameworks in which they operated, and showed evidence of some abilities to assess risk and prioritise. Nonetheless, consistent with existing research (Benner, 1984; Fook *et al.*, 2000), our data suggest that students reaching the end of their programmes generally operate at the level of advanced beginners, only acquiring professional expertise once they move into practice. Thus, there will always be a presumption that further continuing professional development will be required.

Discussion

Persistent and widespread problems in recruiting sufficient experienced social workers among local authorities (Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group, 2007a, 2007b; Local Government Association, 2009) have highlighted the relevance of debates about the quality of social work qualifying education and the arrangements for inducting newly qualified social workers into the workforce. Higher vacancy rates in child protection and mental health services (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2009) mean that newly qualified social workers often begin their employment in extremely challenging areas (Social Work Task Force, 2009a). While policy documents (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2008; Department of Health, 2009) emphasise a continuing role for social work in children's and adult services, uncertainties have been expressed, particularly in adult services (Mickel, 2008), about how this will be implemented. These factors mean that debates about the content of qualifying and post-qualifying education will continue. How research can contribute to this is a continuing challenge. The tensions between research and policy in social work (Jones, 2001; Jordan, 2001; Orme, 2001) are well rehearsed but, as evidenced by their existence in other areas (Jones, 2001; Scott, 2003), will probably continue to be intractable.

However, one difficulty to which social work seems to be particularly vulnerable is in its relationship with the media. Research (Galilee, 2005; Lombard & Maier, 2009) suggests that media representations of social work, and by extension, social work education, are often unfair. Galilee's (2005) literature review suggested that there were two reasons for this. Firstly, he argued, due to its complexity and generally protracted nature, social work is usually of little interest to the media. However, secondly, stories about social work failures, particularly those involving children are

viewed as newsworthy (p.3). The JUCSWEC (2009) submission to the Task Force commented on the negative impact that media coverage had had upon student morale and it would be an irony if increases in applications to social work programmes, evident since the introduction of the degree and the national recruitment campaigns, were to be compromised by negative publicity from within the sector implying that 'anyone can get a place' on a social work programme when our evidence from both students and educators was that this was rarely the case. Programmes may also have a role in improving awareness among the media and general public in highlighting the existence of suitability procedures and the availability of exit opportunities for those thought to be better suited to another area of study.

In comparison with research into the involvement of service users in social work education, less attention has been paid to the involvement of employers and practitioners in qualifying education. There needs to be a clearer understanding of the relationship between HEIs and employers and the factors that help make for effective partnerships. This echoes the General Social Care Council's (GSCC) (2009) submission to the Task Force which stated that:

We want to persuade universities and employers to work more effectively together to ensure that the graduates emerging from qualifying courses are better equipped for their first job. (GSCC, 2009, para. 5)

It also highlights the sharp contrast between our improving understanding of how people using services and carers might be involved in learning (for example: Beresford & Croft, 2004; Levin, 2004; Anghel & Ramon, 2009; Green & Wilks, 2009) and our lack of knowledge about how practitioners' experiences and skills can be brought into the classroom. Is this a matter of presenting authentic 'experiences from the frontline'

and explaining how policy and procedures operate, or of exploring how skills can be transferred? It is all too easy to say that practitioners should be involved in teaching but how many feel they have the skills and confidence to be trainers and how likely are their employers to release them for teaching when we already know the pressures on social workers' time (News Item, 2006; White *et al.*, 2009)?

Nevertheless, despite these gaps, the advent of the social work degree has contributed to renewed interest in social work qualifying education. It is essential that continuing debates take place about its effectiveness but these debates need to take place in a spirit of critical enquiry. In particular, care needs to be taken that the motivation and enthusiasm of students (Stevens, *et al.*, in press) are not affected by unfair representations of their abilities.

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