Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree Qualification in England

Executive Summary

Edited by Marie McNay

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from the Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England which was funded by the Department of Health between 2004-2007 to look at the impact of the new degree level professional qualification in social work. The change was widely welcomed by social work educators, employers, and service users and carers as a way of improving the status of social work and of increasing the numbers of people attracted to the profession. It was accompanied by substantial financial investment in student recruitment, practice placements, involvement of service users and carers, and other measures aimed at improving the quality of learning in higher education. The first new degree level social work qualifying programmes began in the 2003-2004 academic year.

2. Policy Context

The introduction of the new degree for qualifying education reflects wider government policy objectives to modernise social care services and develop a skilled and motivated workforce. The previous professional qualification in social work, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), was a two-year qualification at sub-degree level, but it could be offered alongside undergraduate or postgraduate academic qualifications. Many educators had questioned the adequacy of the DipSW's competences-based approach in preparing social workers for professional practice. There were other concerns about:

- the status and image of social work and the decline in the number of applications to study for the profession;
- the fact that although intakes were more ethnically diverse, men and people with disabilities were still under represented;
- different rates of progression among sub-groups of students and the reasons for this, despite good overall progression rates;
- whether these factors were affecting the extent to which new professionals represented the populations they served;
- specific areas which were seen as problematic in terms of the quality of teaching and the relevance of specific subject areas, although most students were satisfied with the DipSW overall.

3. Other Policy Developments

The development and implementation of the new social work degree was influenced by other policy initiatives, including:

- changes to the post-qualifying framework;
• the setting up of the social work register;
• new codes of practice for social care workers and their employers.

In addition, there were wider policy developments:

• The White Paper *Every Child Matters* (HM Government, 2003) set up separate Children’s Services in order to provide better integration and accountability in national and local services, a programme of workforce reform to attract people into the workforce and to retain them, and the development of a common core of training for those working solely with children and families.

• The White Paper, *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say* (HM Government, 2006) outlined a set of seven outcomes which emphasised preventative services and enabling people to take more control over their lives. It recognised that the workforce would need support in developing new skills and greater confidence in these approaches and highlighted the challenges of delivering support to people with complex and often long-term needs.

• The Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills’ (as it was then) review of the social care workforce, *Options for Excellence* (2006) considered the challenges faced by the social care workforce, including the social work workforce, over the period leading up to 2020 and how it could be prepared to meet the anticipated changes. The report acknowledged the role of the new degree in social work as one of the foundations of excellence for the workforce arising from the Care Standards Act 2000.

• The publication of the *Children’s Plan* (Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) raised further issues for social work education and for employers in terms of the proposals to pilot a Newly Qualified Social Worker status so that social workers are better supported during their first year in employment and to develop fast track routes designed to attract mature graduates into children’s social work.

• *Putting People First* (HM Government, 2007) envisaged a situation in which people who use services take greater control over their lives, meaning that the role of social workers in Adult services may move away from assessment and more towards safeguarding, advocacy, and brokerage.

Taken together, these documents highlight two central issues for the future. Firstly, the entire workforce employed in Children’s and Adults Services is expected to work more closely with other professionals and is increasingly likely to be located in different settings, such as schools or primary care. Secondly, the primary purpose of the workforce is to help people using their services assume greater control of their lives. This has raised questions about the extent to which generic qualifying programmes produce social workers equally well prepared to work in Adults or in Children’s services (Blewett and Tunstill, 2007).
4. AIMS AND SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The Department of Health intended that the reforms to social work education would produce a qualification that rigorously assessed graduates in respect of the following attributes:

- the practical application of skills, knowledge, research and analytical abilities to deliver services which create opportunities for users;
- the ability to reflect social work values in their practice;
- the ability to manage change and deliver required outcomes;
- the ability to communicate with users and carers of all ages and from all sections of the community;
- the practical application of social work theory;
- the ability to function effectively and confidently in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency teams.

(Department of Health, 2003a, p.1)

4.1 Existing published research on social work education

The introduction of the new degree represented the biggest reform to social work education since the introduction of the DipSW. However, a major challenge for the evaluation was the lack of United Kingdom (UK) baseline data which offered some measure of the performance of DipSW students entering the workforce. Of the limited number of studies that existed, the majority were descriptive accounts of a single aspect of programme delivery.

4.2 Aims of the evaluation

In 2003, the Department of Health published a tender for research examining the implementation and impact of the new degree in England. This outlined six areas on which the evaluation would provide more information, namely:

- baseline information;
- applications, recruitment and retention;
- the teaching/learning experience;
- the practice learning experience;
- innovations (in learning and teaching and in organisation of social work education); and
- entering the workforce.

Based on this framework, the evaluation sought to answer four main questions:

i) How has the move to degree level professional social work education and training been implemented?
ii) What are the main outcomes of the change from diploma to degree-level study?

iii) How far has the new degree met the expectations of those entering the profession and other stakeholders?

iv) Has the new social work degree increased the quality and quantity of qualified social workers entering the workforce?

5. DESIGN AND METHODS (Chapter 2 and Technical Appendix)

The study employed a mixed mode design, collecting qualitative and quantifiable data through a range of different methods and techniques. Population-level data on all students beginning social work programmes between 2003-2006 were obtained from the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and national data from an online survey of students collected over seven phases were combined with in-depth work in six case study sites.

6. KEY FINDINGS

The following is a synthesis of the detailed findings reported in the body of the report. They relate both to the specific DH requirements for the delivery of the degree, but also acknowledge the ways in which some of the contextual changes identified above have impacted on the process and outcomes of raising the qualifying level for social work to an undergraduate degree. The progression data apply to the cohort of students that started in 2003-2004.

6.1 Recruitment and retention (Chapters 3, 4 5 and 11)

- Compared with a decade ago, when there were just 4114 DipSW enrolments, there has been an increase of 38 per cent in enrolments on the new degree - 5676 students in 2005-2006.

- Almost 70 per cent of students enrolling on the first year of the new degree in 2003-2004 graduated, with only 15 per cent withdrawing. These results are broadly in line with those obtained on the DipSW. As with the DipSW, however there is some evidence of differential progression between sub-groups.

- Compared with the DipSW, there is greater diversity of applicants, mainly in the greater proportions of Black African and younger students. The proportion of students from Black African backgrounds, for example, rose from five per cent (n = 231) in 2001-2002 (DipSW) to 11 per cent (n = 591) in 2005-2006.

- Only 1-2% per cent of students started the DipSW under the age of 20, but the proportion has risen steadily since to 14 per cent (n = 974) in 2005-2006.
This was due to removing the age barrier to qualifying as a social worker (previously 22 years).

- Flexible approaches to achieving a social work qualification, including opportunities for postgraduate entry, employment-based and part time routes appear to have been maintained, as does the success of social work education in facilitating the academic progress of students from non-traditional academic routes.

- There has been a steady increase since 2003 in the number of applicants for social work degree programmes, including a rise to over 10,000 through UCAS in 2006. The ratio of applicants to acceptances through UCAS has risen from around four applicants for every three acceptances to five applicants for every three acceptances.

- Having a larger pool of potential students from which to select appears to have resulted in an increase in the educational qualifications and, to a lesser extent, the overall quality of applicants.

- Raising the qualifying level does not appear to have deterred applicants from non-traditional academic routes and there is some evidence that programmes are attracting a wider ‘pool’ of applicants.

- The gender balance of social work students remains heavily skewed towards women, with the proportion of men remaining unchanged. Students from Asian backgrounds also remain under represented.

- Male students are significantly more likely than females to report having any form of disability.

- Selection procedures are seen to be rigorous and designed to test students’ literacy, numeracy, motivations, and potential.

- Overall, students appear to be highly committed with a range of motivations for studying, including altruism, personal experience and career prospects; they value the varied and interesting nature of social work. Black students are more likely than other ethnic groups to have job-related motivations.

- The new bursary is the most frequent form of financial support mentioned by students. There is some (provisional) indication that there has been an overall reduction in the number of students who are financially supported by an employer.

- The proportion of postgraduate students passing was significantly higher than undergraduates (81 and 66 per cent; n = 94 and 1380 respectively) and the proportion of deferring (6%) was significantly lower than among undergraduates (12%).

- A significantly larger proportion of ‘White’ students passed (69%) than from ‘Black’ (62 %) or ‘Other’ (57%) ethnic minority groups.
• A lower proportion of students self-identified as ‘Black’ withdrew (13 %), compared with those who described themselves as ‘White’ (15%) or ‘Other’ (18%). However, Black students had the highest referral rate.

• Overall, the proportion of ‘White’ students who failed (2%) was significantly lower than that among students of other ethnicities (5%)

• The proportions of students with any form of disability who failed, withdrew, deferred or referred were significantly higher than non disabled students and the proportion passing was significantly lower.

• A very small proportion of relatively very young degree students (under 20) failed their social work studies (2%, n = 6). Younger students had a significantly lower percentage of referrals and deferrals than other under graduates. However, the same age group had the highest percentage of withdrawal (23%, n = 58) compared to older students.

• Almost half of all the first year students responding to the online survey currently had family or other unpaid caring responsibilities.

• Almost half (46%, n = 66) of Black students are caring for school age children compared to just over one third (36%, n = 539) of all students (online survey).

• On the basis of progression and retention rates to date and stated career path intentions of current students, the degree is likely to lead to an increase in the number of qualified workers joining the workforce.

Comment

Overall, the evidence suggests that the new degree has improved substantially on the DipSW numbers of enrolments and to some extent on the range and quality of recruitment. The findings indicate that policy initiatives to attract a wider range of students to the social work profession have been successful. While there was evidence of some initial resistance to the suitability of younger entrants to the profession, progression and retention rates suggest that this policy initiative has had a positive impact on the number of recruits to both the degree and the profession. Funding mechanisms to support the increase in places in HEIs also seem to have had a positive impact.

The decision to fund a social work bursary appears to have attracted more diverse applicants and supported those who might otherwise have been unable to enter higher education. However, whilst the bursary has been an important factor in attracting applicants, rigorous selection processes are used to identify suitable candidates, thus allaying fears that unsuitable applicants might be attracted by the possibility of a bursary. The selection procedures for the programmes appear to be innovative, involving service users and carers and employers in different ways, and test motivations and eligibility as well as suitability.
There are particular challenges for postgraduate courses given the requirement for students to spend 200 days on practice placements out of two academic years. Despite this, this report shows that social work postgraduate courses are popular, recruit well, and there is very little withdrawal or failure. In the light of greater proportions of young people entering higher education on a variety of courses, postgraduate social work may remain a key route into the profession.

The increase in the number of younger entrants with ‘A’ levels and the requirements for numeracy and literacy means that programmes will have to balance academic suitability with the commitment to supporting people with relevant personal and vocational experience but lacking academic qualifications. Younger students who stay the course are significantly more likely to succeed in their studies with fewer deferrals or referrals than older undergraduates. It will be important to continue to monitor the number of successful applicants from access courses and other non-traditional entry points.

More work needs to be done to address particular areas of diversity, in order to attract students from all backgrounds and to ensure the social work workforce represents society, particularly given the differential progression rates for students from Black and minority ethnic groups. The proportion of Black students who are caring for school age children suggests that they may be more likely to have to combine their studies with other family responsibilities, potentially increasing pressures for some of these students. Additional strategies of support may need to be considered.

The indication of an overall reduction in the number of students funded by an employer needs further investigation as does the availability and cost effectiveness of flexible approaches, such as employment-based and part time routes. These have been an important source of recruitment in the past and some have operated as a skills escalator to attract a range of people into the profession and to widen participation in higher education.

6.2 Teaching and learning (Chapter 6)

- Overall, the evaluation finds that social work educators are delivering the DH requirements for the degree. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Benchmark Statement in Social Work was seen to be helpful in setting out the components of undergraduate social work education.

- Teaching staff see an increase in academic and practice standards of students and both they and students report largely positive experiences of teaching and learning on the new social work degree.

- Of the topics covered by the end of the second year, students reported highest levels of satisfaction with ‘Anti-oppressive practice’ and ‘Social work values and ethics’.
‘Children and families’ appeared at the top of the list of 25 topics which were seen to relate strongly to working in practice settings and came joint fourth overall in terms of student satisfaction.

The degree appears to have been the impetus for developing new methods of delivery of the curriculum, especially in skills lab work, in e-learning and in involving service users and carers.

Courses have different arrangements for delivering the curriculum but all seem to have developed mechanisms for ensuring core generic learning and providing opportunities for specialist learning.

One area that appears more problematic is inter-professional education. Courses are currently testing varied models to address the difficulties encountered.

The new degree seems to have afforded the opportunity for programmes to create more diverse methods of assessment and innovations (for those programmes) in a range of assessment methods e.g. linking theory with individual/family observations, involving service users and carers.

Most informants consider that the new degree has resulted in a refining of assessment systems and an increase in the rigour of assessment. About three quarters of students are highly satisfied with their assessment but those without previous experience in social care, and postgraduate students tend to be less satisfied.

Most practice assessors report that service users are involved in a variety of ways and in many aspects of students’ assessment in placement, although some report that service user involvement is limited.

**Comment**

While overall most participants report positive experiences of teaching and learning on the new degree, there are some concerns.

Increases in the numbers of students and in the number of practice learning days and the further integration of some social work courses into higher education systems (which involves standardising timetabling and so on) has meant that there are some pressures on the curriculum, timing of assessments and resources. There may be an issue to resolve about whether social work educators have received sufficient institutional support in return for the substantial funding that social work education now brings to many HEIs and the extent to which social work education enables HEIs to meet their targets of student completion, diversity and employability.
Some informants were concerned about the way that students’ values were assessed compared to the DipSW requirements. There was a view that the previous requirements for the DipSW more strongly addressed anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. The current DH requirements have moved to a more outcome focussed approach and some informants felt that these represented a more diluted statement of values and, potentially an erosion of previous practice. It may be that programmes would value further consultation about this important area and that the GSCC could explore this in its review process.

6.3 Practice teaching and learning (Chapter 7)

- The data show that the number of placements provided each year has risen with the increase in student numbers. In 2005-2006, a total of 8,087 placements was provided by the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

- The increase in the number of practice learning days, the funding arrangements and the work undertaken in developing practice placements all seem to have had positive impacts on the variety of practice learning opportunities in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

- Providing increased resources through the daily placement fee has been well received and is seen to have resulted in extra placements, particularly in the voluntary and private sectors.

- The existence of practice learning as a Performance Indicator for statutory agencies (which has now been withdrawn) was thought to have been particularly important in ensuring the supply of practice learning opportunities in the statutory sector.

- There are varied experiences with some programmes able to secure a high percentage of statutory placements and other programmes more reliant on the voluntary and private sectors for placements.

- There are pressures on HEIs to identify and access good quality placements. These include the increase in placement days in the new degree, increase in the number of students, local conditions, and new requirements of the degree, including meeting the different needs of younger students.

- The main factors seen to contribute to the overall quality of placements are: the ability of different agencies to provide students with a useful range of practice learning opportunities; the quality of practice assessment; and how students are treated.

- The increased number of students and pressures to secure a sufficient quantity of placements have raised questions about the capacity of some placements to offer students high quality learning experiences. Nevertheless 78% of placements are rated as ‘excellent, very good’ or ‘good’ by students.
• Student satisfaction with placements in non-statutory settings tends to be lower but higher where there is a qualified social worker present for ‘all or most of the time’.

• Analysis of students’ overall ratings show that the better placements fulfil criteria which are achievable as much in non-statutory as statutory placements.

• Almost 90% (n = 1198) of students for whom information was available had at least one placement working with children and families and almost 75% (n = 1002) had at least one placement working with adult service users.

• The Fact Find conducted in 2004-2005 showed that 38% (n = 26/42) of undergraduate programmes on which information was obtained offered practice placements in Year 1/Level 1 with the number of days ranging from 20-60.

• Practice assessors identify that, on final placement, the proportions of students performing as well as, or better than DipSW students has risen on every aspect (communication skills, approaches to equalities, theoretical knowledge, performance and preparedness) and are seen to have improved most on two aspects emphasised in the Requirements for Social Work Training - communication skills and theoretical knowledge.

• Students and practice assessors identify practice placements as a key way of learning about multi-agency and interprofessional working. The quality of placements is seen by staff and students as a critical factor in the overall quality of the course and as a tipping point in terms of withdrawal.

• The separation of children and adult services, represented an unforeseen challenge in accessing the required number of placements working with both groups. This appears to have been largely met by HEIs.

**Comment**

Students appear satisfied with some aspects of voluntary and private sector placements. However, teaching staff and students also identified a need for capacity building, extra monitoring and support for some voluntary and private sector placements, in order to ensure that students are able to benefit from their placements to the required level of skills and to undertake the right kinds of tasks.

Difficulties were experienced by many programme providers in finding an adequate supply of placements in the statutory sector, despite the support from Learning Resource Networks. This suggests that there is scope for judicious consideration of what future incentives might be developed to help programme providers find more statutory placements.
Many programmes split the required 200 days of practice learning between two long placements. Longer placements are seen by some to offer a more in-depth experience for students and mean that the actual number of placements required for degree students remains the same as that under the DipSW. Others argue that there are educational and practice benefits to be derived from placements that occur at every stage of a student’s programme, i.e. in the first year of undergraduate programmes (as in the DipSW) as well as years two and three. However, because of the difficulties in organising Year 1 placements for some programmes, it appears that there has been a reduction in them. Further investigation of the educational value of them may be beneficial.

The practice learning component may place additional demands on some students, particularly for people with parenting and caring responsibilities. Further investigation of this issue may also be beneficial.

6.4 Innovations (Chapters 6, 8, & 9)

- Overall the report suggests that some innovations have been implemented more successfully than others.

- The new degree seems to have provided a spur for the increased involvement of people using services and carers in social work education and appears to have produced a ‘step change’ in the level and range of opportunities for users and carers to be engaged in social work education.

- Students value service user and carer input to their training and education as providing a unique perspective. In turn, those using services and carers appear to find involvement in professional education and training worthwhile and beneficial. However, there is evidence that barriers to service user and carer involvement still exist, including security of funding.

- There are generally high levels of support for the new requirement for Assessed Preparation for Direct Practice (APDP) and programmes have developed a wide range of ways to meet it. In addition to shadowing, other methods included assignment/portfolio, exercises (e.g. videos), statement or interview and whole module.

- APDP has been interpreted in social work programmes as having two main elements, the element to ensure ‘safety’ to practice and the element of ‘preparation’ for practice placements. All programmes met the former but varied in the extent to which the preparation element was tackled.

- Students’ experiences of the quality of Information Technology (IT) teaching and resources at the case study sites seem to have been mixed and there were some difficulties around interpretation of the need to ensure that students are computer literate at the level of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) or the equivalent.
• Initial concerns around the ECDL requirement do not appear to have persisted and most case study sites had modified their approaches to allow students the greatest possible flexibility while allowing them not to incur financial costs. However, the need for greater clarity about the particular relevance of the ECDL to social work was evident.

• All programmes in the case study sites have arrangements for Exit routes for students (providing they are eligible) who are not deemed suitable for the social work degree or do not wish to continue. There are awards in social welfare at different levels for those who have not passed their practice placements and transfers to other related academic courses.

Comment

Overall, the degree appears to have acted as a catalyst and has facilitated reflection, innovation, and changes in social work education. The requirement for service user and carer involvement in the delivery of the degree has universal acceptance. There is evidence of good practice in recruiting, resourcing, and organising networks of service users and carers and acknowledgement that there are opportunities for further development in this area. Modules appear to have been developed in conjunction with service users and carers that are innovative.

In particular, the research identified a high level of support for the provision for students to undertake a short period of Assessed Preparation for Direct Practice before entry to practice learning. This provision has been effectively used to prepare students for practice and to identify potentially unsuitable students in order to protect service users and carers. However, as the interviews with informants showed, there was a lack of precision in the way that it was described.

The requirement for IT training in social work education was a response to the concerns of employers and of newly qualified social workers who had undertaken the previous qualification. In this respect, programmes were faced with adopting new approaches to IT learning with varying successes. One option might be to examine other developments in health and in higher education for the delivery of IT training to see whether there are lessons for social work education.

6.5 Entering the workforce (Chapters 10 and 11)

• The evaluation found that students identified that studying for the degree strengthened their motivations to become social workers. Students seem keen to keep a range of options open in terms of their intentions to work with a specific service user group or in a specific setting.
Social work educators feel that the new degree is better able to produce students who are more prepared for the complex and changing world of social work than the DipSW.

There is evidence of a change over time in the way that students conceptualise practice. As they develop, students are seen to become more analytical and critical, more holistic, draw more on policy, legislation and theory, and are clearer about their role as social workers.

At the final research assessment point, students had reached a level of skills acquisition appropriate for the completion of qualifying training - the ‘advanced beginner’ or ‘competent’ stage of professional development.

Comment

Despite the fact that there is no longer a requirement for the award to be delivered in partnership between HEIs and agencies there is continuing enthusiasm among academic staff and practice agencies for the degree and demonstrated potential for HEIs and employers to work together around workforce planning and strategies. This enthusiasm is associated with the view of all stakeholders that the degree has increased the status of the social work profession.

Employers’ views on the new degree confirm those of other key stakeholders that degree status is welcome. The qualities they most seek in new practitioner are effective engagement with service users and carers, analytical abilities and skills in outcome focussed planning. The extent to which these are met will not be known until qualified students have been in the workforce for some time.

7. CONCLUSION

Overall, the results from the evaluation suggest that the decision to implement the social work degree qualification represents a policy success and comprises an important part of the government’s overall objectives to modernise public services. The evaluation provides evidence that students appear to become more analytical and critical over time and that they acquire skills from a combination of classroom-based and practice learning. However, evidence from this study and previous work, suggests that there will always be a stage between achieving a professional qualification and operating as a professional. It is important to recognise that qualifying education is not intended to produce ‘proficient’ or ‘expert’ workers.

The impact of the degree will not be known until qualified students have been in the workforce for some time. Steps are already in hand to follow up newly qualified social workers through a project funded by the Department of Health’s
Social Care Workforce Research Initiative examining perceptions of graduates and their employers of their preparedness for work. This Summary concludes by reinforcing the recommendation in the main report that there is a period of stability in social work education in order to establish an appropriate timescale in which to measure the outcomes of these changes on the performance of social work degree holders in the workforce. This will also allow for the results of this evaluation to be contextualised with the results for the new post-qualifying framework in social work.

REFERENCES


