

What (a) Difference a Degree Makes: The Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree in England

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Joan Orme, Gillian MacIntyre, Pam Green Lister, Kate Cavanagh, Beth R. Crisp, Shereen Hussein, Jill Manthorpe, Jo Moriarty, Endellion Sharpe and Martin Stevens

The authors are members of the team responsible for the Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England.

Joan Orme is Professor of Social Work at the Glasgow School of Social Work, a joint school of the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde.

Gillian MacIntyre is a Research Associate at the Glasgow School of Social Work.

Pam Green Lister is the MSW Qualifying Course Director at the Glasgow School of Social Work.

Kate Cavanagh is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Science at the University of Stirling.

Beth R. Crisp is Associate Professor in Social Work in the School of Health and Social Development at Deakin University.

Endellion Sharpe is Managing Director of Sharpe Research.

Jill Manthorpe is Professor of Social Work and Director of the Social Care Workforce Research Unit at King's College London.

Shereen Hussein, Jo Moriarty and Martin Stevens are Research Fellows in the Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London.

Summary

After many years of debate in the UK about the need for a degree-level qualification in social work, the arguments for a minimum degree-level qualification were accepted. The requirements for the degree in England were developed drawing on work from a number of sources, including a benchmark statement for undergraduate degrees in social work and focus groups with stakeholders. The new degree in England, launched in 2003, involves one extra year's study; improvements in the qualifying standard for social work; and specific curriculum and entrance requirements. At the time of launching the degree, the government department responsible for funding (Department of Health) commissioned a three-year evaluation of the implementation of the new degree to establish whether the new qualifying level leads to improvements in the qualified workforce. The aim of the evaluation is to describe the experiences of those undertaking the degree, collect the views of the various stakeholders about the effectiveness of the degree and measure the impact of a degree-level qualification on those entering the workforce. This article, written by the team undertaking the evaluation of the England degree, explores the reasons for the methodological approach adopted and the issues that have arisen in setting up the research.

Keywords: social work qualification, evaluation, professional training, education, research methods

Introduction

In 2001, the Department of Health (the central government department responsible for social work education in England) announced that the basic qualification for social work would be an undergraduate degree (Department of Health, 2001a). The announcement meant that previous arrangements allowing students to qualify as practitioners at diploma level while also offering the professional qualification alongside degree and postgraduate courses would be changed. This was a response to political and public disquiet about the perceived quality of some social work practitioners (Philpot, 1999; Eborall and Garmeson, 2001; Lord Laming, 2003) and reductions in the numbers of social workers qualifying each year (TOPSS England, 2000) as well as being part of the government's wider aim to modernize the social care workforce (Secretary of State for Health, 1998). The requirements for a social work degree were published (Department of Health, 2002a) following consultation with many stakeholders, including employers, practitioners, students, social work academics and service users and carers. Arrangements for social work education in the other three countries of the UK evolved after the changes announced in England and comprise slightly different arrangements, but all involve degree-level studies as a minimum requirement. This article focuses on the changes in England only.

The government invested over £21 million in social work education and training in the year of the introduction of the new degree (2003–04), rising to £81.45 million in 2005–06) (Department of Health, 2003a), although the actual increase in resources is hard to determine, especially since much higher education is funded by central government sources outside the Department of Health. To accompany this investment, the Department of Health commissioned an evaluation of the implementation of the new degree. The questions in the tender document were comprehensive, covering the changes and are subsumed under five themes:

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

The final commissioning of the evaluation in 2004 involved a team that comprised researchers from Glasgow University (now the Glasgow School of Social Work), King's College London and Sharpe Research (a market research company). Their combined expertise sought to ascertain what difference a degree-level qualification made to those entering social work employment. The research team were assisted in their task by a Reference Group representing various stakeholders in the degree and a Service User and Carer Advisory Group (which also had representation on the Reference Group).

This article describes the aims of the evaluation and the methodological choices made to meet them. In doing this, it will review existing research into social work education and identify methodological issues that have emerged in the early stages of the research.

Context for the evaluation

The previous professional qualification in social work—the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 1991)—had been in existence for some ten years and had often been criticized for its competence-based approach (Kemshall, 1993; Clark, 1995; Dominelli, 1996; Lymbery, 2003). It was a two-year qualification, set at sub-degree level, but could be offered alongside undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. A degree-level qualification meant that a three-year undergraduate degree would be the norm but graduates were permitted to undertake a two-year postgraduate qualification, so long as they met Department of Health requirements within this period. Part-time study options were also available.

At one level, the requirements for the new degree were less prescriptive than those for the qualification it replaced. In introducing it, the Department of Health recognized that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were subject to other quality assurance mechanisms and sought to work in tandem with these. However, the Department of Health did stipulate certain changes that it thought would improve the quality and quantity of entrants to the social work workforce. These included removing the minimum age for qualifying as a social worker (thereby allowing recruitment straight from secondary level education at the age of eighteen), requiring students to possess qualifications in mathematics and English at key skills level 2 (the equivalent of a GCSE qualification), and obliging them to declare health or disability-related conditions. Students must register with the General Social Care Council (GSCC), the regulatory body established under the Care Standards Act 2000. In return, non-means-tested bursaries of around £3,000 per annum would be paid to English home country students not funded by an employer (Department of Health, 2002*b*) and an ongoing national recruitment campaign was launched to persuade potential students of the benefits of studying social work (Department of Health, 2001*b*).

The degree curriculum and modes of teaching and learning were to some extent left to the discretion of the individual programme providers but there were specifications that core subject areas had to be addressed. These consist of:

- Human growth and development, mental health and disability;
- Assessment planning, intervention and review;
- Communication skills with children, adults and those with particular communication needs;
- Law; and
- Partnership working and information sharing across agencies and disciplines (Department of Health, 2002*a*, pp. 3–4).

On completion of the degree, students are expected to be competent to the level of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) in information technology skills. Other curriculum requirements include expectations for innovation in teaching methods and flexibility in the delivery of programmes, including part-time routes and provision for accrediting learning outside formal training, formerly termed Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). Providers of the degree are also expected to work with various stakeholders, including

employers, service users and carers and to involve them in all processes of the degree, such as student recruitment, curriculum delivery and assessment. Many HEIs were already involving service users and carers but it is the first time that the Department of Health has allocated specific funds to support them in doing so (Department of Health, 2003a).

Increasing the programme length was not intended to give extra time for academic study *per se*. Announcing details of the curriculum, the then Minister asserted that it was to focus on 'practical training' (Department of Health, 2002c). To achieve this, the amount of time spent in assessed practice was raised from a minimum of 130 days to 200 days and funding was given to establish both a Practice Learning Taskforce and increases in the numbers and types of placements (Department of Health, 2003b). A further innovative aim of the new degree was to protect service users and improve standards, which would be partly achieved through assessing students on their safety to undertake supervised practice.

The new requirements meant that HEIs could apply to the GSCC for approval at the same time as having their degree qualification validated in their own institution. The timescale meant that some HEIs recruited students for the new degree in the 2003–04 academic year, while the others, with the exception of the Open University, offered it the following year. Unlike other HEIs, the Open University's academic year commenced in January and it therefore did not introduce the new degree until January 2005.

Evaluating social work education

One of the major hurdles to answering the research questions was the lack of UK baseline data (Moriarty and Murray, 2007). To evaluate what difference a degree makes, it is necessary to have some measure of the performance of students who entered the workforce holding the original qualification that the degree is replacing. While there have been some studies evaluating social work education, these have been limited. For example, Shardlow and Walliss's (2003) review of comparative studies of European social work found that the majority of studies were theoretical rather than empirical, and only two of the empirical studies in their sample focused on social work education. Carpenter (2005) has argued that while some studies have been retrospective, none has conformed to strict methods of evaluation over time. Focusing on 'outcomes' of social work education, how changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviour may be attributed to teaching and learning opportunities, he argued for greater clarity about what is being measured and more rigour in evaluation methods. This rigour should include attention to both sample size and to effective measurement over time, drawing on data from a variety of sources.

Studies of social work education include analysis of increases in student numbers in Denmark (Halskov and Egelund, 1998) and recruitment of educators in Italy (Cavallone and Ferrario, 1998). Watt (1998) focused on Polish and Baltic states' students' reflections on their experiences, while Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) evaluated readiness to practise using data from practitioners who were recently qualified in the UK. As background to the changes introduced by the Department of Health, Wallis-Jones and Lyons (2003), building on their earlier studies (Lyons *et al.*, 1995; Wallis-Jones and Lyons, 1996, 2001), had surveyed

students who qualified in summer 2001 in England on their assessment of their readiness to practise.

Another focus has been on the different kinds of knowledge applied in practice and the process of knowledge acquisition. Nähri (2002) undertook a *post hoc* exploration of knowledge used by practitioners in Finland, while Sheppard and Ryan (2003) attempted to discern the process of applying knowledge in practice among UK social workers. Strikingly, and consistent with Carpenter's (2005) concerns, only one study (Fook *et al.*, 2000) is based upon a longitudinal evaluation—of Australian students' progression through a degree programme, and subsequently into practice.

Methodological considerations

Social work education involves both classroom and practice-based learning. Consequently, the evaluation required a complex amalgam of data to investigate different ways in which the degree-level qualification and its attendant requirements and resources affected the quantity and quality of students entering the workforce. There were some quite straightforward measures that could be applied, and data collected to plot these (e.g. on the number and diversity of students recruited to social work courses). Other data, such as students' perceptions of their experiences, were also important. However, a more complex measure was how to assess changes in students' 'readiness to practise'—an important consideration in view of the Department of Health's emphasis upon the ability of the degree to meet employers' and service users' needs.

These requirements and the strengths and expertise offered by the team suggested the need for the mixed methods approach. Mixed methods approaches are achieving increasing popularity in social research for a number of reasons. First, every method has its limitations and the results from single method designs, even if well executed, tend to be open to more than one interpretation, either because they fail to provide all the data necessary or because the results stem from a bias in the study's method. Multiple methods have complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses, leading to richer and more reliable results (Brewer and Hunter, 2006). Second, mixed methods approaches are particularly suited to complex policy evaluation because they provide information on both processes and outcomes. The mixed method approach was intended to provide an in-depth analysis of the implementation and outcomes of a degree-level qualification, set against a comprehensive analysis of the data on applications, recruitment and retention.

Data collection

The evaluation comprised three main approaches: fact find, online survey and case studies, which were designed to address different aspects of the evaluation and to meet different data requirements.

HEI fact find

At an early stage, the research team set up systems to gather data on student recruitment, and, where possible, to compare this to patterns of recruitment to the DipSW. The GSCC agreed to provide anonymized data records on all students registered on the new degree and, where possible, data on students on the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW). Short telephone/email surveys of HEIs offering the new degree were used to supplement this and to provide information from the perspective of social work educators.

These data provide a complete picture of recruitment patterns over a three-year period, albeit only on those who took up places. While they only provide information on a limited number of primarily demographic variables, they are based upon the total population of those entering social work education over a three-year period. Like other data collected in the evaluation, they have the potential to be analysed by category such as age, disability, gender and ethnicity. They also have the potential to provide comparisons with progression rates among students completing the DipSW (Hussein *et al.*, 2007), but this is beyond the scope of the timescale for the evaluation.

Online survey

Online surveys are often used in marketing and other activities, but have now established a place in academic research being used to reach hard-to-access populations or respondents who have easy access to technology but might not be motivated to complete paper-based questionnaires (Braithwaite *et al.*, 2003; Wright, 2005). Evaluations have shown that, often, the response rate is higher in such surveys (Cook *et al.*, 2000; Boyer *et al.*, 2002) and they are seen as being more cost-effective in that they avoid the costs of printing questionnaires and entering the data separately. Cook and colleagues' overview of the use of online surveys concluded that response *representativeness* was as important as response *rate* and this could be enhanced by the number of contacts, personalized contacts and pre-contacts.

A whole-population online survey has been undertaken of students enrolled in the degree course over the three-year period of the evaluation, totalling seven phases of data collection. All students registered on the new degree in the academic year 2004–05 were invited to participate in an online survey at the point of commencing the degree. They have then been encouraged to complete follow-up online questionnaires in years two and three, thus giving a comprehensive overview of the experiences of one cohort of students over the length of the degree. Students commencing the degree in the year 2005–06 have been invited to complete the online survey in years one and two. Finally, students beginning in 2003–04 and 2006–07 have also completed the survey in their final and first years, respectively.

The aim of the survey is to give a comprehensive overview of the perceptions of students of their experience of the new degree. It asks for details of students' backgrounds; their motivations for studying social work; experiences and opinions about teaching and learning; expectations; and suggestions for improvements as they proceed through the degree. It was developed after holding discussion groups with students at a selection of different HEIs, selected for contrast in terms of their geography, programme size and programme type.

During successive years, further group discussions were used to develop and refine the questionnaires relevant to different points in their study. The questions are closed to facilitate pre-coding but there is an optional free text 'comments' question at the end. Demographic data collected in the survey will enable comparisons between the characteristics of responding students with the wider social work student population.

The research team had assumed that because HEIs are increasingly using web-based technology for teaching and assessment purposes, students would be responsive to this mode of involvement. However, data protection did not allow for direct access to students so various methods have been used to engage with academic staff responsible for the degree to request that they facilitate their students' access to and completion of the online questionnaire. This process will enable important methodological advances in our understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of this method of data collection because, until now, many internet-based or online surveys have not been able to provide a specific sampling frame from which to compare responders and non-responders.

The evaluation timescale did not permit our obtaining data on students' perceptions of the DipSW. However, the online surveys offer comprehensive data for future comparison; indicate changes in students' perceptions over time; and provide aggregate data of students' experiences of the aspects of the new degree that were seen to be innovative.

Case studies

The third aspect of the methodology involves drilling down to provide richer, more detailed and multi-perspective data on the experience of implementing the new degree. Six case study sites were randomly chosen (the only criterion applied was to achieve a geographic spread). At some of these sites, students could undertake a social work qualification at undergraduate or postgraduate level. They offered a total of nine routes to qualification, and provided places to 430 students.

The case studies' methodology involved following the cohorts of students who undertook the degree (or its equivalent) during a three-year period (2004–07). All documents related to the validation of the degree and handbooks (e.g. for students, practice teachers and so on) produced during the period were collected. Interviews were undertaken at the outset with key stakeholders (course directors, Deans, staff overseeing recruitment and practice learning) and focus groups were held with students and service users and carers. While participation in these groups was voluntary, attempts were made to ensure that they represented the diversity at the case study sites.

During the course of the three years, questionnaires were sent out to practice teachers/assessors who provided placement opportunities and telephone interviews were undertaken with employers of students who were about to move into the workplace. Assessment data on progression rates and views of external assessors were collected towards the end of each academic year. At the close of the three-year evaluation period, the interviews and focus groups were repeated.

The approach to the evaluation drew on the principles of realistic evaluation developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997), who argued that, especially for the evaluation of policy implementation, it is not possible to consider outcomes in a vacuum. Realistic evaluation provides a framework for this style of evaluation by establishing the extent to which there is a causal link between a programme and its outcomes. Its basic paradigm is based on the theory that to understand what works and why it works, a researcher has to consider:

- what is distinctive about the particular context; and
- how the measures (mechanisms) being introduced interact with the context to produce the outcomes.

Based on a formula (Context + Mechanism = Outcome (C + M = O)), this process maintains the uniqueness of each situation while suggesting what circumstances (context) are most favourable for successful results (outcomes) from the programme (mechanism):

Realism, as a philosophy of science, insists that the outcomes unearthed in empirical investigations are intelligible only if we understand the underlying mechanisms which give rise to them and the contexts that sustain them (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p. 297).

For the purposes of this evaluation, it meant that as well as gathering data pertinent to the objectives of the degree, we also had to explore the complex interrelationships between contexts (at both the local and the national levels) and the process of implementation at the case study sites. The degree was introduced at a time in which policy about the role and purpose of social work was being reviewed through *Options for Excellence* (Department of Health/Department for Education and Skills, 2006) and in the context of a higher education sector which was in a state of flux. Additionally, the evaluation took place at the outset of the new degree. Most programmes at the case study sites were offering a degree qualification for the first time. The case study method provided rich data from stakeholders on the effectiveness of the degree and has the potential to be able to monitor how individual programmes developed in response to emerging issues.

Readiness to practise

The evaluation of whether a degree-level qualification would lead to improvements in practice was obviously a key question for the Department of Health. The degree had been introduced as part of a modernizing agenda for social work which followed events such as the Victoria Climbié inquiry (Lord Laming, 2003). There was also some evidence that employers were becoming dissatisfied with some aspects of students completing training (Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; Pithouse and Scourfield, 2002). Academics had campaigned for some time for a degree-level qualification as a way of ensuring that the workforce had the necessary knowledge, as well as skills, to undertake complex social work tasks (Orme, 2001). As mentioned earlier, there had been concerns about the mechanistic, competence-based approach to learning (see Ford and Hayes, 1996). Finally, students and practitioners felt that their capacity to act effectively on behalf of service users and carers was often compromised because of the low status in which they were held and attributed this to the level of their qualification.

Evaluating practice

The challenges to evaluating practice are methodological and practical. An overview of the literature on evaluating readiness to practise in social work is limited for the purposes of this evaluation. We have identified studies that are retrospective-asking people to reflect on their, or others', preparedness to practise (Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; Watt, 1998; Lyons, 1999). Other studies focusing on evaluations of practitioners concentrate on the knowledge that they use in practice, rather than an outcome evaluation of changes over time. These tend to depend on evaluation at a single point and draw on relatively small populations. Literature in other domains such as nursing and education gives some background (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2005) but opportunities to evaluate actual practice in those professions are aided by the public nature of the professional activity, the classroom or the ward. In social work, the evaluation of actual practice invariably involves intervening in, and therefore influencing, the somewhat private and delicately balanced relationship between worker and service user.

It is perhaps for this reason that previous studies have distinguished between practitioners' knowledge and practice and have studied the relationship between the two: 'Practitioners use theory to generalize about a problem and practice is what they specifically do about it' (Floersch, 2004, p. 162). Floersch argues that only a mixed method approach involving ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, provides the necessary breadth of information to compare the two but he was investigating the difference between what he calls Knowledge Transfer and Knowledge in Action. While this can, of course, give information about actual practice and how this is informed by learning, he was not constrained by the requirements to undertake a large-scale study or by the need to replicate his study over time.

In the UK, Sheppard and colleagues (2001) focused on outcomes of learning. They employed a 'triangulation' with 'cognitive process interviews' that involved social workers 'thinking aloud' in response to vignettes (see later section) with which they were presented (Sheppard *et al.*, 2001, p. 865). An identified limitation of the study was that practitioners were usually talking about their work and there was no way of checking what they actually did in practice. Ford and colleagues (2004) drew on concepts of criticality developed in the philosophy of education which are pertinent to social work to explore complex and critical practices that incorporate values that should permeate judgement and action (Ford *et al.*, 2004, p. 191). In researching the development of criticality, their focus was on individual students as case studies. The researchers made observations in the classroom, seminars and tutorials, and on placement supervision sessions, analysed students' written work and undertook interviews with students to reflect on how they had developed their use of knowledge and theory in their practice. However, the number of students involved in this study was small.

These studies gave useful overviews of methodological choices but, as in most research, the availability of resources, especially time, was crucial. Other practical considerations involved the students themselves. Students on the new social work degree were undergoing an intensive educational experience which involved supervised practice. We were conscious that many students in the first cohort considered themselves to be 'guinea pigs' (Day, 2004). A rigorous method that was not too intrusive was essential.

Understanding professional practice

The discussion of what constitutes professional practice is key to informing an evaluation of 'readiness to practise'. To identify what difference a degree-level qualification makes does not merely require observations of whether students can perform particular tasks, but requires a method of ascertaining whether students are drawing on the learning undertaken in the HEI and in practice, the research base, their own life experiences, and the information and understanding that they acquire from each intervention in which they participate.

The stated aim of the new social work degree was to improve practice. However, it is difficult to establish what practice at 'degree level' might look like. The major changes to practice introduced by the new degree (as compared with the DipSW) described above clearly set the focus on developing a practical degree qualification. The standards for all Honours degrees as set out for the Quality Assurance Agency focus on the need for students to be able to understand and analyse a complex body of knowledge and develop good communication skills. Consequently, the crucial factor about degree-level study is to be able to apply complex bodies of knowledge in ways that are appropriate in social work practice.

However, the National Occupational Standards for Social Work (NOS) (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2002) standards were to 'form the basis of the assessment of competence in practice' (Department of Health, 2002a, p. 1), which suggests that a mechanistic consideration of skills may continue to underpin the assessment of social work students. Furthermore, it implies that there has not been a very extensive move away from a competence model of education in social work. While it was important for the project to note that, it was also necessary to ensure that appropriate methods for the evaluation of degree-level, professional practice were developed.

Barnett (1994) suggested that the dependence upon competences in professional education represented a narrowing to sets of practical skills: '... skills are competences which are applied to situations' (p. 810). He deemed this inappropriate, not least because it denies the agency of those who are 'objects' of the competences, in the case of social work service users and carers. Just as importantly in terms of 'outcomes' of social work education, he suggested that the idea that reliance on competence allows for predictability is incoherent. Professional activity, he argued, requires reason, interaction and responsiveness, not just the rote performance of skills and tasks. This approach was reflected in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) subject Benchmark for Social Work Degrees (2000), which emphasized core applied knowledge, as well as skills which have to be demonstrated through teaching learning and assessment.

Taylor and White (2006) pointed out that professional social workers have to be able to function in conditions of uncertainty. But they observed that social workers often rush to a hypothesis and tend to seek out evidence to confirm this, rather than searching for what they call 'disconfirming' evidence (p. 939): social workers strive for certainty but 'certain' things are not necessarily 'the right thing', which, for example, leads social workers to look for aspects of situations that confirm initial assessments, rather than be open to reconsidering their initial findings (p. 944). They therefore suggested that the new degree programmes

would need to make students cognisant of knowledge and research, arguing, like Barnett, that a linear or technical/rational approach to knowledge is limited: 'Without insight, interpretation and understanding information is blind (*sic*)' (Barnett, 1994, p. 42).

Such critiques of educational approaches for the professions are supported by work in other fields on the development of 'professionalism' or expertise (Benner, 1984; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Eraut, 1994). An evaluation of degree-level study might assume that students would demonstrate changes over time in the way that they undertook practice, but also in the way that they conceptualized practice. Acting in a mechanistic, rule-bound way is the mark of a 'novice' (Benner, 1984; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). The mark of a 'competent' practitioner, according to Dreyfus and Dreyfus, is to see a situation as a set of facts: 'He (*sic*) has learned that when a situation has a particular constellation of those elements a certain conclusion should be drawn, decision made or expectation investigated' (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986, p. 24). While this may be an effective way of performing, it does risk what Taylor and White (2006) call the 'confirmation bias' referred to earlier. In contrast, an 'expert' knowing what to do is based on mature and practised understanding. Experts deliberate before acting, not in a calculative, problem-solving way, but by reflecting on their own intuition (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). With mastery comes transformation of the skill, which does not depend on amounts of experience and previous knowledge, but provides an analytical ability, even where there has been no previous experience. This involves moving from 'formalism', or mechanistic responses, to using interpretative evaluation strategies (Benner, 1984).

In the introduction to this paper, we identified Fook and colleagues' (2000) research as one of the few studies of changes in students' 'professionalism' over time. A key strength of their study was that it was longitudinal over five years and commenced with a group of students starting their social work training. Drawing on work on professional development (Benner, 1984; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986) and in an attempt to replicate Benner's (1984) study of nurses, they plotted social work students' approaches to practice, seeking to build up a picture of expertise and how that expertise is learned and developed over time.

In terms of the practicalities of their methodology, Fook and her colleagues interviewed students using vignettes to enable students to talk about their practice (a discussion of vignettes is provided in the next section). They also undertook critical incident analysis to establish what the students identified as informing their approaches to practice. While it might have been valuable to observe students on placement, as Benner (1984) had with nurses, this was felt to be impractical and potentially intrusive on the delicate relationships involved between social worker and service user. Also, Barnett (1994) argued that to base evaluations using observation as 'evidence' reduces understanding to observable performance which does not always give information about the interaction of knowledge and skill:

We cannot know what individuals as social actors are up to by observing them. We can only fully understand their actions by taking into account their definitions of their situations, their intentions and their conceptual framework (Barnett, 1994, p. 75).

Such an approach resonated with the evaluation of the social work degree in England. First, it gave a point of comparison where no baseline data existed and, second, its purpose was

complementary. The evaluation of the degree is not just about how or what knowledge is constructed. It is about how practice is performed using knowledge, and how the knowledge acquired during the process of undertaking a degree in social work is applied, how it informs the way practice is conceptualized.

In order, therefore, to try to establish what difference a degree made to social work students' readiness to practise, it was decided to administer vignettes to students at the case study sites. These would be administered at the commencement of the degree and would be re-administered, using the same vignettes, at the end of the degree. This would provide data on the way that students conceptualized practice and would also give indications of whether this changed over the period during which they were undertaking degree-level studies and supervised practice.

Vignettes

Vignettes have been used in social research for two decades (Finch, 1987; Barter and Renold, 1999). Vignettes are variously described as brief cases—simulations of real events depicting hypothetical situations (Wilks, 2004), often developed from an amalgam of case examples. Effective vignettes are those with which participants can identify; the scenarios are trustworthy and believable (Hughes and Huby, 2004; Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006). Vignettes are therefore not real cases but their use presents participants with real-life decision-making situations (Soydan and Stal, 1994; Taylor, 2006). In research, vignettes are employed as elicitation tools, focusing on responses to these hypothetical situations (Wilks, 2004). They facilitate study of sensitive areas of enquiry (Barter and Renold, 1999) and can be administered in a variety of ways, presenting the material in written form or using videos (Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006) to present scenarios. Elicitation of responses is usually undertaken in interviews or focus groups, which means that the number of participants is small, but the resulting information can provide rich data.

In this study, the aim was to develop a methodology that would discern the level of analysis and application of knowledge when considering practice at the outset of the degree and on completion of the degree. It needed to be replicated in six case study sites and over time. Because of the potentially large numbers of students at the case study sites, a decision was made to administer the vignettes as a paper-based exercise. Two vignettes (a children and families case, and an adult social care case) were developed by the researchers and discussed with the study's Service User and Carer Advisory Group, after which amendments were made. Students at each case study site were invited to attend for a session, at the very beginning of their programme of study, at which they provided written responses to the vignettes. The same cohort has been asked to respond to the same vignettes by the end of their programmes after completing all their practice placements. To aid analysis of the written responses, students were asked to respond to themes identified in the literature on professional development (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Fook *et al.*, 2000):

- significant factors in the situation;
- what is going on in the situation;
- what should happen next in the situation;

- what the social worker should do in the situation; and
- the reasons for the social worker's actions.

Each of these areas was designed to test different aspects of students' ability: the knowledge they brought to the analysis; the application of that knowledge to the case scenario; assessment and analysis of the situation; and the action skills that they considered to be of use in the situation.

While written responses might not yield such rich qualitative data as those obtained through interviews, it allowed for more students to participate and provided an opportunity for quantitative analyses of vignette data—a hitherto unexplored process. Preparatory work for the analysis involved developing a pro forma which enabled comparisons between the ways in which different researchers rated the student responses.

A major debate in the literature relates to the relationship between responses to vignettes and the actual practice of those who participate. While there are many advantages in using vignettes to research topics that might not necessarily be accessible to the researcher, the most frequently identified limitation surrounds the distance between responses to vignettes and social reality (Eskelinen and Caswell, 2006). There is no guarantee that the responses given will mirror behaviour of respondents in their professional practice (Wilks, 2004, p. 82). However, as has been said, the evaluation of the degree is not just about action and skills. It is about the impact that studying at degree level has on professional practice. The benefits of the use of vignettes in this study are that they are administered across a wide range of settings; will elicit responses at time one and time two (beginning and end of degree-level study); and results will be available for comparison with other studies (Benner, 1984; Fook *et al.*, 2000). Eskelinen and Caswell (2006) found that vignettes created a shared point of departure and, by following up observations and discussions, they could discern differences in approach that could be attributed to institutional and social contexts. By focusing on responses that will reflect developments in professional approaches, it is anticipated that the analysis of the vignettes will produce rich data on differences that emerge as a result of degree-level study which will also be considered in the light of data from questionnaires to practice teachers/assessors, interviews with key informants such as employers and self-reports from students in focus groups at the case study sites and in the online survey.

Conclusion

The introduction of a degree-level qualification in social work marks a crucial development in social work education and will have long-reaching impact on the social work workforce in England. This has been recognized by the investment made both in resourcing the degree and in funding an evaluation. The scale of the evaluation is unprecedented in the history of UK social work and the methodological decisions involved in setting it up, which have been described in this article, have implications not only for the outcomes of this evaluation, but also for future studies in a variety of fields.

There are many lessons to be learnt and the discussion of the effectiveness of different methodological approaches will contribute to the growing social work research literature. We

have acknowledged the problems associated with the lack of baseline data when evaluating change and are confident that the data generated by this study will provide a baseline for future studies. The methodological tensions around readiness to practise will no doubt stimulate further debates about evaluating practice, not only in social work research. The multi-method approach has benefited from the different perspectives of the research team, but has been demanding of researcher resources and the social work academic community, academics, students, practitioners and service users and carers.

One consequence of such an approach is the amount of data generated. It will provide a rich source for further analysis and description of this crucial stage of change in social work education. Having said that, we accept that all methods are a matter of compromise and that the evaluation of the new social work degree takes place at a time of change in social work practice, the employment context and higher education. It will therefore be difficult to attribute all change to the introduction of the degree. However, it is anticipated that the combination of methods will enable us to make some crucial observations about the process and outcomes of increasing the qualifying level for social workers and these will be supported by evidence from a number of key stakeholders in the process.

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