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Selecting Social Work Students: Lessons from Research

Vivienne Cree, Gary Clapton and Fiona Morrison (The University of Edinburgh) and Susan Levy and Richard Ingram (The University of Dundee)

Introduction

It is self-evident that it is necessary to recruit successful students who will go on to become confident, capable, robust practitioners; social workers who have a strong value-base, a well-developed set of skills, and an ability to think critically and be good advocates of the social work profession. But can we be certain that the selection methods we employ at the beginning stage of a social work student’s journey allow us to achieve this? This article reports on a recent study of selection to social work programmes in Scotland, carried out by a joint team from two Scottish universities, as part of the Scottish Government’s Review of Social Work Education in 2016. We will look first at the international evidence from research to date, before going on to outline the methods used in our own research study. We will then present an overview of our findings and offer some initial observations and conclusions going forward; more detailed analysis of different aspects of the research is planned in the future. Firstly, however, we offer a brief description of the context in which this research was taking place.

Social Work Education in Scotland

Social work education in Scotland is located across eight universities (including the UK-based Open University), and is regulated by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Social work students may undertake an undergraduate Honours degree (usually four years) or a postgraduate Master of Social Work degree (usually two years). The *Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (2003) sets down the Standards in Social Work Education (SISWE), which were introduced with the advent of the new degree in Scotland in 2004, and include the necessary considerations that universities offering social work programmes must meet. Notably, while Scotland shares with the rest of the UK a mandatory expectation that service users and carers will be involved in selection, there is no ruling that interviews must be conducted (unlike in the rest of the UK). Programmes are managed by universities but reviewed by university systems and by the SSSC, to which programmes must submit annual monitoring returns (AMRs) that give detailed statistics on applications, on-course students, withdrawals and failures, amongst other more qualitative feedback about how programmes are running.

As already stated, this research was located within a review of social work education initiated by Scottish Government through the SSSC. This was not, therefore, a purely academic exercise. The review took place at a time when Scottish social work education was being questioned by government, and although the climate in Scotland seemed less overtly hostile than that affecting the earlier reviews in England (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; HCPC, 2014; Narey, 2014), the outcome of the review was uncertain, and remains so at the time of writing this article. Of course, government interest in social work education in the UK is not a recent phenomenon. Holmström and Taylor (2008a) point out that interest in selection to social work training is almost always political. The introduction of the DipSW in 1990 (with

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revisions in 1995) demonstrated widespread concern for the need for greater rigour in selection processes, and the introduction of the new Honours degree as a basic qualification in 2003 in England and 2004 in the rest of the UK also brought ‘a further iteration of such anxiety’ (p520). Holmström and Taylor locate some of the pressures on social work programmes in wider changes at higher education level, including competing demands for widening participation and, at the same time, a huge increase in student numbers across the board. The UK reviews of social work education initiated in 2014 and 2016 are therefore symptomatic of a wider set of challenges facing universities.

Predicting success in social work education: reviewing the field

Before embarking on our own research, we examined what had been written about social work selection. An initial search was undertaken using an online database search tool, with the search terms “social work programmes”, “social work education”, “selection” and “selection process”. The search elicited a considerable number of results, which were then followed up in order to explore further literature. A similar approach was taken to identify relevant studies from nursing, teaching and medicine training. While we began with more recent studies (publications in the last 10 years), this was then extended back, as it became apparent that the selection of social work students has been a matter of ongoing (but intermittent) concern since, at least, the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Towle, 1954; Olander, 1964). While there is not space to do justice to the full body of literature, we will, however, draw attention to some key findings.

Significantly, the research that has been conducted on social work selection is, for the most part, small-scale, often based on reporting one university’s experience of recruitment and

admissions or focused on one issue in selection, such as equality and inclusion (Beaumont and Cemlyn, 2005), user and carer involvement (Baldwin and Saad, 2006; Matka *et al.*, 2010), mental health needs of students (Collins, 2006), personal statements (Ferguson *et al.*, 2000), fees and bursaries (Hatt, 2006), widening participation (Jones, 2006; Dillon, 2007), moral character (Holmström, 2014), personality testing (Manktelow and Lewis, 2005) and interviews (Bridges, 1996; Watson, 2002, Campbell *et al.*, 2013). Manthorpe *et al.* (2010), in contrast, attempts to review six programmes in the UK. A smaller number of papers attempt to review the field as a whole and draw conclusions from wider evidence (e.g. Taylor and Balen, 1995; Pelech *et al.* 1999; Holmström and Taylor, 2008a and b; Moriarty and Murray 2007). A recent addition is the literature review written by Aotearoa/New Zealand scholars, Hughes *et al.* (2016).

Across the piece, our strongest finding is that there is little agreement as to what background factors are most important in student selection (for example, previous academic study or previous relevant experience?) (see Holmström and Taylor 2008a, Munro, 1995; Pelech *et al.*, 1999), or what selection methods are most reliable (written essays, personality tests, individual and/or group interviews, or a mix of some or all of the above?) (see Lafrance *et al.* 2004; Miller and Koerin, 1998; Taylor and Balen, 1995. A persistent theme was the question of bias and discrimination. How do we ensure, whatever systems we choose to adopt, that bias and discrimination are minimised? Bridges (1986) and Watson (2002) argue that interviews are inevitably subjective and discriminatory – we choose people like ourselves – and that the performance in interview may give little indication of what kind of a student social worker (and indeed social worker) a person will be. Taylor and Small (2002) identify that structured interviews that focused around ‘what if’

questions are more valid than unstructured ones. Interestingly, Campbell *et al.* (2013) highlight the potential for bias in both written statements and interviews, pointing out the ways in which gender, ethnicity and religion may impact on selection decisions in Northern Ireland. Manthorpe *et al.*'s (2010) study of six UK programmes found that the variability and lack of consistency in selection processes made it difficult to compare approaches and so to draw any firm conclusions. For their part, Holmström and Taylor (2008b) conclude that 'the lack of ability to predict, with any certainty, the likelihood of future success or struggle [...] leads us to argue for a new focus' (p834). The focus, they argue, should be on how we best support students at different stages of the social work student 'life-cycle', including at times when decisions are made about fitness for practice and termination of training.

A brief review of literature from nursing, teaching and medicine training threw up similar challenges in relation to selection. Much of the literature (as already cited for social work), simply described what individual programmes and professions were doing, and within this, there was clearly a high level of difference in practice and a claim of insufficient rigour in selection, although broad agreement about principles (Iucu *et al.*, 2014). The literature also demonstrated the impact of external factors on admissions processes, for example, the pressures of high staff-turn-over, burn-out and the need for congruence between the pressures of the field, the content of training programmes and the importance of determining suitability of applicants to the profession. More specifically, Macduff *et al.* (2015) speak to a shift towards the development of tools that would support values-selection in nursing selection, that is, a strategy for recruitment of students based on assessment of how much their individual values and beliefs align with that of the (nursing) profession. But they note that 'universities should seek to better explain to students the

purposes and processes involved in these on-site selection events' (p.7). Donaldson *et al.* (2010) consider that age is the most important variable for success in nursing, with older students doing better on courses; in contrast, Baguley *et al.* (2012) found that there was no difference between school leavers and non-school leavers in terms of success on one nursing programme in Scotland. Donaldson *et al.* (2010) also suggest abolishing the one-to-one interview for nursing because of its unreliability and lack of predictive value. Bowles *et al.* (2014), in reviewing teacher training in Australia, advance a systematic framework for the application process, and note that personal or professional references have not been shown to be useful. White *et al.* (2012) demonstrate that applicants for medicine training 'second guess' what is wanted of them in written tests; they give the selectors what they think is 'the right answer'. They argue that there is a 'hidden curriculum in admissions' that has a strong influence on applicant response.

The research project

Our project set out to answer a question posed by the Scottish government in 2016: 'How can universities best select the right people for social work programmes?', This was further detailed in the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) tender as follows:

'We need to know more about the different ways in which universities in Scotland currently select students for entry to social work programmes. We also think that it's important that we learn from best practice used in selection in other countries and other professions. We would like to explore the potential to introduce a national approach to selection. We also need to ensure that we maximise the 'widening access' agenda while ensuring that students have the appropriate values and the capacity to

develop the skills, knowledge and understanding to be effective social workers. Having this information will help us make recommendations about selection.'

Leading on from this, we identified four initial research questions. These were as follows:

1. How do universities in Scotland currently select UG and PG students? Why? For how long? Have there been any significant changes in recent years and why?
2. What evidence is there about the outcomes of our selection procedures in Scotland? Is selection to UG and PG social work programmes working?
3. What is the broader research evidence about selection methods, in social work, nursing and medical education?
4. What does this suggest about how we should proceed in selection?

A further six questions emerged during the course of the research: what are we looking for in the selection process - academic, values, experience?; how do we address widening access?; what about international recruitment and processes?; how do programmes deal with criminal convictions?; what about the Maths and English requirements?; and is a national approach to selecting social work students necessary or desirable?

Methods, ethics and methodology

A mixed method approach to data collection was used in order to answer our research questions, Firstly, we undertook a targeted review of relevant literature, as already presented. Secondly, we carried out qualitative telephone interviews with a representatives from all eight universities in Scotland offering social work programmes to establish each

institution's approach to selection. Thirdly, using a purposive approach to sampling, we interviewed three long-standing practice teachers and three local authority social work managers to find out their perceptions of current selection methods and how far they felt they were fit for purpose. Fourthly, we sought feedback from service users and carers (key questions were put to each university to discuss within their user and carer groupings and networks) about their views and experience of selection; input was received from three groupings. Fifthly, we invited students currently enrolled in social work programmes across Scotland to complete an online survey to tell us what they felt about their experiences of being selected from social work training. Finally, we conducted analysis of statistical evidence of SSSC's Annual Monitoring Returns (AMRs) from 2008 to 2015, as a way of checking out what (if any) were the outcomes of the different selection methods used by universities over time. Ethical permission for all aspects of the research was sought and gained through the Principal Investigator's university.

It is important to take a step back to consider our chosen methodology. The study was limited by a number of factors: time constraints, a small research budget and the context within which the study was conducted. All these factors impacted on what we did and how we did it. That said, our primary objective was to explore social work student selection from different perspectives; to reflect both different types of evidence and different stakeholders in the process, because as has already been identified, so much of what we currently know about student selection is partial and localised in scale. Our study was unusual (relative to other studies of student selection) in that our sample included universities from across Scotland; it was also special in its use of both qualitative and quantitative kinds of evidence, which were then fed back to our funder on completion as part of a wider dissemination

exercise. This was not, however, and did not claim to be, a representative study (Gilbert, 1993). Our interview informants were chosen by us because of their expert knowledge, as education providers, practice teachers and managers, and as those who were part of our service user and carer groups at universities. Although they were not unconnected with us, as might be expected in conventional qualitative research, we sought to minimise the impact of our pre-existing relationships by employing a non-social work researcher to conduct the interviews (van Heugten, 2005). Similarly, the 278 students who completed the online survey could not be said to be a randomised sample; instead they were self-selecting. However, they were also anonymous; identifying details were confined to enrolment in particular universities, whether students were undertaking post or undergraduate study, age, gender, ethnicity and disability. The best way to describe our study, in conclusion, is in terms of what Lincoln and Guba (1985) have identified as trustworthy research, demonstrated in the care that was taken in the study's execution, the triangulation of data across different sources, and our longstanding engagement in, and knowledge of, the field of social work education. Further research could now explore how generalisable our findings are in different contexts and with different research methods.

Research findings

We now provide an overview of the main findings from our research. Further and more detailed analysis from different aspects of the research is planned for a later date.

a) Qualitative evidence: stakeholder views

Views of social work education providers

Three general points emerged from the interviews with social work education providers at the higher education institutions (HEIs). Firstly, across the board, providers that they attracted many more applicants than they have places; the situation in 2016 was one of largely selection, not recruitment. Secondly, processes for recruitment and selection of social work students had evolved differently across the Scottish HEIs, although the broad parameters remain the same: that is, the Scottish Government's *Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (2003); the *Framework for Higher Education in Scotland* (revised 2003); the QAA's *Benchmark Statements for Social Work* (revised 2008); the QAA's *Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (2014); and the Equality Act (2010). Thirdly, variation across HEIs had enabled recruitment and selection procedures to meet the needs of individual institutions, take account of local contexts and accommodate the large numbers of individuals who apply to social work education programmes. In a few institutions, selection systems were different for undergraduate and postgraduate applicants. For instance, one HEI uses one-to-one interviews as part of its assessment for the undergraduate programme and group interviews for its postgraduate programme.

More specifically, it emerged that all HEIs used processes designed to assess applicants' capacity across three broad domains: academic ability, relevant work or personal experience and understanding of, and commitment to, social work values. Firstly, applicants' qualifications and personal statements were used to assess academic ability; most HEIs insisted on an academic reference. Some institutions also required applicants to

provide written responses to a series of set questions about social work. These responses were used, in part, to assess applicants' written skills. Secondly, work or personal experience connected to the social work role was a requirement of all HEIs. Social work education providers placed greater value on what applicants demonstrate they have *learned* from their experience rather than the length or amount of experience that applicants have. Experience was assessed by reviewing applicants' personal statements and references. Some institutions also explored applicants' work and experience during interview. Thirdly, personal statements were used to assess applicants' understanding of, and commitment to, social work values. Some institutions also required applicants to provide written answers to set questions about social work. These responses were used to assess applicants' understanding of the social work role and of social work values, and were also explored during selection interviews where these were organised.

Three additional issues were explored with HEIs: stakeholder involvement; use of interviews; and other criteria used in selection. It was clear that HEIs involved a range of stakeholders (managers, practitioners, service users and carers) in their recruitment and selection processes, and that these arrangements have changed over time. For example, when all HEIs in Scotland held interviews, it was common practice for practitioners and managers to give time to selection days. While all HEIs seek to involve service users and carers, this involvement varied across HEIs, from contributing to the design and development of processes (setting the questions for written exercises and in some cases scoring applicants' responses), to participation in interviews of candidates. Likewise, some institutions involved employers and practice teachers in the scoring of applications.

The question of selection interviews was the issue over which there was least consensus across the board. At the time of the study, four of the eight institutions used interviews (either group or one-to-one) as part of their recruitment and selection process; some had gone back to interviewing after a number of years of not conducting interviews. Viewpoints on this were highly polarised. Some people argued that it is “only common-sense to interview candidates for a ‘people profession’ like Social Work”; that “emotional maturity can only be assessed at interview”; that it is “important to ‘model’ the close relationship between staff and students” through interviewing applicants at the outset of programmes. In complete contrast, other social work education leaders asserted that “interviews are time-consuming and inevitably biased”; that “performance at interview does not equate in any way with success on a social work programme, or indeed success in practice”.

However, the selection interviewing was not the only area where there was varied practice between HEIs. It transpired that universities adopted different approaches to SSSC’s demand that additional criteria such as competences in English, Maths and Computing were demonstrated. There was even difference within HEIs, with one HEI insisting on qualifications in Maths and English for its undergraduate applicants, but not for its postgraduate students.

Views of practice teachers

Interviews were conducted with three practitioners from different parts of Scotland who have responsibility for practice teaching. Two of the practitioners were currently involved in HEIs recruitment and selection processes; the third used to be until the arrangements changed a number of years ago. All three practitioners were directly or indirectly supervising social work students while on practice placements.

When asked to reflect on the students they worked with, all practitioners commented on the variability in the quality of students, but noted that this had always been the case. All participants considered there to be a greater number of younger social work students than had been in the past. This was interpreted both positively and negatively. For instance, one participant said that younger students were often more “open to learn” having been closer to full-time education (i.e. school). He described younger students as being “in the learning mind set” and, as a result, were more likely to question practice. However, the same participant also felt that that younger students tended to have less social work experience, which was an important gap. Another participant commented that from a student’s perspective, “the more experience of practice they can get the better”.

Participants were asked how ready students from SWE programmes were for practice placements. One participant commented that “students’ readiness for placement is an area that has improved in recent years”. He described how HEIs had actively developed strategies for addressing readiness for placement. This was achieved by one HEI by building in observational placements and another introducing two weeks of intensive preparation

before practice placements began. All three participants commented that readiness for placement varied amongst students. One participant commented that while some students coped well with the academic demands of SWE programmes, they might struggle with the emotional demands that come with practice placements. Another participant commented that while a lack of social work experience might make placements more difficult for some students, students can be “fast learners and make up for their lack of experience quickly.”

We asked participants for their views on the shift in many HEIs away from interviewing as part of recruitment and selection processes. All expressed a preference for interviewing applicants. One participant felt that interviews allowed selectors to probe particular issues that it was not possible to do with a paper-based application process. Another commented that while he appreciated that interviews were time and resource intensive, he regretted that interviews were not used by all HEIs. This was “because so much of social work is about relationship-building and communication”. The final participant believed that interviews “enabled an assessment of interpersonal skills, values and to ‘tease out’ what applicants had learned from their experience”. Despite a preference for interviews, none of the three participants said that they had noticed a change in the quality of the students when HEIs stopped interviewing applicants. They further remarked that HEIs would be in a better place to make a judgement about whether the absence of interviews had affected the quality of students undertaking SWE programmes.

Participants had mixed views about how well HEIs were doing at recruiting a diverse student body. Two felt that there had been an increase in BME students, while a third said that recruiting BME students was still an area that HEIs needed to do better. One participant said

that there had been an increase in students coming from working-class backgrounds, but the other two said that this was still an area that was problematic. These views suggest that further empirical work is necessary to fully understand the profile of the student body for SWE programmes in Scotland. In terms of stakeholder involvement, all participants were eager and expressed a commitment to strengthen the connections between practice and academia.

Views of managers

Interviews were conducted with three social work managers from different parts of Scotland, only one of whom still had some connection with social work selection and practice teaching. The interviews were not intended to be representative of managers' views, but rather were a high level scoping exercise, designed to give us some insight into the process of selection for social work education from the perspective of those who were in different management positions.

It was evident from our discussions that the managers we spoke to remained highly committed to working with universities. The importance of "partnership", "knowledge exchange" and "strengthening relationships" were expressed by each of the informants. The managers were also acutely aware that the landscape of practice had changed, putting pressure on the social work role and identity. They felt that universities needed to do more to reflect this change, but agreed that is not necessarily an issue for the selection of students. On the contrary, the managers all said that it was more important to get 'the right people' into social work, that is, people with passion, enthusiasm, the right value-base,

conceptual ability, compassion and resilience. They also acknowledged that in coming off courses, they did “not expect graduates to be the finished article”, as one manager said. What was important was that they were keen to apply their learning; knowledge and skill development could then happen in practice. One manager said that students do “hit the ground running reasonably well and so they then learn rapidly on the job”.

Interestingly, one senior manager reflected that her managers often said that they wanted graduates who were better prepared for practice, and she understood why this was so, given the volume of legislation and policy and change in recent years. But she felt that what was more important is who people *are*, not what they *know*. Another manager said something similar: “what you want to recruit is the competent and confident workforce of the future, so there needs to be a judgement made about somebody’s capacity to reflect and grow and develop, both during the training programme and on the job”.

The managers expressed different opinions about how we might best select students who will become the competent and confident workforce of the future. Two expressed a preference for interviews, although one said she knew the research evidence on interviews was not promising. This manager recommended the use of Organisational Development (OD) diagnostic tools in interviews, to help people think about *who* they are bringing to social work training. Another manager said: “I think that every contact counts re social work learning and it is a really helpful way of establishing how the person engages with other people”. The manager who said that interviews were not essential reached this view on pragmatic grounds; he asked if we are getting a good enough cohort without interviews, then why have them?

Managers were also asked about their priorities in selection. All agreed that being fair and inclusive is vitally important; 'equity and access is important, but so too is quality'. One manager said she felt that sometimes someone with a lot of experience of social work (e.g. as a former service user) was not necessarily the best person to train in social work; prior experience may be less important than *how* someone makes sense of that experience. She argued that "we need a much more diverse workforce"; she felt that too many students today are white, young women. One manager talked about the pressure his agency was under; he thought "it was unlikely that social workers would have time to be involved in student selection, even if they wanted to". His view was that, if relationships with the university are good enough, "the university just has to decide, are we talking to somebody who has the capacity to learn, grow, develop, reflect, and have the right values? and I'm satisfied with that judgement". Another manager had a different view of this. She said she thought that social workers "would *want* to make time for this, because selection offers an opportunity for universities and agencies to work together and so build those all-important relationships".

Views of service users and carers

The views of service users and carers were gathered from three HEI service user and carer groupings on their experience of being involved in the selection process and whether they thought they should be involved in the selection process. Significantly, responses ranged from those who said that service users and carers *should* be actively involved, to a smaller

number who felt that service users and carers should *not* be involved in the selection process, because this required specialist knowledge of psychology and personality testing.

Teasing out this a bit further, it was evident that 'involvement' meant different things in different places. Firstly, involvement might mean participation in the decision-making around the process of selection. Examples included the production of scenarios and questions for use at stage two of the selection process. As one service user said: "We do feel that our views are taken on board by the staff team implementing the procedures and we are happy with the arrangements in place for admissions and with our involvement in the process."

Secondly, some service users and carers were much more directly involved in selection, working in collaboration with practitioners and academics to assess and provide feedback on applicants' responses to a written task and/or scenario. This gave them a very strong feeling of being valued as demonstrated in their responses. As one person said: "We are the ones who have the experience of dealing with social workers, so we feel we know what qualities people need and what knowledge people need to be able to be a competent and effective social worker"; and another said: "Including service users and carers in the admission process allows for important person centered skills identified as important or essential by carers and service users which may be overlooked by academic staff. These can be little things which may appear irrelevant to someone who has never been in a position to require assistance but can be a great comfort or provide reassurance to a carer or service user."

Views of students

An online survey was circulated to all students (undergraduate - including distance learning students - and postgraduate) on qualifying social work programmes at the eight HEIs across Scotland. There was a 14% response rate to the survey with 278 students completing the online survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were generated by the survey, and here we focus on the findings in relation to selection criteria, the selection process and the factors that influenced students' choice of HEI.

Table 1 summarises the demographic data of the students who completed the survey: notably, 83% were female, 15% of students reported having a disability, 12% were BME and 47% were aged over 30 years.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Students were asked about relevant work/voluntary experience that they had prior to applying to study social work. Ninety-four per cent had previous experience, with 73% having more than a year (or full-time equivalent) of experience. When asked if they thought previous experience should be part of the entry requirements to social work, 78% agreed. Interestingly, when asked to rank the importance of previous relevant experience alongside other criteria in the selection process, 78% felt that personal qualities and values were the the most important criteria (see Figure 1). Only 6% of students thought that academic background should be the most important factor in the selection process, and 30% felt it was the least important factor.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Students' experiences of the selection process varied, with 41% having been interviewed (many of these were group interviews/exercises) and 88% having completed an additional written exercise. Group interviews are perceived as beneficial in enabling applicants to demonstrate their personal skills and values, and as an opportunity to meet other applicants and academic staff; they were felt to reduce some of the anxiety that can be associated with individual interviews. With regard to completing a written task, responses ranged from some students spending time researching topics and reflecting on why they were choosing social work, to others being quite daunted by the 'academic' nature of what they were being asked to do and/or felt they lacked sufficient experience and knowledge of the social work role to complete the task. There was a call for HEIs to reconsider the use of such written tasks, with a suggestion that if they were to continue, they should be standardised in order to reduce applicants' workload at a busy time of year. One student said: "I was in my final year of school and I received three different universities written exercises around the time of my school higher prelims. This put a large amount of pressure on me as I knew that I had to submit my best work to the university but if I did not get good enough grades on my prelims then I wouldn't have been able to sit my exams".

When asked why students chose their programme of study, 'location' emerged as the key factor (see Figure 2). This provides a useful insight into the selection process, suggesting that applicants are, to an extent, driving the selection process through frequently choosing their 'local' university. The comments of the students appeared to confirm this through a

narrative associating students' choice of university with a personal connection to the location of the university or the university itself, through family, study and/or employment. As two students said: "I have responsibilities here, a child, a flat etc. I couldn't uproot them"; and "I completed my undergraduate here."

b) Quantitative evidence: Annual Monitoring Returns and SSSC summary reports

AMRs and the SSSC summary reports in relation to all eight HEIs were interrogated to highlight the national picture over the period 2008-2014. This time-period was chosen because it saw HEIs adopt a range of approaches to the recruitment of social work students (including the re-introduction of interviews in some HEIs); we felt this might provide some broad indications about how these changes had impacted on student outcomes.

The statistical data led to many more questions than can be answered here, about the impact of fees and bursaries, about social work's wider profile in the media, about social work student progression relative to other degree programmes. These are all subjects that merit further investigation; our focus was simply to find out if variability in selection procedures had had any obvious impact. The answer to this question, as we will demonstrate, was to the contrary.

Applications and admissions

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the trends relating to application numbers and actual admissions to programmes, showing that applications, particularly at UG level, have remained fairly buoyant over time. UG admissions have also remained steady, after a decline in 2010/11. PG applications and admissions have declined since 2010/11, reflecting perhaps, the wider issue of fees and student debt.

INSERT FIGURES 3 & 4 HERE

Figures 5 and 6 highlight the national retention and progression data over the period and allow us to track the possible impact that changing recruitment approaches may have had on the performance of students over the course of their studies. The key message from the aggregated data is that there have not been substantial changes over time in terms of the level of student withdrawals and/or progression and completion. Further analysis may, of course, identify specific issues at individual programme and institutional level.

Discussion

The picture that emerges, across the board, from both the qualitative and quantitative evidence, suggests that *how* we go about selection may have less impact on the eventual student cohort than we might expect. Students select *us*, just as we select *them* and the student survey demonstrated that geographical and financial concerns loom large in applicants' minds. Undoubtedly, other issues also influence students: future career

prospects, attitudes towards the profession and, of course, a range of factors that may fuel an individual's desire to become a social worker such as a profound personal experience, a commitment to social justice and social work values, a desire to work with people or perhaps something else entirely.

However, it is an unavoidable truth that students are only *able* to select us, if we first select them, underlining that our selection processes do indeed matter. In our study, interviews as part of selection processes proved to be the most contentious issue amongst all participants. Interviews were constructed as having several functions. They were seen to be a means to assess and ensure that individuals were 'right' for social work. As social work educators, we play an important 'gatekeeping role' to practice and ultimately to vulnerable individuals and families, interviews were seen as a way to manage uncertainty and mitigate risks posed by the 'wrong' individuals entering this world. Interviews were also seen to be part of induction and students' socialisation into social work programmes. Linked to this, was the notion that 'the interview' is so crucial in practice; that interviews held some sort of symbolic function, beginning the process of modelling of what will become the cornerstone of students' professional practice. While these may be laudable aims, findings from our study suggest that interviews do not necessarily deliver these; they are not a 'fail-safe' way to identify candidates who may not be suited to social work. As discussed earlier, some individuals and groups perform better at interview than others and there is the potential for unconscious bias and discrimination during interviews. Furthermore, in terms of socialisation or relationship-building, there may be other ways in which this can be achieved, through open days or through tutor-student relationships when students commence their courses.

Conclusion

It is evident that *whatever* the local practice is in selection, identifying at selection the students who will ultimately succeed on our programmes is far from straightforward. Failure-rates across Scotland are consistently low over time, and there is no evidence that a shift away from interviewing, for example, has had a negative impact on student retention, just as the re-introduction of interviewing at some HEIs seems to have had no obvious effect on student outcomes. What our study has demonstrated is that there are no 'quick fixes' and no obvious right answers in selection. Social work remains a broad church; there are as many ways of 'doing social work' as there are kinds of social work students. Whatever systems we use, our decision-making must be both fair and transparent. Currently, few universities provide public information about the basis of their decision-making. Once admitted, students need support throughout their learning journeys, and it is here that 'selection' decisions need to continue to be made, by teaching staff, by practice teachers and by students themselves about whether social work is the 'right fit' for them. Selection is not a one-off event that happens prior to admission to a university, and applicants cannot be 'ready for practice' at the beginning of training. Instead, becoming a social worker is a lifelong process (Author).

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[to be added later]

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