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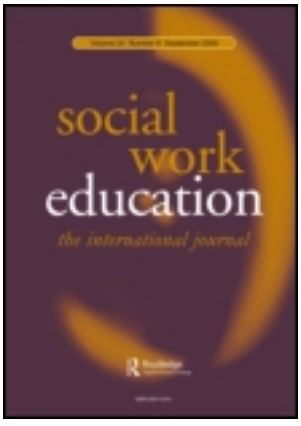

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The Conundrum of Balancing Widening Participation with the Selection of Suitable Students for Social Work Education

Jean Dillon

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This paper examines how increased diversity through widening participation to higher education in England can be aligned to the selection of suitable students for social work education. It considers the implications of an educational policy directive to widen access and new professional entry requirements for social work training introduced in 2003. The assessment of students for social work is explored by drawing upon findings from a small scale survey of social work admissions tutors and examples of admissions practice. Written from the perspective of a social work admissions tutor at an outer London post-1992 university, the paper discusses the opportunities and challenges that social work programmes may face when endeavouring to balance widening participation with professional requirements for entry into social work training.

Keywords: Admissions; Diversity; Social Work Education; Student Selection; Suitability; Widening Participation

Introduction

Growing numbers of students from more diverse social backgrounds are now entering higher education in England. The increased diversity amongst the student population is largely the result of a government educational policy directive introduced in 1997 to widen participation for non-traditional students. Social work education in England has also gone through a state of transformation with the introduction of a new three year qualifying degree in social work in 2003 with new Department of Health (DH) professional entry requirements stipulating that all

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entrants have to prove suitability for social work training by demonstrating that they 'possess appropriate personal and intellectual qualities to be social workers' (DH, 2002, p. 2). These changes have the potential to radically change higher education per se, and social work education through greater diversification of the student population and through placing an increased onus on social work programmes to admit students with the potential to become competent, accountable social workers who will uphold professional standards. Whilst increased diversity has intrinsic benefits, it may also create challenges for social work programmes because of the added rigour of professional entry requirements and the need to consider how these can be applied within a widening participation approach (Cunningham, 2005).

Changes in Social Work Education

The General Social Care Council (GSCC), the English regulatory body for the social work profession and social work education, introduced a new three year qualifying degree in social work in 2003 with new Department of Health professional entry requirements (GSCC, 2002a; DH, 2002). The DH outlines four key requirements that entrants to social work education must meet: key skills in English and mathematics equivalent to GCSE grade C; the ability to communicate clearly and accurately in spoken and written English; a criminal records bureau check; and demonstration of 'appropriate personal and intellectual qualities to be social workers' (DH, 2002, p. 2). Although the DH provides some guidance on intellectual requirements, 'appropriate' personal qualities are not defined, apart from reference being made to entrants having the 'appropriate' verbal and non-verbal communication skills, and the need for students to declare any health related matters which may impinge on their ability to undertake and to complete social work training (DH, 2002, p. 2). Clearly defined operational selection criteria to assess 'suitability', or indeed, 'unsuitability' for social work education through appropriate personal qualities appears to be generally lacking amongst social work programmes in England and in other countries (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Lafrance *et al.*, 2004). This suggests that social work programmes may need to consider developing more clearly defined suitability/unsuitability criteria and to evaluate whether their existing selection methods are sufficiently robust to assess appropriate personal qualities for professional practice.

Widening Participation

Widening participation embraces groups who have not traditionally attended university and became a key priority for higher education institutions (HEIs) in England following the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, commonly referred to as the 'Dearing Report' (NCIHE, 1997; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). A key concern was the continual under-representation of non-traditional students in higher education, for example, women, people from minority ethnic backgrounds, students with disabilities and from particular social classes, i.e. with parents in non-professional or unskilled work (NCIHE, 1997). The Dearing

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Report recommended increased participation for non-traditional students, which was implemented through a government widening participation strategy and a specific target to increase the overall participation rate of people in higher education between the ages of 18 and 30 to 50% by 2010 (DfES, 2003a).

In considering the effectiveness of the strategy, participation rates are now at 43% with more people from minority ethnic backgrounds and more women now entering higher education (DfES, 2003b; MacLeod, 2005). Although participation rates from previously under-represented social classes have improved, these students continue to be clustered within post-1992 universities, with students from more privileged backgrounds still predominant among the old universities (Archer *et al.*, 2003). Research links this differentiation to a number of different factors relating to the social circumstances of prospective non-traditional students, including unequal life chances, limited aspirations, underachievement at school, and financial concerns about entering higher education (Joseph Rowntree Foundation & Glasgow University, 2002; Ferri *et al.*, 2003; Lall *et al.*, 2003). This disparity suggests that equality of access and of educational opportunities—key underlying premises of the widening participation policy strategy—have yet to be realised and may be limited in scope, and perhaps call for what Whitty (2002, p. 79) terms 'new modes of collectivism that pay attention to the legitimate aspirations of individuals from all social backgrounds'. The aspiration-raising activities of the Aimhigher project in England, which involves collaborative widening participation work with schools and colleges, provide one such illustration of collective action in this area.

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Diversity within Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

The concept of diversity is both multi-faceted and complex. At its most basic level Frame & O'Connor (2002) equate human diversity with differences relating to distinguishing characteristics such as ethnicity, colour and gender. Comerford (2005) expounds on the idea of diversity being associated with difference by arguing that it is essentially a multi-faceted social construction that reflects commonly held notions about individual and group identities and their inter-relationship within a particular sociohistorical context. Thus, social responses to human diversity are influenced by how 'differences' are perceived within a given context and time, i.e. they can either be viewed as positive assets which strengthen communities and societies, or they can be seen more negatively and associated with social processes which may produce the 'othering' of people perceived as different or problematic. Fernando (2003) argues that socially constructed notions of difference may also become more entrenched over time, culminating in labelling, discrimination and social exclusion. Recent negative media reactions and governmental responses to refugees and asylum seekers in England provide an example of the latter processes.

Universities are currently endeavouring to respond to the different needs of students associated with increased social, skills and cultural diversity. Social diversity relates to key factors that may influence students' higher education experience and attainment, for example, social background and circumstances, and life experiences

and expectations (Bibbings, 2004: http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/Resources/link10/link10_3.html). Skills diversity embraces different levels of skill, ability and disability, language and learning styles and past learning experiences (Bibbings, 2004). Taken together, increased social and skills diversity may mean that the transition to higher education requires significant adjustment for students from non-traditional backgrounds, especially if they are the first in their families to enter higher education. Read *et al.* (2003) illustrates how such students may have to confront and negotiate the largely unwritten 'rules of the game' of university life and navigate their way through the unfamiliar dominant discourses of knowledge, communication (both written and spoken) and the prevailing practices of different HEIs. A growing body of research suggests that the 'alien' culture of HEIs can lead to non-traditional students feeling isolated, with a sense of not 'belonging' and concerns about their academic capability (Read *et al.*, 2003). Such issues may be compounded for non-traditional students within old universities who, as was identified earlier, form a smaller percentage of the student population (Archer *et al.*, 2003), and for social work students because of added demands associated with meeting academic and professional requirements, for example, integrating theory into practice and completing assessed practice placements.

Bibbings (2004) argues that there is a lack of clarity about how HEIs should respond to social and skills diversity amongst the student body, which is perhaps reflected in lower progression and retention rates amongst non-traditional students (HEFCE, 2002, 2004) and is arguably compounded by increased cultural diversity amongst the student body. Leighton & Hughes (1961) use the term 'culture' to refer to 'behaviour and cognition arising from shared patterns of belief, feelings and adaptation that people carry in their minds'. Fernando contends that the concept of 'culture' has changed over time and goes on to suggest that:

> Culture is no longer seen as a closed system that can be defined very clearly, nor something that is composed of traditional beliefs and practices that are passed on from generation to generation, but as something that is living, dynamic and changing—a flexible system of values and world views that people live by and create and re-create continuously. (Fernando, 2003, p. 11)

The multiplicity of cultural norms and values now apparent amongst the student body, coupled with increased social and skills diversity have produced a multi-tiered system of higher education in the twenty-first century which may create challenges for HEIs as they struggle to respond to and prioritise the different needs of students (Swift, 2001). These changes raise questions about how equality of access and opportunity for students can be achieved within an increasingly differentiated and market orientated system of higher education, especially for social work programmes which also need to strive to ensure that students demonstrate suitability for social work education at the admissions stage and are fit to practise both during and on completion of training.

Issues for Fair Access to Higher Education

Increased diversity has particular implications for fair admissions policy. How, for example, do HEIs strike a balance between promoting inclusive access to

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non-traditional students whilst also endeavouring not to discriminate against other students? For example, do universities accept students with lower grades than those stipulated in their published entry criteria, or do they target students at state schools within disadvantaged areas, thus endorsing positive action? Policies advocating positive action are currently illegal and if introduced could potentially tip the diversity scales too far. Conversely, do universities adopt highly selective admissions procedures by 'cream skimming' the 'best' and most academic students, for example, students from more privileged backgrounds who have benefited from private schooling and achieved high examinations passes, especially where demand exceeds supply?

If universities choose the 'best' students they may compromise diversity and are in danger of reinforcing claims that higher education is elitist and unrepresentative of the broader population (Archer *et al.*, 2003). Strathdee (2005) expounds upon the difficulties inherent in increasing diversity by highlighting how selective assessment techniques historically used in schools may actually have exacerbated social inequalities and compromised skills diversity by limiting the way learning was assessed, and by ensuring set proportions of young people failed to pass key examinations. How then do HEIs strive to ensure that the selection processes they employ do not disadvantage certain students? This is an added challenge for social work programmes, which not only need to endeavour to ensure that entrants have the apposite academic abilities but also have the appropriate personal qualities to undertake social work roles.

Strathdee (2005) suggests that assessment against published standards may be one solution to this conundrum. Professional standards such as those stipulated by the DH provide applicants with the opportunity to work towards achieving these agreed standards in advance of selection. However, published standards provide no guarantee that entrants to social work programmes will have acceptable levels of literacy. Indeed, Rai (2004) illustrates how the DH requirement that entrants have key skills in English equivalent to grade C GSCE resulted from concerns about poor literacy standards amongst social workers in London, which were identified during a high profile child protection inquiry. Whilst not dismissing the importance of social work students having 'acceptable' levels of literacy, the assessment of such skills also needs to be considered in a widening participation context. As earlier discussion about increased social, skills and cultural diversity within higher education illustrated, students are now far less homogenous than previously and may express themselves in a variety of different ways. Rai argues that such considerations are not reflected in the DH entry requirements, which present clear communication in both spoken and written English as an unproblematic concept and which do not acknowledge 'either the diversity of ''Englishes'' in common use in the UK or the place and value of diverse languages and communications forms in social work'(2004, p. 150).

The assessment of literacy skills is also a subjective process (Strathdee, 2005), as the marking of academic essays and the differing grades sometimes given by first and second markers and the use and need for moderation meetings indicate. Although

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the DH has provided some guidance on the standard of English expected of social work entrants, the potential for subjectivity means that social work programmes may need to be continually vigilant, particularly if in supporting widening participation they are to avoid further disadvantaging already disadvantaged students.

One suggestion is for programmes to develop some guidance in this area and to regularly review what they consider constitutes appropriate standards of literacy. Social work programmes may also support applicants in this area, and indeed more generally, by providing pre-entry academic guidance during, for example, open days and when admissions tutors visit schools and colleges.

Candidates may also benefit from being supplied with interview guidance, reading lists and mock mathematics tests in advance to help them prepare for selection. Students who have identified that they have dyslexia may benefit from being contacted prior to selection to determine what support they require, for example, exam scripts on coloured paper or with larger fonts (Lockley, 2002: www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp). Applicants whose level of literacy is not of a satisfactory standard could perhaps be advised to undertake an Access to Social Work Programme or a remedial English course. Whilst such strategies may support widening participation, they do not address issues amongst disaffected students deterred from applying to university in the first place because of social disadvantages linked to, for example, poverty and low expectations (Joseph Rowntree Foundation & Glasgow University, 2002; Ferri *et al.*, 2003; Lall *et al.*, 2003).

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Fair Admissions Policy and Practice

Access to higher education for non-traditional students may be promoted by fair admissions practice. Indeed, all HEIs are now obliged to ensure that their admissions procedures are fair. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was specifically set up to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for under-represented groups in the light of the introduction of tuition fees in 2006 (OFFA, 2005: www.offa.org.uk). OFFA requires all HEIs to draw up access agreements setting out the measures they intend to take to safeguard and maintain fair access (2005). Fair admission practice has particular resonance for disabled students and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 make it illegal for HEIs to treat disabled students less favourably, or to disadvantage or discriminate against them in any way (HEFCE, 2002). Admissions tutors must, therefore, be both sensitive and responsive to the range of needs of all applicants, but particularly students with disabilities. During selection candidates with disabilities may, for example, benefit from being offered the use of computer facilitates and additional time to complete written papers and mathematics tests. Nonetheless, despite the introduction of OFFA and disability legislation, it remains highly debatable about how 'fair' fair admissions can be in an unequal society, as earlier discussion about widening participation and the persistence of the highly socially stratified university system in England indicates, and which paradoxically may be reinforced by the introduction of tuition fees in 2006.

Social Work Education's Gatekeeping Role

Social work programmes play a fundamental role in student selection by acting as first line gatekeepers to scrutinise the suitability of students for social work education (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). They are, therefore, expected to be reasonably sure the students that they select have the ability or potential to undertake social work roles, will not compromise professional standards or put the public or others at risk. In assessing suitability, Ellis (1975) posits the view that social work programmes should perhaps start from a position where they assume a wide range of trainability and merely exclude what appear to be extremely unsuitable candidates. An international study by Barlow & Coleman (2003) revealed that several Canadian programmes took a similar stance by using written practice guidance denoting both unsuitability and suitability for social work education. Ten out of 12 of the social work programmes in their study stressed conduct and behaviour indicating unsuitability for professional social work roles, for example, 'concealment or distortion of the truth in the social work admissions form' (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 157). However, only two out of 12 of the programmes in their study focused on suitability indicators, for example, 'the ability to respond in authentic ways with attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that accords the client dignity and worth' (Barlow & Coleman, 2003, p. 158). Suitability policy guidance may provide an important means of assessing appropriate personal qualities and suitability for social work. It is acknowledged, however, that such concepts are difficult to define and may be open to a range of alternative interpretations. Nevertheless, a key aim of the study undertaken by the author was to explore whether such suitability policy guidance was used amongst English social work programmes to assist them in making selection decisions.

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The Study

The study involved a small-scale survey of social work admissions tutors at universities in and around London and had three key aims. Firstly, to investigate how social work programmes had interpreted and implemented the DH entry requirements for social work training. Secondly, to establish whether written suitability policy guidance was used to assist admissions processes. Finally, to gauge social work admissions tutors' levels of satisfaction with the existing admissions procedures currently in place.

Methodology and Sampling Considerations

The study was essentially exploratory and based on a research design embracing qualitative and quantitative methods. A postal questionnaire comprising open and closed questions was sent to social work admissions tutors at seven HEIs within London, and one within the immediate vicinity of London. The decision to survey social work programmes predominantly in London was based on an opportunistic sampling strategy (Brown & Dowling, 1998), i.e. programmes were chosen that the

author had some familiarity with and which shared similar characteristics to her own university, for example, predominantly within urban areas, with diverse cohorts of social work students and a comparable demand for places. Five universities completed the questionnaire which, whilst not representative, provided a useful snapshot of admissions practice and related concerns which have a broader significance.

The Findings

Assessment Methods to Assess the Suitability of Candidates

There are a variety of ways of assessing suitability for social work education, for example, through application forms, personal interviews, group interviews, criminal records bureaus checks, written tests, and psychological testing. The social work programmes in the survey used a combination of selection methods and interpreted the DH requirements in different ways. All programmes in line with the DH requirements conducted individual interviews, but two out of five programmes also conducted group interviews. All assessed English skills and suitability for social work through written assessment, although the DH does not specify that these skills must be assessed by examination; but none used psychometric testing. All but one of the programmes invited candidates to the university to complete the written assessment; the remaining programme required candidates to complete an essay in advance but indicated in future they were planning to invite candidates to sit the written test at the university because of concerns about authenticity, i.e. whether essays were actually completed by candidates themselves. Similar concerns may be raised about personal statements on application forms where standards of literacy differ considerably from written tests completed by the same candidates under examination conditions. Suspected cheating, similar to plagiarism, may provide an early indicator of unsuitability in terms of personal qualities deemed essential for social work, for example, honesty and integrity (Levin, 2004).

All but one of the programmes (four out of five) assessed skills in mathematics through testing—although the DH does not specify that these skills must be assessed by examination; the remaining programme only tested candidates without GCSE mathematics. There may be some limitation in using the latter approach, especially for mature students whose mathematics skills are perhaps 'rusty' and need updating. Moreover, social workers in the UK are increasingly required to utilise their mathematics skills by, for example, costing care packages (Adams *et al.*, 2002). Social work programmes may, therefore, also wish to give some thought to whether existing selection methods used are sufficient to assess candidates' current proficiency in mathematics.

At the time of the study (2004), only one programme met the DH requirement to involve service user/carers in student selection procedures, but did not specify the nature of this involvement. The absence of this kind of involvement amongst the other four programmes can perhaps be explained by the short time programmes had to incorporate such involvement prior to the introduction of the new degree in 2003.

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Suitability Policies

Only two out of five programmes used written suitability guidance to aid admissions decisions. One of the programmes without a written policy stated that:

> we are trying to spot the potential for social work and have in mind social work values, knowledge of diversity issues, anti-discriminatory practice etc. (HEI D)

In this instance, the assessment of suitability appears to be based on rather nebulous processes, which heightens the risk of subjectivity and of making admissions decisions based, for example, on 'gut feelings' or 'intuition', and which also reflects some of the concerns identified in the literature about the lack of operational criteria to assess suitability (Maidment & Briggs, 1998; Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Lafrance *et al.*, 2004). However, all the programmes without suitability policies indicated that this was an area for further development:

> We need to develop more precise suitability criteria and criteria for assessing performance in interview. We wish to do this in conjunction with service users. (HEI A)

> A more rigorous suitability process—taking into account of personal situation, emotional readiness, medical conditions, psychological readiness and attitudinal aspects. (HEI B)

> We find differentiating between 600 plus applicants for 26 places very difficult—particularly as access course students often appear rather similar. (HEI C)

As some of these comments suggest, the assessment of suitability can be difficult per se and can also create tensions for widening participation, particularly in a context of high demand for places. In the latter circumstances, one option might be for admissions tutors to select students with the 'best' academic attainment. However, academic skills do not necessarily equate with students having the appropriate personal qualities (Maidment & Briggs, 1998). Some of these potential dilemmas are now considered further by drawing upon composite examples shared with me by colleagues from a UK based social work admissions tutors email discussion group.

Colleagues revealed problems with a minority of students who placed undue emphasis on their own academic achievements and aspirations rather than a commitment to working with service users/carers. For example, candidates who seemed overly focussed on developing theoretical knowledge rather than social work skills. They also expressed concerns about candidates who were 'higher achievers' and who implied during selection interviews that they had little to learn because they 'knew it all'. After enrolment such students were sometimes found to lack sensitivity and empathy when working with services users during practice placements. Such characteristics could be linked to 'extreme narcissism' and what Vigilante (1983) refers to as excessive self-preoccupation. Such problematic traits may be identifiable earlier on during the application stage, for example, when written personal statements on application forms focus almost exclusively on personal achievements, and where career progression rather than a commitment to working with people

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appears to be the sole motivation for some applicants wishing to undertake social work training.

Conversely, in a context of low demand for places or when a high proportion of candidates fail to accept offers of places made, social work programmes may find themselves under pressure to reach their targets in terms of student numbers. In such instances there may be a danger that academic and/or suitability criteria may be compromised through social work programmes offering places to students that in different circumstances they might otherwise not have done. Research by Born & Carroll (1988) on applicant numbers and selection outcomes appears to confirm this tendency by illustrating that as applications for social work training decreased, acceptance rates increased. Examples that colleagues shared where this proved to be problematic include students who during selection interviews were noted to make poor eye contact or to make limited contributions to group interviews and then once enrolled were observed to have poor interpersonal skills linked to a lack of engagement and a refusal to take responsibility for their own learning. Another example includes a candidate who during selection was affronted at being interviewed by a service user rather than an academic member of staff and who post-enrolment was heard making derogatory remarks about older service users in the presence of their academic tutor. The examples identified here illustrate some of the conflicting pressures sometimes associated with making appropriate admissions decisions, and the need for social work programmes to decide what weighting should be given to academic potential and suitability for social work in their selection processes, as well as how these attributes will be measured (Maidment & Briggs, 1998).

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Levels of Satisfaction

Respondents were also asked to rate the effectiveness of current admissions procedures. Four admissions tutors expressed satisfaction; the remaining tutor was very satisfied with the current systems in place but said that they could not take the credit because they had inherited existing arrangements. Most of the tutors did, however, consider improvements were necessary and, as the findings presented earlier indicate, felt particularly challenged by their responsibility to assess suitability for social work education. This is not surprising because unlike other non-professional programmes within HEIs, social work programmes have the conundrum of balancing widening participation with selection methods assessing suitability for professional social work roles. They also need to strive to ensure that the admissions decisions they make are fair and commensurate with social work values. Maidment & Briggs (1998) expound on the ethical dilemmas that potentially arise from balancing these considerations:

> The values held by social work as a discipline may conflict with the processes used for selection, therefore inhibiting the gatekeeping function. For example, belief in the potential of individuals to create positive change in their lives, is a value inherent in the philosophy of social work. (Maidment & Briggs, 1998, pp. 66–67)

Whilst adherence to social work values is an important consideration during selection, social work programmes' key priority must be to ensure, as far as possible, that only students who are fit to practise and who will not cause service users any harm are admitted to social work education.

Discussion

Challenges for the Assessment of Suitability for Social Work

Based on the findings from the survey, issues of suitability appeared to be the most pressing concern of social work programmes, although somewhat surprisingly there was only limited evidence of the use of suitability policy guidance to support selection decision making processes. Whilst potentially problematic behaviour, such as the kind of discriminatory values illustrated earlier, may be detectable during selection, research suggests concerns sometimes only emerge at a later stage whilst students are undertaking practice placements, for example (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Lafrance *et al.*, 2004). Examples include students identified as being 'wounded helpers' as a result of unresolved issues from difficult early life experiences, and who became emotionally overwhelmed when working with families experiencing similar difficulties. It is well documented in the literature that unresolved problems related to attachment issues in early childhood can lead to problematic emotional behavioural patterns during adulthood and if not addressed may become more entrenched over time (Pearson *et al.*, 1994; Rothbard & Shaver, 1994; Mickelson *et al.*, 1997). Other concerning behaviour shared by admissions tutors relates to students who, due to alcohol misuse, had problems with attendance and punctuality and with meeting assessment deadlines. A key question to consider is whether these kinds of problems could have been detected at the admissions stage, and whether the selection methods currently employed by social work programmes are sufficiently robust in picking up early signs of unsuitability for social work. The paper concludes with some suggestions for the development of operational criteria to measure suitability and for more robust selection methods to assess unsuitability for social work education.

Robust and Clearly Defined Selection Procedures

More robust selection interviews may help with assessing both suitability and unsuitability for social work education. Although some of the literature questions the validity and reliability of selection interviews due to concerns about subjectivity (Ellis, 1975; Munro, 1995), the DH (2002), nonetheless, requires all candidates to be interviewed. Moreover, interviews arguably have advantages because they provide interviewers with the opportunity to gauge personal qualities relating to maturity, self-awareness, and empathy towards others. DH entry requirements related to verbal and non-verbal communication skills may also be assessed through interviews, for example, 'verbal congruence, content relevance, and use of eye contact' (Wodarski, 1979, p. 10).

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However, assessing suitability and appropriate personal qualities through interviews does involve making subjective judgements and, as the survey of social work admissions tutors revealed, this is an area where social work programmes may struggle. A more representative way is to perhaps draw upon the personal qualities that service users/carers themselves value in social workers. Indeed, a growing body of research indicates a broad consensus on what service users/carers deem essential qualities in social workers, for example, listening skills, empathy, respect, trust, support, and physical and emotional availability (Barnes, 2002; Levin, 2004, p. 35; Bailey, 2005). Social work programmes in conjunction with service user/carer representatives can build upon these categories by drawing up their own criteria for assessing personal qualities during interviews and/or when marking written tests. Relevant selection criteria in this area that was developed in conjunction with service user/carers at my own university include categories relating to 'self-awareness', 'inclusive practice', 'appropriate boundary setting' and 'commitment to work with service users/carers'. These categories are commensurate with what Skinner (2005, p. 5) refers to as 'key capabilities for social workers'. Other relevant capabilities categories outlined by Skinner include, 'emotional awareness' and 'interpersonal understanding' (2005). Whilst it is acknowledged that such categories are open to interpretation and do not preclude issues of subjectivity, they at least set the parameters for more robust selection processes through the development of operational criteria to assess suitability for social work, which was found to be lacking amongst some of the social work programmes in the survey and amongst programmes in general.

Criteria for assessing personal qualities and, indeed, suitability policy guidance may not, however, be sufficient to assess what one of the social work admission tutors in the study identified as 'emotional and psychological readiness' for social work training. Neither may these selection tools be sufficient to prevent dangerous or unsuitable students entering social work education, for example, students whose own children are or have been on local authority child protection registers. Skinner's research (2005) on selecting out dangerousness indicates that past behaviour is the best indicator of future behaviour in predicting who may be unsafe to practise. Skinner suggests that selection methods which develop techniques of examining each candidate's past may help in screening out unsuitable people for social work (2005). One possible option is for social work programmes to consider developing more robust interview techniques permitting the examination of past behaviour and enabling interviewers to ask in-depth probing questions about candidates' attitudes, motivations and personal/professional boundaries when working with children and vulnerable adults. Such techniques may also assist in identifying issues discussed earlier relating to a minority of students being 'wounded helpers'. These types of interview techniques are commonly used in England for qualified social workers wishing to work within Children's Services. They are referred to as 'Warner interviews' and were developed following the recommendations to facilitate safer recruitment practices outlined in the Warner Report (1992), which followed an inquiry into the selection, development and management of staff in children's homes.

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Warner type interviews generally require interviewers to undertake training on probing techniques, which may have some resource implications for social work programmes. Another potential limitation relates to consistency and quality assurance when applying such techniques during interviews. However, the advantages of developing selection methods embracing safeguarding procedures arguably outweigh the disadvantages.

Finally, social work programmes may wish to reiterate the professional conduct expected of students by referring applicants and candidates to the DH entry requirements, relevant suitability/unsuitability criteria, and the GSCC Codes of Practice and registration requirements (GSCC, 2002b, 2003). The Codes of Practice describe the professional conduct and practice standards expected of students and qualified social workers and their responsibility to uphold public trust and confidence (GSCC, 2002b). In 2004 the GSCC made it compulsory for the names of all qualified social workers to be entered onto a national register, and for them to re-register every three years. Social workers can be struck off the register for professional misconduct, and may not be able to re-register if they do not demonstrate continual professional development and fitness to practise between each period of registration by completing a minimum of 15 days of appropriate training, for example, equal opportunities training (GSCC, 2003).

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Conclusion

Social work programmes need to balance a number of complex and competing demands when endeavouring to widen participation through the promotion of diversity and when selecting suitable students for social work education. They have the complicated business of promoting student diversity without compromising professional and academic standards, and whilst also endeavouring to uphold core social work values. Fair admissions practice, suitability policies and criteria, and more robust selection methods may help, but it is also important to recognise that a desire to enter social work education does not translate into an entitlement (Born & Carroll, 1988). Entrants to social work education need to recognise that they do so under trust; therefore the responsibility also lies with them to demonstrate suitability at the selection stage, and to uphold the academic and professional standards of social work thereafter.

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