

'Hanging on a Little Thin Line': Barriers to Progression and Retention in Social Work Education

Jo Moriarty, Jill Manthorpe, Bharat Chauhan, Gwynne Jones, Helen Wenman & Shereen Hussein

Identifying the reasons why students leave higher education without completing their studies has become an increasingly important issue in higher education in the United Kingdom. This paper reports on a series of interviews held with social work students, social work educators, and higher education staff with responsibilities for recruitment and retention in four English higher education institutions (HEIs). The interviews aimed to identify some of the reasons why students might consider leaving before achieving a social work qualification and some of the initiatives the HEIs had set in place to reduce this risk. The findings suggest that some of the widening participation initiatives established in many HEIs are aimed at students at the beginning of their studies but that social work students might benefit from additional support at other periods, for example, both during and on their return from practice placements. Furthermore, the changing profile of social work students may have implications for cohort dynamics and social work educators need to be alert to these developments.

Keywords: Social Work; Education; Student Progression; Interviews; United Kingdom

Introduction

The increased number of higher education entrants in the United Kingdom (UK) has created considerable interest in identifying and supporting students at risk of leaving before completing their studies. Many of these concerns, as Longden (2006) has observed, originate in central government. For example, Objective V of the Public Service Agreement (PSA) between the Treasury and the former Department for

Jo Moriarty, Jill Manthorpe & Shereen Hussein, King's College London, UK. Bharat Chauhan, Gwynne Jones & Helen Wenman, General Social Care Council.

Correspondence to: Jo Moriarty, King's College London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK. Email: jo.moriarty@kcl.ac.uk

Education and Skills (now Department for Innovations, Universities and Skills) for 2004–2008 is to ‘bear down on rates of non-completion’ in higher education (HM Treasury, 2004). These currently run at around 17% for students as a whole (House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, 2001) and 12 and 19% for full time and part time social work students, respectively (Hussein *et al.*, 2006).

This priority is also reflected in higher education funding arrangements. In 2007–2008, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) allocated a total of £4,510 million for teaching to higher education institutions (HEIs), of which £354 million was to be used on widening participation for students from under-represented groups or who were at greatest risk of not completing their studies (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2007). Examples of the ways in which this funding is used include summer schools, induction programmes, and integrated student services (Universities UK, 2002; Gorard *et al.*, 2006).

This article uses information from interviews and focus groups undertaken with social work students, social work educators, and other staff with responsibilities for recruitment and retention in four English higher education institutions (HEIs) in 2006. It formed part of a programme of work looking at diversity and progression in social work education commissioned by the General Social Care Council (GSCC), regulator of social work and social care in England and accreditor of programmes leading to the social work professional qualification.

The results presented here illustrate some of the complex inter-relationships between individuals and the places in which they study. They highlight the role of social work educators in creating supportive environments for students. However, the extent to which such actions are successful may be influenced by the extent to which developments in social work are integrated with student retention strategies within the institution as a whole.

Background

There is a considerable literature on progression and retention, and reviews of the main areas of theoretical and empirical enquiry now exist (Yorke, 2004; Metz, 2004/2005; Chaves, 2006; Gorard *et al.*, 2006; Zepke *et al.*, 2006). Explanations for early exits from higher education vary (Yorke, 2004) and students leaving higher education early tend to attribute their difficulties to a combination of events (Christie *et al.*, 2004). These include the wrong choice of field of study; financial problems; academic difficulties; unhappiness with the social environment or wrong choice of institution; dissatisfaction with institutional provision and with the quality of the student experience; and personal problems (Yorke, 2004).

Most of the early work on this subject originated in the United States (for example, Tinto, 1975, 1997, 1998; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Astin, 1999) and broadly adopted a social integration position, arguing that the key to retention and academic success was the development of a *student's* sense of connection with the institution (Maldonado *et al.*, 2005). Recently, commentators have questioned these theories for seemingly assuming that all students, whatever their background, share

broadly similar experiences (Torres, 2006) or for lacking grounding in students' own perspectives (Brunsden *et al.*, 2000). By contrast, more recent research has placed greater emphasis upon the impact of the *institution* upon students. Here, the notion of 'institutional habitus' (Reay, 1998; Reay *et al.*, 2001; Thomas *et al.*, 2004), a concept loosely based upon the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), has been influential. This can be understood as 'the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' (McDonough, 1996, cited in Reay *et al.*, 2001, S1.3). For example, students from families with a tradition of study in higher education understand better the nuances of choosing a particular HEI or course of study over another (Reay, 1998). The emphasis upon HEIs' responsibilities for improving retention was also emphasised by Yorke & Thomas (2003). They concluded that a commitment to maximise student success needed to be embedded throughout the HEI.

This shift in emphasis explains why it is now more common to see references to 'student retention' and 'progression and achievement' rather than 'non-completion', 'drop out' or 'attrition'. These more student-centred terms (Yorke, 2004) reflect the reality that routes *into* and *through* higher education are increasingly differentiated (Smith & Bocock, 1999) with students leaving and returning at different times.

Methodological Approaches

Identifying why students leave higher education before achieving their intended qualification poses considerable methodological challenges. Recruitment rates are low in surveys of students failing or withdrawing from higher education because many move without leaving forwarding addresses or are unwilling to discuss their experiences (Yorke, 1999; Davies & Elias, 2003; Quinn, 2004).

Secondary analyses of institutional records reduce the risk of sample selection bias but bring their own difficulties because recorded reasons for non-completion may differ from those identified by students themselves. Thus, when asked by the institution, students may be reluctant to criticise the quality of teaching and learning, although this may have played a part in their decision to leave (Assiter & Gibbs, 2007).

Limitations also arise from only looking at former students. Students who contemplate leaving higher education outnumber those who actually do considerably (Ballantyne, 2000; Christie *et al.*, 2004). For this reason, the perspectives of those experiencing difficulties but who continue (for example, Reay *et al.*, 2002) may help illuminate why students ostensibly sharing similar characteristics experience progression differently.

Research on Social Work Students

In their literature review of stress among students in higher education, Robotham & Julian (2006) cited two US studies where social work students reported high levels of stress (Tobin & Carson, 1994; Dziegielewski *et al.*, 2004) and queried whether students following vocational subjects experienced more stress than those who were

not. UK research (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2002) has also suggested that social work students make greater use of student counselling. However, they point out that this does not necessarily indicate greater difficulty but may reflect better awareness of the potential benefits of such services.

Research undertaken prior to the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (for example, Baron *et al.*, 1996; Crawshaw, 2002) highlighted the ways in which some social work programmes created progression difficulties for students with disabilities through the use of group exercises for students with sensory impairments and the failure of some practice placements to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Cree (1996) observed that men were believed to have poorer rates of progression than women, a pattern also apparent wherever men study subjects in which they are substantially outnumbered (Johnes & McNabb, 2004), as is the case in social work.

There have been longstanding concerns about the need to deliver social work education in an anti-racist way. For example, Aymer & Bryan (1996), Cropper (2000) and Butler *et al.* (2003) have, respectively, identified the benefits for progression among Black students of having Black social work educators as role models and the existence of group support through peer mentoring schemes.

Nevertheless, the potential benefits of initiatives such as these may be localised. In work commissioned by the GSCC based on the total population of students registering for a Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) between 1995 and 1998, Hussein and colleagues (2007) found that men, people from minority ethnic groups, and students with disabilities studying for a Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) all had lower overall progression rates. However, there were differences in their rates of progression depending upon whether they were studying in different types of HEI and the characteristics of their cohort composition. Generally, progression was best in HEIs where men, people from minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities were neither substantially *over*-represented nor *under*-represented. It is worth noting that the statistical method used to analyse these data, logistic regression, controlled for each of the variables in the model so that, for example, men's poorer progression was not explained by their ethnicity or disability status but existed independently in its own right.

Set against this picture, were two positive findings. Unlike existing research in higher education where older students and students with lower levels of previous educational attainment tended to have poorer progression (Hall, 2001; Smith & Naylor, 2001), this was not the case for social work.

Taken together, Hussein and colleagues' results provided robust generalisable information that some social work students were at greater risk of poorer progression than others. They also implied that there were additional factors operating at programme and HEI level that retrospective secondary quantitative data analyses of this sort were unable to capture.

As most of the existing qualitative studies of social work students had been undertaken before the introduction of the new degree and before widening participation was such a high priority, the GSCC decided to undertake further in-depth work. As research on progression among social work students has rarely included perspectives of other higher education staff, even though they may be

responsible for making decisions that impact on social work programmes, it was thought to be important that their perspectives were included, along with those of students and social work educators.

Methods

The material presented here is based on a small-scale case study approach. Four HEIs were selected on the basis of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) where there is a deliberate intention to include phenomena that differ widely from each other. This approach helps to identify whether there are central themes that cut across cases or people. HEIs were selected because they:

- offered both undergraduate and postgraduate routes to obtaining a social work degree;
- were located in different parts of England;
- were situated in city centres and in more rural campuses; and
- included pre- and post-1992 universities.

Eight focus groups, three joint interviews, and one individual interview were held separately with students, social work educators, and staff with responsibilities for aspects of widening participation within the HEI. Focus groups were selected as the main way in which to collect data because their interactive nature creates synergies facilitating disclosure (Kitzinger, 1994; Gibbs, 1997; Finch & Lewis, 2003). They also resulted in people being interviewed in groups akin to their everyday lives within the institution (Callaghan *et al.*, 2003). This helped the project team understand some of the key characteristics and processes operating within each HEI. Participants could also choose to be interviewed jointly or as individuals.

The focus groups and interviews were conducted using a semi-structured topic guide and were undertaken by three of the authors (Jo M, BC and GJ) working in pairs. The HEIs were also invited to provide any documentation about their widening participation and equalities strategies that they thought would provide useful contextual information. Refreshments were provided and every participant was given a book token in recognition of his or her contribution. Ethical approval was not required as this work came within the GSCC's audit remit but all participants gave their informed consent.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Analyses of the transcripts and notes taken during the interviews were undertaken using the analytic hierarchy described by Ritchie & colleagues (2003) in which data are organised into key themes, concepts and emerging categories and then summarised and synthesised.

Findings

Sample

Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of participants. We did not routinely ask participants to record their disability status or age so that focus group

Table 1 Characteristics of Study Participants

	Men (<i>n</i>)	Women (<i>n</i>)	<i>N</i> from a minority ethnic group	Total
Students	10	24	14	34
Social work educators	7	7	4	14
HEI staff responsible for aspects of recruitment and retention	5	2	0	7

members could maintain their privacy, but several students volunteered that they considered themselves to have a disability and in some cases had used social work services. Students' ages ranged from those entering higher education at 18 to people in their 40s. Twenty-nine were following undergraduate programmes and they were almost evenly divided between those in their first, second and third years. The remainder were postgraduates. In presenting findings, no identifiers are provided for tutors (referred to as 'social work educators') and staff with responsibilities for recruitment and retention ('HEI') in order to maintain confidentiality. The only identifiers presented for students are their gender and ethnicity.

'Match' between Students and Place of Study

Previous research (Quinn *et al.*, 2005) has highlighted the importance for students of making the 'right' choice of course. Although many social work programmes have traditionally recruited high proportions of local applicants, the geographical proximity of many HEIs offering social work programmes means that even if applicants want to study locally, they may be able to select from more than one HEI.

The variation in students' accounts of the processes by which they made their decisions was striking. They ranged from those who visited different HEIs before making a final selection, to those who were guided by others, and those for whom it was a matter of chance:

You know the teachers were approachable, that's what I should say. When I went to a few others, they were ...—what's the word I want to use—authoritarian? ... I did not warm to them as I did to the tutors when I came here. (Black woman student)

It's the research pedigree I think ... My dissertation adviser ... [had] studied here ... [He] recommended it to me. (White man student)

I came here by accident. I applied the day before clearing ended and got on the course. You know, I should have done a lottery ticket perhaps instead, you know. Basically, I've really enjoyed it. I've been to university twice before and I just think they do their best, so I'm quite happy. (White man student)

Another important factor was the extent to which students thought they would 'fit in' with other students and in the institution as a whole:

I did have a place at [other HEI in locality but thought] they would offer me more support here. It was local to home and it had a strong ethnic minority [student

population] here that I thought I would fit in well with. That was the reason why I chose to come here. (Black woman student)

The use of the words 'local' and 'fit in' are striking. Many HEIs offering social work traditionally have an 'institutional habitus' based upon providing vocational courses primarily in health and social care to a mainly local population:

The university has always seen itself very much as a local university and serving the needs of local communities and professional and occupational groups. So that's I think an important aspect of the university. (HEI)

However, HEIs face increasing dilemmas between operating as a local resource and being able to compete on an international level:

I mean we offer subjects ... which we know to be internationally excellent, and we make no bones about telling people they're internationally excellent ... Perhaps we don't offer courses that are quite as vocational as some of our peers, and that could be a reason for not selecting us. (HEI)

I'm not entirely sure how the institution, as it were, got to the position of having ... a considerable proportion of its income tied up with ... with international students or business, other than to say that the university invests a lot of energy in a small number of partnerships. (HEI)

HEI Recruitment Strategies

The comments from both sets of respondents raise questions about the way in which wider HEI and social work recruitment strategies operate in tandem. Nowhere was this highlighted more strongly than in the example of HEI-wide programmes aimed at attracting school leavers from neighbourhoods where participation in higher education had traditionally been low:

We run four or five summer schools each year ... and [students in Years 10 and 11] get a taste of ... what it's like to actually be a student ... We run a range of higher education tasters as well ... And they really vary depending on the needs of the schools that we're actually dealing with ... We also have a schools liaison function within the Office, and we've currently got four members of staff who are engaged in that. (HEI)

When asked about strategies designed to attract those who might be returning to education, the same respondent replied:

Well, an interesting group, and I think mature students have been quite hard done by over the years ... I think they don't have quite the range of opportunities that they used to have ... We have a programme of visits with local feeder colleges where we know there to be populations of mature students ... and we do pay regular visits to those colleges, and we try and talk to the Access students there ... [but older applicants] don't have the kind of support that your average sixth former has in terms of "how do I go about applying to university and how do I refine my choices?". (HEI)

Adjusting to Life in Higher Education

The HEIs were aware of the variations in the extent to which students, whatever their age, were prepared for life in a particular HEI:

We're looking again at the materials that we have provided pre-entry so the students are better prepared for university life and their programme. (HEI)

In addition to providing preparatory information, other measures were aimed at facilitating the transition into higher education:

We've appointed a full-time worker within the faculty whose role is to link in with all the courses and make sure that there's student ambassadors from those courses. So, when students start in September ... they know who an ambassador is and they can link up with that person for, I don't know, anything from accommodation things, to student activities, to what's going on in the faculty to whatever. And that's a new scheme. (Social work educator)

Bradley & Manthorpe (1996) have commented that social work programmes tend to concentrate upon events marking the end of a student's period of learning but that induction at the beginning is neglected. This reduces the chances of creating opportunities for developing group identities that could promote teaching and learning most effectively. We found that strategies tended to be specifically aimed at helping students during their first few weeks in higher education. However, there are other critical periods. While the peak time for withdrawals does occur during the initial weeks, smaller peaks occur after Christmas or during assessment times (Willmott & Lloyd, 2002; Boorman *et al.*, 2006):

Assignments, Christmas, and a holiday. It's a real stressful period—Christmas. (Black woman student)

Academic Support for 'At Risk' Students

Tutors and other staff all confirmed the need to identify students at risk of not progressing because of academic difficulties:

Yes, we've got a robust [tutorial] system, so your [tutor] sticks with you throughout the course ... And I think that works really well, and that same person will probably also help and support and give tutorials and guidance academically. (Social work educator)

Personal tutor models were common, in keeping with the idea that the most effective approaches offer services which students can access without fear of being labelled as 'problems' (Yorke & Longden, 2004). Nevertheless, the reluctance of some students to use services was acknowledged:

We're not positively pro-active enough ... I mean traditionally we've said to students ... if you declare a disability there are a variety of supports available for you—and the onus is put on the student. One or two of us, me included, think that actually ... the personal tutor should be sitting down as early as possible, explicitly checking out whether a number of challenges are faced by a particular student, and

then saying to the student, "I am going to refer you, unless you tell me not to". (HEI)

This comment reflected a recurring theme across all participants, namely that many students either did not know or chose not to reveal that they had a disability that might impact upon their studies:

Not all students actually flag that they've got a disability because they think it's going to go against them ... Some of them think ... "if I put down I have dyslexia they're not going to look at my application in quite the same way" ... and so ... we end up catching some students after they've actually started and looking at their needs at that point, which is not really the right way round. (HEI)

I didn't know I was dyslexic before I started the course, and I was encouraged to go for a test, and I had [i.e. was given] just anything, you know, just been totally supported and encouraged. (White woman student)

However, not all students had such a positive experience, as other research (Stanley *et al.*, 2007) confirms:

There's no point just going to someone that's dyslexic, there you go, there's the laptop, there's the instruction manual, sort it. People can't do that. (White woman student)

Two of the case study sites had set up 'early identification' schemes for students at risk of poorer progression by central monitoring of students' progress. In one instance, interim help was provided during the process of formally assessing a student's support needs:

So, what we've identified is a retention project which can put a resource in place prior to that identification, and that enables quite a broad-based approach to take place. And the early feedback [is that] we can already see some benefits coming [through]. (HEI)

Central monitoring was seen as another way of reducing the onus for seeking support on the student.

Role of Social Work Educators

Many social work students do not have backgrounds of previous academic achievement (Green Lister, 2003; Leslie, 2003; Jones, 2006). Perhaps this was why students felt that the encouragement they received from tutors, or its absence, was so important:

I went home one night virtually in tears, and I consider myself to be quite a strong character, ready to throw it all away because somebody, a lecturer had put me down so much, in public, in a room of 50 people that I felt sort of that big. And that's the kind of thing where people can drop out because you're made to feel that you're stupid, you're incapable, you can't do it, you're not worth it, you're not worthy of being here. (White woman student)

That was one of the things that really stuck in my mind, that [tutor] said to us that, "We are here to help you succeed. We want to do everything we can to help you

succeed. And we're going to do that and help you to get to succeed whilst you're here". And that really struck a chord with me, because I'd never, I'd not really heard that before ... The last time I was in education was at school, or in the college, and that wasn't their mantra ... It was totally different. (Black woman student)

Competing Commitments

Although the above comments highlight the importance of internal support from within the HEI, it has been suggested (Yorke, 2004) that it is factors *extraneous* to the HEI that have the greatest impact on the retention of older students, who still comprise the majority of social work students (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2007).

Many students combine their studies with part-time employment (Lucas, 1997; Curtis, 2005; Callender *et al.*, 2006). For students, the benefits of additional income had to be balanced against the impact on their academic work:

Last year ... it wasn't really a problem. It didn't occur to me that I wouldn't be able to do it for a whole course ... This year ... I'm finding it a bit more difficult ... so I know, for sure, that I won't be able to work next year ... I mean I could still qualify with an alright degree if I continued working, but not, not for the degree that I want. (Black woman student)

The other area in which students most often reported difficulties was in combining their studies with caring responsibilities. Practice placements posed a particular problem:

When I came to the ... [open day] I was told "oh we love mature students and we really welcome people with families and we'll do everything that we can and it will be, work placements will be during term times within [local area]" ... and ... now I'm on my first-year work placement now working nine to five, Monday to Friday, with a half day off. And when we all raised this in a meeting, we were just shouted down, "well look what are you going to do when you're in the real world". Well, actually, when I'm in the real world I'll be paid, and I'll be working part-time personally because I've got four children. (White woman student)

Social Support and Cohort Dynamics

These illustrative examples demonstrate some of the difficulties of combining multiple aspects of student life. Nevertheless, as Kirk's (2004) work has shown, social networks outside the HEI, such as partners, other family members, friends, and work colleagues, can also be important sources of support. If they are absent, relationships with student peers may assume greater importance:

What I noticed was that quite a few of the students that left in my year, sort of, were used to keep themselves to themselves, weren't tapped into a network, and ... I find that a lot of people ... tend to huddle into that little group, that's their little network but then other people ... that come in are isolated and by themselves, they

are not let into any network, into any social group you see, then barriers are put up.
(White man student)

While difficulties of this sort occur across every subject, students may experience greater isolation while on placement, especially if they lack supportive networks outside the HEI:

I'd say it's difficult ... to see each other outside of lectures sometimes ... I did feel that I was becoming somewhat isolated from the group [on placement], because there wasn't much laid on in terms of bringing us back together socially, was there?
(White man student)

One of the case study sites had specifically used some of its widening participation funds to address the needs of such students:

We have got some part of the funding for like induction activities, cohort identity-type activities so the majority of them sort of happen at beginning of term to introduce people to university people. It's also available [at] times for programmes, [where] people don't see each other very often, but you can bring them in just to have that little reinforcement. (HEI)

Beyond this initiative, there was some uncertainty about what efforts should be made to help students find support outside the settings of student counselling services. An example of this was captured in one group where the tutors themselves were aware of their own separation from the wider institution:

I think if they were ... more integrated into the university, and used more of its resources, and maybe we've been a, I don't know, I mean I'm speaking for myself, I mean when I first came I thought, right, I'm going to go out to [local supermarket] etc, I'm going to do this, do that. I stay in this building, we do, you know. I think students do. (Social work educator)

Increased funding (Department of Health, 2001, 2002) has led to substantial growth in the number of social work students and some increases in their diversity, for example, the proportion of younger students has risen (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2007). More often than not, dynamics within cohorts of students were seen in terms of how they impacted upon students' learning and not on how they might affect their interactions outside the learning environment:

And it's something that we've been discussing recently ... Because groups are large, there are differences between students. And it's the students that are coming to us saying, "resolve our problems", "we can't do anything about it" and "you're not introducing any great disciplinary measures" etc, etc, and we're saying "oh no, you have to raise these through formal mechanisms, through [annual review], your chosen reps should be raising these through student meetings". (Social work educator)

Taken as a whole, the themes emerging from the interviews revealed the fragility of the processes by which some students continued their studies. The line between successful and unsuccessful progression may be narrow:

I've nearly left actually, what kept me going was I thought I'll be excluded, I'll go back into the poverty aspect, but it's really just hanging on like a little thin line of whether I will still stay ... and I cannot guarantee that I will actually stay, because it can be frustrating. (Black woman student)

Discussion

This article provides a vertical snapshot of differing viewpoints on student retention and progression. While some themes, such as the importance of preparation for higher education and the need for early identification of students at risk of poorer progression and providing support, were raised by all three groups of participants, others were unique. These differences helped suggest why, despite a shared institutional commitment to widening participation, differential barriers to progression and achievement were reported in all four HEIs.

Interviewing staff working in higher education with remits beyond social work highlighted areas in which social work students benefited from the wider institutional environment, such as access to central student support and counselling services. However, it also revealed that many HEI-wide initiatives for widening participation were aimed at attracting school leavers from socially deprived neighbourhoods and placed less emphasis upon supporting those wishing to return to education. In the absence of structural supports, students were often reliant upon their own individual resourcefulness and determination.

The interviews also suggested that while some issues faced by social work students are shared by all those embarking on higher education, others were not. The first few weeks of a programme are always the most difficult for students. However, students studying vocational subjects such as social work have other periods of transition during and after practice placements. Only one of the HEIs appeared to have taken account of this fact in allocating its widening participation funds.

Although the existence of competing priorities emerged strongly in the groups held with students, HEIs face competing priorities of their own (such as developing new programmes of study, enhancing their international presence, and attracting research income). Comparatively small programmes such as social work, which are traditionally resource-intensive in terms of teaching time, may face increased pressure to reduce the number of seminars and tutorials and to conform more to the patterns of teaching and learning found on courses with large numbers of students. Should such changes take place, their effects on student progression and achievement would need to be monitored.

Historically, comparatively few social work students have failed or decided to withdraw from their studies (Hussein *et al.*, 2007). This may change as a result of the increasing size and diversity of social work student cohorts. Current strategies for widening participation may need to be re-evaluated to reflect students' differing needs (Holmström & Taylor, 2007, 2008). Staff face a difficult task in balancing their responsibilities to maintain academic standards with an understanding of how students' lives outside the institution affect progression. Having good social support

and the impact of cohort dynamics were recurrent themes in the student groups but were hardly addressed by other participants. Greater attention to developing strategies aimed at facilitating peer support might have beneficial effects on progression.

Limitations of the Study

The project had to be completed within a four-month timescale and this influenced the extent to which in-depth exploration was possible. Moreover, it is based upon cross-sectional data and so was unable to capture the full set of factors contributing to change or outcome over time (Lewis, 2003).

Researchers ought to undertake reflexive readings of the information they have gathered in order to understand their roles and perspectives in the generation of and understanding of data (Mason, 2002). There is no doubt that the direct role of the GSCC in this project facilitated access, particularly to those in senior positions. Nevertheless, although participants were assured that the project differed from a GSCC inspection and unless information was supplied on which GSCC inspectors had a duty to act, no identifiable information would be shared outside the project team, it is also possible that they may have spoken more frankly had no-one from the GSCC been present.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, the study was able to draw some conclusions that could be explored more fully in future work. The widening participation agenda has clearly promoted ideas in HEIs about ways to support progression and retention among non-traditional students who may be at greater risk of poorer progression. Many of the issues that they sought to address, such as helping with adjustment to higher education or identifying study support needs, are as relevant for social work students as for other students in higher education. However, while other HEI-wide initiatives focused on working with schools and with school leavers, many people attracted to social work consist of those returning to higher education or accessing it later in life. Furthermore, there are aspects of social work education, such as time spent on placements, which may pose particular difficulties for students, especially those who have outside commitments. The study also identified that while students are aware of the potential impact of cohort dynamics and levels of social support upon their progression, this seems to be less recognised by staff. This suggests that further research to link these and some of the other themes explored in this article with actual outcomes for students is needed.

Acknowledgements

We should like to thank all those who took part in this project and those who were involved making meeting arrangements. Thanks are also due to other members of the

GSCC Diversity, Progression and Achievement group, especially Amanda Thorpe and Jane McLenachan, for their advice and comments. Liz Moor and JHTS Transcription Services undertook the transcriptions. The Social Care Workforce Research Unit receives funding from the Department of Health (DH). The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily the DH nor the GSCC.

References

- Assiter, A. & Gibbs, G. R. (2007) 'Student retention and motivation', *European Journal of Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 79–93.
- Astin, A. W. (1999, originally published 1994) 'Student involvement: a developmental theory for higher education', *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 18–29.
- Aymer, C. & Bryan, A. (1996) 'Black students' experience on social work courses: accentuating the positives', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 1–16.
- Ballantyne, C. (2000) 'Are they glad they came? First year students' views of their university experience', *Proceedings of the 9th Annual Teaching Learning Forum*, Perth.
- Baron, S., Phillips, R. & Stalker, K. (1996) 'Barriers to training for disabled social work students', *Disability & Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 361–378.
- Bean, J. P. & Metzner, B. S. (1985) 'A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition', *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 485–540.
- Boorman, S., Brown, N., Payne, P. & Ramsden, B. (2006) *Part-time Students and Part-time Study in Higher Education in the UK. Strand 2: A Survey of the Issues Facing Institutions*, Universities UK, London.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.-C. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Sage Publications Ltd, London.
- Bradley, G. & Manthorpe, J. (1996) 'Evaluating a social work introductory programme', *Social Work Education*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 34–50.
- Brunsdon, V., Davies, M., Shevlin, M. & Bracken, M. (2000) 'Why do HE students drop out? A test of Tinto's model', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 301–310.
- Butler, A., Elliott, T. & Stopard, N. (2003) 'Living up to the standards we set: a critical account of the development of anti-racist standards', *Social Work Education*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 271–282.
- Callaghan, J., Young, B., Pace, F. & Vostanis, P. (2003) 'Mental health support for youth offending teams: a qualitative study', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 55–63.
- Callender, C., Wilkinson, D. & Mackinon, K. (2006) *Part-time Students and Part-time Study in Higher Education in the UK. Strand 3: A Survey of Students' Attitudes and Experiences of Part-time Study and its Costs 2005/06*, Universities UK, London.
- Chaves, C. (2006) 'Involvement, development, and retention: theoretical foundations and potential extensions for adult community college students', *Community College Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 139–152.
- Christie, H., Munro, M. & Fisher, T. (2004) 'Leaving university early: exploring the differences between continuing and non-continuing students', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 29, no. 5, pp. 617–636.
- Crawshaw, M. (2002) 'Disabled people's access to social work education—ways and means of promoting environmental change', *Social Work Education*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 503–514.
- Cree, V. E. (1996) 'Why do men care?', in *Working with Men: Feminism and Social Work*, eds K. Cavanagh & V. E. Cree, Routledge, London, pp. 64–86.
- Cropper, A. (2000) 'Mentoring as an inclusive device for the excluded: black students' experience of a mentoring scheme', *Social Work Education*, vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 597–607.
- Curtis, S. (2005) 'Support for working undergraduates: the view of academic staff', *Education + Training*, vol. 47, no. 7, pp. 496–505.
- Davies, R. & Elias, P. (2003) *Dropping Out: A Study of Early Leavers from Higher Education. DfES Research Report RR386*, Department for Education and Skills, London.
- Department of Health (2001) *Press Release 2001/0486: Government Launches First Ever Social Worker Recruitment Drive*, Department of Health, London.

- Department of Health (2002) *Press Release 2002/0401: Funding Boost for Social Work Students*, Department of Health, London.
- Disability Discrimination Act 2005*, The Stationery Office Limited, London.
- Dziegielewski, S. F., Roest-Martl, S. & Turnage, B. (2004) 'Addressing stress with social work students: a controlled evaluation', *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 105–119.
- Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team (2007) *Findings from the Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree Qualification. Research Summary 1*, Social Care Workforce Research Unit, London.
- Finch, H. & Lewis, J. (2003) 'Focus groups', in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Researchers and Students*, eds J. Ritchie & J. Lewis, Sage Publications Ltd, London, pp. 170–198.
- Gibbs, A. (1997) 'Focus groups', *Social Research Update*, vol. 19, Winter, pp. 1–4.
- Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. & Slack, K. (2006) *Review of Widening Participation Research: Addressing the Barriers to Participation in Higher Education*, Higher Education Academy/Institute for Access Studies, York.
- Green Lister, P. (2003) "'It's like you can't be a whole person, a mother who studies". Lifelong learning: mature women students with caring commitments in social work education', *Social Work Education*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 125–138.
- Hall, J. C. (2001) *Retention and Wastage in FE and HE: A Review*, SCRE Website, Glasgow.
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (2007) *2007/07: Recurrent Grants for 2007–08*, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Bristol.
- HM Treasury (2004) *Public Service Agreements 2005–2008: Chapter 2, Department for Education and Skills*. Available at: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/C/0/sr04_psa_ch2.pdf, accessed 19 March 2008.
- Holmström, C. & Taylor, I. (2007) 'Mapping the terrain of selection for social work: a critical analysis of policy, theory and research', *Social Work Education*, DOI: 10.1080/02615470701379941.
- Holmström, C. & Taylor, I. (2008) 'Researching admissions: what can we learn about selection of applicants from findings about students in difficulty on a social work programme?', *Social Work Education*, DOI: 10.1080/02615470701737544.
- House of Commons Education and Employment Committee (2001) *Higher Education: Student Retention: Session 2000–2001, HC 124*, The Stationery Office, London.
- Hussein, S., Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J. & Huxley, P. (2006) *Diversity and Progression in Social Work Education in England. A Report on Progression Rates among DipSW Students*, General Social Care Council, London.
- Hussein, S., Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J. & Huxley, P. (2007) 'Diversity and progression among students starting social work qualifying programmes in England between 1995 and 1998: a quantitative study', *British Journal of Social Work*, DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcl378.
- Johnes, G. & McNabb, R. (2004) 'Never give up on the good times: student attrition in the UK', *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 23–47.
- Jones, K. (2006) 'Valuing diversity and widening participation: the experiences of access to social work students in further and higher education', *Social Work Education*, vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 485–500.
- Kirk, K. (2004) *Diversity and Achievement Research Project—An Evaluation of Support for Learning*, Social Policy and Social Work Subject Centre (SWAP), Southampton.
- Kitzinger, J. (1994) 'The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 103–121.
- Leslie, D. (2003) 'Using success to measure quality in British higher education: which subjects attract the best-qualified students?', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, vol. 166, no. 3, pp. 329–347.
- Lewis, J. (2003) 'Design issues', in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Researchers and Students*, eds J. Ritchie & J. Lewis, Sage Publications Ltd, London, pp. 47–76.
- Longden, B. (2006) 'An institutional response to changing student expectations and their impact on retention rates', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 173–187.

- Lucas, R. (1997) 'Youth, gender and part-time work—students in the labour process', *Work Employment & Society*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 595–614.
- Maldonado, D. E. Z., Rhoads, R. & Buenavista, T. L. (2005) 'The student-initiated retention project: theoretical contributions and the role of self-empowerment', *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 605–638.
- Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Researching*, Sage Publications Ltd, London.
- McDonough, P. (1996) *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*, State University of New York Press, New York.
- Metz, G. W. (2004/2005) 'Challenge and changes to Tinto's persistence theory: a historical review', *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 191–207.
- Metzner, B. S. & Bean, J. P. (1987) 'Creating a connection: tackling student attrition through curriculum development', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 15–38.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Quinn, J. (2004) 'Understanding working-class "drop-out" from higher education through a sociocultural lens: cultural narratives and local contexts', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 57–74.
- Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. & Noble, J. (2005) *From Life Crisis to Lifelong Learning. Rethinking Working-class 'Drop out' from Higher Education*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.
- Reay, D. (1998) "'Always knowing" and "never being sure": familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice', *Journal of Education Policy*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 519–529.
- Reay, D., David, M. & Ball, S. (2001) 'Making a difference?: institutional habituses and higher education choice', *Sociological Research Online*. Available at: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/4/reay.html>, accessed 12 June 2008.
- Reay, D., Ball, S. & David, M. (2002) "'It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end": mature students on access courses and higher education choice', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 5–19.
- Ritchie, J., Spencer, L. & O'Connor, W. (2003) 'Carrying out qualitative analysis', in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Researchers and Students*, eds J. Ritchie & J. Lewis, Sage Publications Ltd, London, pp. 219–262.
- Robotham, D. & Julian, C. (2006) 'Stress and the higher education student: a critical review of the literature', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 107–117.
- Smith, D. & Bockock, J. (1999) 'Participation and progression in mass higher education: policy and the FHE interface', *Journal of Education Policy*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 283–299.
- Smith, J. P. & Naylor, R. A. (2001) 'Dropping out of university: a statistical analysis of the probability of withdrawal for UK university students', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A (Statistics in Society)*, vol. 164, no. 2, pp. 389–405.
- Stanley, N. & Manthorpe, J. (eds) (2002) *Students' Mental Health Needs: Problems and Responses*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- Stanley, N., Ridley, J., Manthorpe, J., Harris, A. & Hurst, A. (2007) *Disclosing Disability: Disabled Students and Practitioners in Social Work, Nursing and Teaching*, Disability Rights Commission, London.
- Thomas, M., McCleary, R. & Henry, P. (2004) 'Effectiveness of admission criteria on student performance in classroom and field instruction', *Advances in Social Work*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 33.
- Tinto, V. (1975) 'Dropout from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research', *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 89–125.
- Tinto, V. (1997) 'Classrooms as communities: exploring the educational character of student persistence', *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 68, no. 6, pp. 599–623.
- Tinto, V. (1998) 'Colleges as communities: taking research on student persistence seriously', *Review of Higher Education*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 167–177.
- Tobin, P. J. & Carson, J. (1994) 'Stress and the student social worker', *Social Work and Social Sciences Review: An International Journal of Applied Research*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 246–255.
- Torres, V. (2006) 'A mixed method study testing data–model fit of a retention model for Latino/a students at urban universities', *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 299–318.

- Universities UK (2002) *Student Services: Effective Approaches to Retaining Students in Higher Education*, Universities UK, London.
- Willmott, L. & Lloyd, P. (2002) *Improving the Support and Retention of Students: A Case Study*, Higher Education Academy, York.
- Yorke, M. (1999) *Leaving Early: Undergraduate Non-Completion in Higher Education*, Falmer Press, London.
- Yorke, M. (2004) 'Retention, persistence and success in on-campus higher education, and their enhancement in open and distance learning', *Open Learning*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 19–32.
- Yorke, M. & Longden, B. (2004) *Retention and Student Success in Higher Education*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.
- Yorke, M. & Thomas, L. (2003) 'Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 63–74.
- Zepke, N., Leach, L. & Prebble, T. (2006) 'Being learner centred: one way to improve student retention?', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 587–600.

Copyright of Social Work Education is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.