



*A Profile of Students Admitted
to the Social Work Degree in the
CMSWTP Region*

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Introduction/Background to the project

Social work is a high stress profession that involves working with people facing complex and challenging life situations. In spite of the high-pressure nature of the profession, social work continues to be a lucrative and enticing career proposition for thousands of young people and also for those of mature age seeking a change of career. According to Social Work England, which regulates the profession, 67 institutions in England offer full time undergraduate degree programs in social work.

According to a report by Skills for Care (2022), around 5,710 students enrolled onto social work courses in England in 2020/21, an increase of 32% from the previous academic year. Of these undergraduate enrolments (making up 57% of enrolments), increased by 24% in 2020/21. The number of qualifying graduates decreased by 29% from 4,700 in 2012/13 to 3,360 in 2020/21. 470 of these students left the course without achieving a degree. Most people enrolling on social work courses in 2020/21 identified as female (87%). In undergraduate degree programs, the majority of students were white and 34% belonged to BAME groups. Social work enrolments had a greater proportion of people from Black, Asian and Minority ethnic background than the average across all higher education 35% vs. 31%).

Context and Rationale:

The Cheshire & Merseyside Social Work Teaching Partnership (CMSWTP) comprises 15 Primary Partners and 1 Secondary Partner including 4 Higher Education Institutions, 8 Local Authorities, 2 NHS Trusts and 1 voluntary sector organisation. The vision of the CMSWTP is to improve the life chances of children, young people, adults and their families by improving the recruitment, retention and the training and development of social workers and their practice. This project aims to support the vision of the CMSWTP by exploring the background and exploring the retention of student social workers. With the support of the CMSWTP the intention of this research project was two-fold, namely, to identify the socio-demographic profile of students admitted to the social work degree across the CMSWTP area, and to identify reasons and generate a profile of premature leavers, i.e. those students who left their programme of study before completion.

As academics from two universities of the four involved in the partnership we work closely with students and prospective students, and felt these are worthwhile areas to explore, we believe that knowing more about the socio-demographic background of applicants to the social work programmes will inform staff working in recruitment marketing and admissions departments and enable social work programmes to identify groups towards whom recruitment strategies may need to focus upon.

Social work students need to pass each module of their programme in order to progress, complete 30 skills days as well as being successful in two practice placements, one of 70 days and one of 100 days. It is a challenging programme and students who complete the programme successfully are eligible to apply to register with the professions regulatory body, Social Work England. We were interested in reasons given by friends and colleagues of each cohort as to why they felt others had left the programme prematurely- whilst it is important to note we are not talking large numbers of students, generally across the 3 universities we examined, retention is high, it is still a worthwhile investigation. Knowing more about why students leave will help to ensure appropriate support is offered and at a relevant time. Knowing more about why students leave the programme of study prematurely may also provide an indication of issues of retention for qualified practitioners- it may be possible to extrapolate some information which could be significant here too.

Generating a profile of students who do not complete their programme of study will also enable us to examine student progress through the degree and gain insight into when and why students leave the programme prematurely, knowing more about 'trigger points' may allow strategies to be developed to support students around those times to ensure they are making the most informed decision possible at that time.

With the support of the Cheshire and Merseyside Social Work Teaching Partnership (CMSWTP) we set out to explore these two elements of social work education. The research questions for the project were framed as below:

What is the socio-demographic profile of students admitted to the social work degree in the CMSWTP region?

Why do some students prematurely leave the course at different stages of the social work programme?

Method

Study Design: There were two main elements to this study.

This study used a qualitative cross-sectional design and is descriptive in nature. Primary data was collected from current social work students using electronic questionnaires. These included both open and closed questions to enable students to share attitudes and opinions. Secondary data was obtained from each of the three universities involved in the project regarding:

- a) The profile of social work students at the start of their programme of study, and
- b) Information regarding those students who had left their programme of study prematurely, in the main this related to each HEIs 'withdrawal from studies forms'.

Participant selection

Only undergraduate BA (social work) students enrolled in one of the three universities of the CMSWTP (Edge Hill University, (EHU), The University of Chester (UoC), and Liverpool Hope University (LHU) since September 2018 were included for this study.

Exclusions to the selection of participants were post graduate students and those enrolled in other courses offered by the social work departments of these universities. Students following a combined nursing and social work programme at EHU were also excluded, although it is a programme leading to ability to apply to join the professional body, owing to the programme being a 4-year degree and there being differences in both taught and placement content from other conventional qualifying BA degrees.

Ethical issues

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the ethics committee of EHU. The initial submission was slightly revised in order to fully comply with GDPR regulations in relation to contacting former students.

Data collection

Having obtained ethical approval, permission was obtained from the respective heads of the social work departments of the three universities to begin data collection. A postgraduate student from EHU was appointed as the Research Assistant on the project. Questionnaires were then emailed to final year BA students of the three HEIs.

Findings

The following information relates to the element of the study that sought to explore the socio-demographic profile of student social workers. In order to investigate the socio-demographic profile of undergraduate students admitted to the social work degree across the CMSWTP area data was obtained from that held by the CMSWTP as well as from three of the universities (NB as stated earlier although there are four universities across the CMSWTP, one has a postgraduate programme only).

The information received from both sources was collated in line with widening participation (WP) characteristics. These characteristics primarily group students with less than 120 UCAS points into one of four different sets of circumstances, these are:

- Underrepresented groups
- Students with caring responsibilities
- Considerable pre-course relevant work experience
- Care leavers.

Information was only available for the academic year 21/22 during which period 97 students were enrolled across the three universities, 21 of whom met widening participation criteria as outlined above, the majority of whom came under the category of 'underrepresented groups.' Universities use defining characteristics mainly POLAR. The Office for Students (OfS) define POLAR ('Participation of Local Areas') as a way of classifying areas across the UK looking at how likely young people in that area are to participate in higher education and how this varies by area.

POLAR classifies local areas into five groups - or quintiles - based on the proportion of young people who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Clearly for 'mature' students -

those age 20+ at the start of their programme (the majority of student social workers across the CMSWTP) POLAR characteristics are not appropriate.

Data is available from 2017 onwards for previous cohorts in relation to age, gender, ethnicity and disability as demonstrated in table 1 below:

Year	Number of students	Under 21	Over 21	Disability	BME	Asian /Black British	White	Female	Male
2017	85	34	51	12	9	1	75	76	9
2018	78	38	35	12	4	1	73	69	9
2019	95	39	56	11	4	6	84	88	7
2020	102	50	42	21	3	8	91	92	10
2021	146	65	81	20	11	7	130	134	12

Table 1 please note the figures above relate to those provided from the relevant departments at each HEI.

Reasons why students leave before completing their programme of study

As it was not possible to contact former students in order to address the topic of students who leave the programme before completion, questionnaires were distributed to a selection of final year undergraduate social work students to explore their perspectives of their programme of study and their opinion regarding why some of their colleagues had left the programme prematurely.

Combined with the questionnaire intended to obtain the student voice, information was also obtained from examining 'notification of withdrawal forms' held by academic registry departments. Because of the low numbers of notification of withdrawal forms received, and the lack of information recorded on them, this element of the study meant it was impossible to draw any firm conclusions or make any generalisations, however seeking this data did allow us to make recommendations regarding the value of such documentation as it currently exists

and the difference in detail required by different universities. For example, one university 'Reason for Withdrawal' form requires students to select one only from the following choices:

- Financial reasons
- Personal reasons
- Health reasons
- Unhappy with Programme
- Gone on to Employment
- Other

Whereas another university in the CMSWTP offers a far more detailed choice of reasons for leaving:

1. Health Reasons		5. Transferred to another University
Physical Health issues		University:
Mental Health/Anxiety/Wellbeing		Due to location/travel reasons
Other Health Issues		Preferred programme choice
2. Found/Seeking Employment		6. Other reasons
Found Employment		Travel disruptions/changes to public transport
Seeking Employment		Commute too difficult
Apprenticeship		Car share/parking issues
3. Financial Reasons		Non-attendance/engagement
Need to return/commence employment		Academic Failure
Limited financial information prior to commencing programme		Failure to adhere to Learning Agreement
Unable to access funding		As agreed at Faculty Support Meeting
4. Personal Reasons		Timetable issues/changes
Home Sickness		Delay in placement
Compassionate/Bereavement		Satisfied with an Exit Award
Pregnancy		7. Disliked Programme
Difficulties socially/friendship groups/Isolated		Programme not as expected
Unhappy		Wrong programme choice for career path

Family reasons/responsibilities	No longer chosen profession
Take time out of education/gap year	To commence professional programme
Accommodation issues	Accepted on to another programme
	Unable to cope with programme content/unprepared for programme

The table below gives reasons for withdrawal by students following registration between the academic years 2017 to 2021 at EHU

EHU Students Premature Withdrawal 2017 to 2021

Reasons for Withdrawal	Number of Students
Personal (not ready for higher education)	1
Personal (homesickness)	1
Personal (health reasons)	4
No longer wishes to continue on course	4
Personal (found/seeking employment)	1
Personal (family circumstances/responsibilities)	1
Did not like the course	1
Lapsed (non-attendance)	3
Withdrawn (may return to same/alternative course in future)	2
Academic Failure-Transferred to PT	1
Other reason not elsewhere specified	6
Total	25

Findings

This element of the report relates to information obtained from student questionnaires.

The questionnaires were designed to find out more from final year students regarding their experiences of studying on a social work programme as well as seeking their perspectives

regarding why some of their cohort had left the programme without completing it. Questionnaires were distributed to final year undergraduate social work students across three universities in the Northwest of England. Returns were disappointingly low, (approximately 5%) despite a reminder being given. On reflection we felt the timing of distributing the questionnaire was not optimal, students were already being asked to complete the National Student Survey (NSS), many students were on practice placement and anecdotally we were told that some had disengaged with the programme and were no longer looking at their emails. Regardless of reasons why so few questionnaires were received back there were some interesting comments that were made by the students who completed the questionnaires however we can make no claim they were representative of all final year social work students.

We note from Table 1 that the number of students who identified as BME or Black, Asian British are proportionately quite low when compared to the number of white students and also the population in the Northwest. While the data does not indicate progression and retention of these students it has been observed by earlier authors that for many learners from black and other non-traditional, the educational setting has not been a place that has provided positive experiences (Cropper 2000; Johnson-Bailey 2004).

When asked about their opinion on the reasons some students left the course, one of the prominent reasons which came up was stress and pressure. Some participants stated that their classmates struggled because of the pandemic (Covid-19). There were also a few who were believed to have found it difficult to balance both work commitments and personal life. A few participants stated that some people found it hard to cope with the reality of the work.

Regarding the programme more generally, students highlighted 'assessments' as being the most stressful part of their programme, closely followed by placements.

"Assessments including dissertation whilst on placement full time placed further stress on meeting deadlines that in my opinion, took away from the placement learning/experience".

Students completing the questionnaire suggested that to have a more positive experience, more interactive and engaging sessions were needed. A small number of students also suggested that tutors look to adjust the assessment dates in order have a stress-free placement experience and dissertation.

“Try to move assessments and third year PPDP portfolio before placement”.

The pressure of placements was also attributed as a factor contributing to stress. It was mentioned:

“I struggled with placement and wish I could have transferred after the first 10 days. Maybe a rotating placement 25-day placement to give variety and selection would ease the pressure. 70 days is a long time to be unhappy and it also allows a placement to treat you like a staff member and take advantage of the staffing situation”.

Students also expressed the need for more placements to develop clarity about future career progression

“...more placements so that students are able to decide whether they want a career in adults or children’s, maybe a voluntary in the first year and then a placement of statutory children’s and statutory adult’s and then another placement of non-statutory in a choice of either adult or children, totaling 4 placements altogether”.

Dissertations were another source of stress, particularly as they are done when on practice placement.

“It will be good to not have a dissertation running alongside a placement as the stress of the dissertation takes the focus off the placement”.

“I found it difficult to manage my dissertation whilst on my final placement within a local authority as I was also managing a complex caseload and found myself working on my dissertation until 2 am most nights, with no time for family life”.

“Not to put the dissertation and all the other pressures of finishing uni in time for graduation alongside a placement, which then means there is no work life balance”.

One of the reasons attributed to why some of their peers prematurely dropped out of the programme was to do with their unsuitability for a social work degree. This to some extent raises questions relating to the robustness of student selection and recruitment procedures adopted by the HEIs in terms of their suitability for the social work degree.

“People find the reality of the course too much. Not all people that enrol on the course are suitable to be social workers, despite having support from the university. The course is designed to give people some resilience for when they go out into practice, without this people may be set up to fail once they qualify as the job is extremely challenging”.

Information flow from the departments to the students also seems to have been insufficient.

“The pressure was too much, covid, the course was extremely hard, things weren’t explained properly over resubmissions and assignment fails and EMC’s”.

The participants also shared what made them stay on the course despite the stress noted earlier. Some participants gave credit to the university, mentors, and family for supporting them mentally, financially through the course. Some also mentioned that it was their own perseverance, determination, and attitude of not giving up that helped them stay on the course.

“Having a supportive family and self-determination have helped me to continue the university program”.

“My perseverance and determination to become a registered social worker was the sole motivation that enabled me to persevere in spite of numerous hardships”.

Regarding online teaching during COVID, the feedback was generally positive.

“The online sessions worked well for me as it did not involve a cost. I was able to do some housework at lunch and do the school run. This also give me more chance to research and sit down to have a family tea”.

“Having the online sessions support the home/university balance, for this reason, I believe it would be beneficial to keep some online teaching on the timetable going forward”.

When the participants were asked if they wanted to provide any additional feedback, a few suggestions of recording any online teaching sessions, and providing more placements to provide greater experience in the field, conversely, there were some participants who noted how they enjoyed their placement and appreciated the length of time they spent there, which would not be possible if there were more placements. Finally, several participants also mentioned how important their family support is along the way, noting that the support of family and friends helped them continue to study the social work degree when they might otherwise have considered leaving.

There are few recent studies that explore UK social work student retention, one notable exception being the 2018 study by Boath et al which evaluated a mobile texting service to enhance social work student retention while on placement to positive effect. In a similar fashion finding from a 2009 study by Moriarty et al indicated that social work students might benefit from additional support during and on their return from practice placements. Hafford-Letchfield in a 2007 study noted that student success was associated with their organization and time-management skills as well as their access to study skill support. Success was also

linked with the relationship students had with their tutors and peers. We might assume from this that lack of, or limitation of these factors may negatively affect retention.

We subscribe to the notion of earlier authors (e.g., Calder 1993; Chur-Hansen 2003) that motivation to succeed and seek further educational experiences in adult life, particularly for mature-aged students is influenced by a variety of factors such as teacher, peer support, cultural values, financial and family pressures, among others. As such it is important to continue researching the barriers to access *and* progression for social work students and more research needs to focus on the actual experiences of students once in the system.

Difficulties encountered and study limitations

The study was limited due to a number of factors, beginning during the global pandemic when teaching sessions were mainly online meant there were no opportunities for the researchers to speak to students in person about the project or to meet each other face to face, this combined with periods of absence due to Covid experienced by both researchers meant the trajectory was slower than originally anticipated.

Obtaining data was also more problematic than originally anticipated. Despite obtaining ethical approval for the project relatively early on in the process, in order to comply with GDPR, opportunities to contact former students were not possible. This project focused on undergraduate students, which meant we were dealing with three universities (the fourth university in the partnership only has a post graduate route to study social work) and obtaining data from three universities each with their own unique system of data recording and data storage meant that obtaining the necessary permissions for accessing this was time consuming, and when information was eventually obtained it lacked detail or was incomplete. Regarding obtaining data from participants, owing to COVID protocols being in place a decision was made to use questionnaires rather than conduct interviews with students additionally, as mentioned above, GDPR and confidentiality issues restricted contact with those students who had left their programme of study prior to completion. Our difficulties were also compounded owing to insufficient records available with academic registries of the institutions we contacted.

Clearly there are lessons to be learned from this process and acknowledging projects that do not always go to plan (Coelho & McClure, 2005) still offers learning opportunities and a way of highlighting aspects that need further attention. Developing strategies that may be utilised to overcome barriers in the future are discussed later in the report. The researchers note the limitations brought about by obtaining data from a non-representative sample, this also limits the scope for any generalisation of the findings.

Recommendations

There is a strong case to develop recruitment strategies with a focus on BME students to improve their numbers within social work programmes and to ensure the provision of adequate tutorial support to enable their academic progression.

In order to maximise relevant information needed for departments and the wider university we felt the onus needed to be on departments (ideally personal academic tutors) to conduct exit interviews with students and maintain detailed records of premature leavers.

We recommend that premature leavers are encouraged to complete feedback questionnaires regarding reasons for departure and what actions they felt may be taken by university and department in order to enhance student retention. Such questionnaires need to be consistent across the universities in the partnership. We would suggest the use of the form presented earlier being used by one of the universities which captures comprehensive details relating to premature withdrawal.

A request is made to students for informed consent to use their personal emails as a contact point in order to track career progression, to make them aware of future opportunities and events and for example opportunities to become involved in research.

Given the number of students who said their family and friends were instrumental in their remaining on the programme, opportunities should be made to encourage students to invite their friend and families to stakeholder events held, for example guest speakers to celebrate world social work day, or presentations, there are several events that are open to the general public and developing better links between students and their families and friends may also help to embed the university as part of the communities in which they are based.

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