Challenges and Opportunities for Social Work Doctoral Research

Elaine Sharland
e.sharland@sussex.ac.uk

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ESRC Strategic Adviser for Social Work and Social Care Research: Rationale

‘There needs to be a fundamental step change in breadth, depth and quality of the UK research base in social work and social care… The knowledge base to underpin existing social care services, to support their improvement and to make judgements about cost-effectiveness in their delivery is currently inadequate. Despite some notable exceptions, social work and social care policy and practice have developed largely without an adequate, closely connected research evidence base. It is essential that a stronger connection is made and that the social work and social care research can then deliver high quality evidence to the policy and practitioner communities. High quality, high impact research requires capacity to produce it; at present capacity levels fall far short of what is required.’

Strategic Adviser Commissioning Brief, ESRC, 2008
Purpose of the Initiative

Aim

- to make strategic recommendations to the ESRC and stakeholder co-funders for development of capacity and engagement to achieve research excellence in social work and social care

Objectives

- to identify current strengths and deficits in the social work and social care research and capacity base
- to establish priority interdisciplinary research themes for development
- to identify optimal mechanisms and co-funding arrangements to strengthen research capacity in the discipline and field
Methodology

Desktop review and informal consultation:
◦ extensive review of literature; academic and stakeholder discussions; Resource Paper for circulation to consultants

Consultation Stage 1:
◦ web based qualitative questionnaire to 20 key representatives of social work academy; additional input from others, including learned society

Consultation Stage 2:
◦ interviews with 15 key cognate discipline representatives, and 2 research funders

Consultation Stage 3:
◦ further iteration with all consultants - feedback on draft report incorporated into final report and recommendations
Challenges and emergent priorities

- To manage the principles, pragmatics politics of capacity development in social work and social care research fields.

- To move beyond knowledge hierarchies and paradigm wars, prioritising research excellence AND practice relevance.

- To balance needs of the social work discipline with maximising contributions of social work and cognate disciplines to high quality social work and social care research.

- To agree priority interdisciplinary research themes for capacity building and research excellence.

- To develop research capacity and engagement at individual (micro), institutional (meso) and research community (macro) levels.

- To address diverse stakeholder interests and engage widest possible stakeholder support.

- To fly the flag for social work and social care research and capacity development in a shrinking resource environment.
Social work research capacity – what’s the problem?

- Social work academic workforce: older demographic, mainly recruited from practice and without strong social science base

- Research/practice culture gap – research little integrated in post qualifying training; relatively little employer support; few career transition pathways..... an appealing (or practicable) pathway for social workers and graduates?

- Strong focus in higher education on professional education; ‘pockets of research excellence’ but low critical mass for research

- Long-standing under-investment in research –
  - Research and development = 0.3% social care service spend, compared with 5.4% in health
  - Funding base fragmented, piecemeal, often short term

- Little dedicated research infrastructure

Building social work research capacity means making research a viable, attractive, well supported and sustainable option.....
We need much more research knowledge and use of theory from other disciplines: stress theory, family systems theory, social ecological theory of human development, risk and protective factors theory, group theory, community development theory etc. And we need knowledge of current and past research in journals across cognate disciplines. The areas of possibility are numerous. Everything from new brain research to research on social exclusion or social capital. And not just UK but comparative stuff, we have to look wider than just to ourselves. (Social work consultant)

If you stick with the practice based research you’re always going to be operating in a pretty narrow area aren’t you? And you’re always going to be struggling to have a take on context that’s not just superficial, it’s what drives the way in which people practise and how people respond to that practice seems to me … You have to look at the wider context in which things are placed. (Cognate consultant)

Maybe one of the biggest things you’ve got to do is actually communicate to the rest of the world. Cutting edge social work research has things to say to health, to education to other fields, and on some of the biggest 21st century questions, doesn’t it? How do we care for an ageing population? How do we tackle health and wellbeing equalities? Do real quality work for best value in today’s welfare regimes? That’s not just for policy people and accountants, it’s for service users and all of us.
Improving social work research quality: matters of method

We need to develop much better conceptualisation and operationalisation of outcome measures for social work and social care users. There are continuing issues and debates about how the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of social work and social care services are measured. In particular, there is the need for more sophistication in how outcomes are measured, especially in relation to the complexity of interventions and use of services over time. (Social work consultant)

We also need more rigorous studies on the prevalence and correlates of social problems by utilising methods more familiar in public health and epidemiology, such as longitudinal cohort studies and evaluation of complex programmes of intervention. (Social work consultant)

Comparative approaches particularly to long term care policy, long term care funding... There’s a lot of stuff that’s written at a policy level. But it’s actually looking at how those policies play out and beginning to compare outcomes across cultures and across different kinds of welfare regimes that’s what’s needed.

The problem is with people doing qualitative research not by choice but because it’s the only thing they feel safe in. And that’s a disservice to good qualitative research because people are doing it for the wrong reasons. You do need good qualitative work just as we do good quantitative work. That means developing confidence and the repertoire of qualitative skills too, and being prepared to learn new ones, be innovative. (Cognate consultant)

There is a variety and range of skills you need to deploy to answer any research question, you need qualitative skills, quantitative skills, you need economics, statistics and you need to be able to deploy the battery of skills in different ways to answer different questions. You need good research reviewing skills, to recognise what’s already out there and what’s best. Most of all, you need to be able to combine them to answer the right question in the right ways. (Cognate consultant)
Social work doctoral research: developing next generation capacity

- current capacity?
- maximising engagement
- research training content and delivery
- supporting doctoral researchers and career progression
- current opportunities and challenges
Current doctoral research capacity

- 56% of social work academics now have doctorates (ESRC Audit, 2008)
- 38% of social work academics are currently supervising doctoral students (ibid)
- HEIs now provide ‘a valuable base for doctoral research among practitioners, especially by part-time study’ (RAE, 2008)
- Part time routes increasingly include professional doctorates
- Almost 2/3 of UK social work doctoral students are aged 40+ (Scourfield, 2008)
- 70% of social work departments are in post-1992 HEIs (less established research culture but some HEFCE capability funds)
- Social work applications for ESRC competition studentships are low; success rates correspondingly low (absolute not relative)
The challenge of engagement

Research is currently conceptualised too narrowly and not seen as applicable to social work practice. The primary emphasis in UK social work training (and practice) appears to be on a narrow set of skills required by bureaucracies. This does not encourage research-mindedness. (Social work consultant)

We don't teach our [qualifying social work] students enough about research and why research is important, and we don't inspire them enough to make them hungry for answers and for interesting questions unfortunately. Most come on a qualifying course with the intention of becoming practitioners. Research opportunities need to be integral and visible from the start of courses just as in other disciplines. (Social work consultant)

For them there's got to be some focus or purpose to drive it. So how do you get that kind of motivational interest element into it? If you said to a whole load of practitioners "you can go on a course about how to critically appraise research", let alone do it, they're not going to be terribly interested are they? (Cognate consultant)

Funding is a key issue...[social work] practitioners can earn far more in work than on studentships. There is not much incentive at present to do doctoral research unless following an academic career as research is still not sufficiently prioritised in practice and service delivery by managers, and barely features in post qualifying training. Pressure on completion targets works against part time study and the balancing of full time work with families and other demands. ESRC must consider this especially in applied subjects such as social work. (Social work consultant)

Doctoral courses are not that accessible to early career [academic social work] staff already. Because you've got these people appointed usually to teaching .... You've got staff struggling to do part-time PhDs which is atrocious because they have neither the time nor the learning to do that. And that's just to get people started. (Social work consultant)
Creating opportunities for engagement

- Maximise flexibilities in training structure (pathways) and delivery modes
  - pathways tailored to diverse backgrounds, knowledges, skills and needs
  - improve part time, blended, distance and e-learning opportunities

- Maximise funding flexibilities
  - variable stipend levels
  - stakeholder and employer co-sponsorship
  - career transition fellowships

- Dedicated training opportunities
  - internships and attachments – to centres of excellence, and policy/practice settings
  - studentships attached to new and established research projects and programmes
When you read the data that come out of HEFCE or the other research councils, there are probably far more scientists and social scientists doing part-time doctorates than ESRC recognise. Certainly the Australian research supports that. But in relation to social sciences and humanities, the funders don't have a sense of how important part-time routes are to the vocational disciplines. (Cognate consultant)

It's actually trying to get the people who are a bit more senior, the good ones with experience who want to do research. So [it's] what the doctoral fellowships do that the DH have. You take someone who is a manager or a senior practitioner like you do with nurses and you pay their salary for three years to do a piece of work and everything else. You skill them up and they do a piece of work. They probably have a job to go back to. Of course in their line of work they can do both. (Cognate consultant)

The idea is that we help [the employing agency] turn the problem into a research problem. They fund the person to do the research and to do it really well and then they’re winners because they get a decent piece of work on a problem they’ve been grappling with. The person is motivated because they get their PhD, and we get somebody doing something good here. (Cognate consultant)

This is the best way by far to learn the trade. From start to finish you are working with others who know their business. You're completely involved at all stages, or if not all stages whichever ones give the best fit for the project’s needs and the student’s. You get your hands dirty, really dirty but the difference is there are others in there getting mucky too. And they know how to do or if they don’t know you’re in there together and working it through. It has to be combined with formal training of course. But the student gets the hands on support and makes a genuine contribution to something bigger. They do it in the States all the time. I don’t know why we don’t do it here. Money, I suppose. (Social work consultant)
Questions of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are contested.....

• is social work a distinctive discipline?
• how far should we grow our own researchers, or import others?

But there is broad agreement on:

• need for programme of research training (as in MRes (1 of ESRC 1+3 )
• sound social science core – includes qualitative and quantitative methods

plus mix of:

• discipline specialism at core and advanced level
• interdisciplinary specialisms at advances levels

and:

• development of sound subject knowledge and theoretical frameworks relevant to social work and drawn from wide range of disciplines
I’m broadly in favour of the current ESRC regime that requires people to do at least a minimal amount of everything. Certainly what they’re going to get in an MRes is not going to equip them to actually go and do very much by the way of sophisticated quantitative or qualitative research. But that’s not the point; the point is what it means to be a professional social scientist and having sufficient knowledge to know what kinds of methodologies are appropriate to what kinds of questions. It may well be that given certain kinds of specialism, you would never, ever use many of those things. But it still seems to me to be important to have that kind of foundational knowledge. (Social work consultant)

Beyond the basics, much depends on what research they’re wanting to do. So if they want to be observing, say, what goes on in a multi-professional team meeting, then there are very approaches to observing they could learn about. You can count what you see, like psychologists do, or use much more fluid visual methods. That’s when you need to develop the repertoire even if you only use part of it, as you probably will. (Social work consultant)

Quantitative research capabilities must be improved and extended to all academic social workers (even if they opt not to use them), much as psychology does. Beyond that specialist training for some is needed in multi-variate, logistic regression and longitudinal analytic techniques. (Social work consultant)

Social work does have and does need distinctive training in relation to its practice oriented approaches and participatory research. This is crucial for other disciplines to learn about too particularly if they are to value social work research. (Social work consultant)
Support and progression for doctoral researchers: the wider picture

Creating the right research training opportunities and curricula is only part of the story....

Social work doctoral students need:

- high quality supervision
- informal support and development opportunities: buddying, peer support
- active research communities and infrastructure within HEIs
- access to wider research networks, events, training (eg. RDI; learned society?)
- prospects for academic and research career development (including links with practice) – this means investment!
Some of the challenges for social work

- Spending cuts – in higher education and research!

- Most social work doctoral research goes on in an HEI world well beyond ESRC ‘gold standard’ reach

- Social work status within HEIs:
  At individual institutional level social work should not be seen as a ‘cash cow’ due to additional funded student numbers. Research should be seen as an equally important activity and core funding and capacity funding be targeted towards it. Where funding is limited, social work should be incorporated in [wider] institutional research development work. (Social work consultant)

- Training the trainers and leaders:
  If we’re going to be training up more and more new researchers to be really good researchers, and that’s what we want don’t we, then we need to make sure we give them the quality of service they deserve. They need excellent supervision. Co-supervision with other disciplines can be great idea, but social work’s also got to provide the best (Social work consultant)

I would support with training and resourcing the development of research supervisors, managers and leaders......They themselves are often without higher degrees/research training and lack confidence and competence to lead. (Social work consultant)
Some of the opportunities (despite the cuts)

- The ESRC recognises a need for better signposting of current research initiatives and opportunities across a range of funders that may be of interest to researchers, including doctoral researchers, working on social care issues (includes RDI, NCRM, mid-career fellowships and cross-sponsor studentships) (ESRC, 2010)

- Social Work Reform Board – raising and keeping research capacity development on the agenda?

- Proposed changes to JUCSWEC – a learned society for social work?
Opportunity or challenge? Some unresolved questions...

Concentration of excellence, or widening participation?

- ESRC recognises social work research as a ‘priority area’ for development, and doctoral research training is key. But their main interest is developing capacity for excellence - highest quality, high impact social work and social care research.

- ESRC plans to concentrate recognition and support for postgraduate research training in established centres of excellence (Doctoral Training Centres or Units) - if possible with ‘outreach’ to other HEIs, but risks marginalising social work and social care.

- Some degree of concentration of excellence is needed – but essential to ensure that social work and social care (with pockets of excellence) are included:

  [There is] the notion that all should be made welcome to the feast. I do not share this view. We should concentrate research training in centres of excellence ... But social work needs to be as fully as possible represented in the excellence mix. In order to ensure access, these would need to be developed for delivery in more flexible ways than are currently used. In particular, it should be recognized that part-time will be the norm for social work PGRs for the foreseeable future. (Social work consultant)

- Social work involved in 15 bids; some joint (eg York, Leeds & Sheffield); just 3 pre-1992 HEI bids
Opportunity or challenge? Some unresolved questions...

**Targeted ‘non-standard’ provision**

- Funding support for stand-alone Research Masters
- Dedicated (ring fenced) doctoral studentships and fellowships, including ‘discipline hopping’ schemes

We have high quality social work candidates who simply don’t apply. Why, because it’s a vicious circle, so few ESRC studentships go to social work that no-one believes they can. If the ESRC wants to take social work seriously, they have to put their money where their mouth is.

You need to create the right conditions especially for doctoral students from other disciplines to come into social care research. There’s got to be a carrot, make it not just possible but desirable. (Cognate consultant)

**Professional doctorates**

- Can provide key career pathway into academic research for practitioners and early career academics (structured research training, practice/service focus, flexible delivery)
- But ESRC is withdrawing recognition – consider these CPD not academic pathway
ESRC response (March 2010).....

- The ESRC does not see added value in ring fencing support for specific discipline areas as a means of addressing the capacity needs of the social care field.

But on a more positive note:

- However, where it is evident in the bids received to the [new Doctoral Training] Framework that training in social care is of a high quality and will address current capacity concerns in the field, the ESRC will seek to ensure that studentships are available for those pathways.

And:

- The ESRC recognises a need for better coordination amongst stakeholders in the social care research field. At an early opportunity, we will take a lead in bringing stakeholders together to explore the full potential of an initiative to strengthen capacity for excellence in social care research. The aim of any initiative will be to engage a broad range of perspectives on social care issues, underpinned by excellent research.

Watch this space!
Summary Report:


Main Report:

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/Strategic%20Adviser20for%20Social%20Work%20and%20Social%20Care%20Research%0-%20main%20report_tcm6-35297.pdf