



# Younger students in social work education: our new 'non-traditional' students?

*Cath Holmström*

**SWAP funded dissemination project 2006-2007 report**

**June 2008**

## **Introductory comments**

My initial interest in the experiences of younger students' within social work education developed at a time when, for most social work educators, the inclusion of school leavers within our programmes was a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, this was one of the many changes associated with the introduction of the new degrees that provoked discussion in HEIs and in practice circles, given the previous emphasis and value placed upon the importance of pre-programme experience. My work as Admissions Tutor meant that I had become involved in recruitment and selection debates regarding the difficulties younger applicants had, or perceived that they had, in 'competing' for places with the more familiar social work applicants. Working with practitioner and academic colleagues to explore fair assessment of the increasingly diverse pool of applicants had been an interesting experience. Teaching and tutoring across the BA meant that I also became aware of the extent to which some of our younger students reported experiencing discrimination on placement and within university experiences on the basis of their age and perceived 'lack' of experience.

This dissemination project related to research I initially carried out in the summer and autumn of 2006 that had focussed upon the experiences of our 'younger' (i.e. those coming direct from school or after a gap year or two) social work students on the BA Social Work degree within my own institution. The research used focus groups and questionnaires with the first three BA SW cohorts to gather a range of quantitative and qualitative data, with the focus groups serving the role of highlighting areas for exploration in the questionnaire phase of the research. Although the main focus of the research was with the younger students themselves, a small sample of Practice Assessors, academic tutors and 'mature' students were also surveyed.

The research findings had been thought-provoking and raised some challenging issues regarding the extent to which our younger students felt fully integrated, valued and supported on the degree. Themes of identity, difference, equality and inequality emerged strongly from the data. Younger students gave examples of times at which they felt their age had been significant in how they had been treated negatively on placement and within the university-based element of their studies. Frequently these included assumptions being made that they lacked 'essential' experience – a 'deficit' approach not much in use within social work education! At the same time, assumptions by other (chronologically mature) students that the younger students may not be so committed or reliable (especially in relation to assessed group work) caused some concern. Outside of the course, our younger students often reported finding it harder to become as fully involved in student social events as students on other (more traditionally academic) programmes of study because of the professional demands of a social work programme. As such, some reported feeling that they struggled to 'belong' both within and outside the course. Studying on a professional programme resulted in others

(friends/family etc) seeing them differently sometimes too and whilst some positives of this were acknowledged, many students reported feeling pressurised in different directions— possibly seen as being ‘too serious/professional’ by some outside the programme and ‘not able to commit’ from within the programme. Many also reported experiencing doubts about their academic ability at the same time – coming as high achievers (ours is a programme with relatively high entrance requirements) from A level/equivalent and aware that many other students expected them to obtain high marks, many talked about how difficult it had been to then admit needing help with this transition. Indeed, my own examination of student progress data indicated that these younger students did, on average, achieve relatively low marks during their first year of study – whether due to adapting to very different styles of teaching, learning and assessment and/or a result of needing to join in some element of campus social life – although their average marks increased dramatically as they progressed through their studies.

## Project aims

The aim of this dissemination project was to use the research findings mentioned above and, through dissemination and further exploration of these issues, positively affect the quality of student experiences by highlighting possible area of change in practice and areas for further examination. Social work programmes have a strong tradition of ‘inclusivity’ and working with very diverse student groups and have for a long time worked with a high proportion of those deemed ‘non-traditional’ learners within HEIs more generally. My initial analysis of research data showed that many of us were now needing to consider a newer group of ‘non-traditional’ entrants within social work education: our younger, or school-leaving, students and were needing to examine the extent to which our programmes and practices enabled these students to be fully integrated and welcomed as ‘apprentices’ within social work education and training.

I had anticipated that the dissemination grant would enable me to reconvene the initial focus groups in order to revisit and re-examine data and issues raised and to examine findings from the secondary research with assessors, tutors and other students. In addition to completing this, I was then able to work with tutors on the programme and to build awareness and appreciation of all aspects of difference within the group more fully than previously during the induction programme last Autumn 2007. I was also able to share findings and explore implications with assessors studying on our ‘Enabling learning’ module as well as with those involved in recruitment and selection.

## Project outcomes

The most significant highlights of the dissemination project for me have been presentations at conferences. The grant allowed me to spend more time preparing these than would have otherwise been possible and to work in a collaborative manner with co-presenters who were new to conference attendance and presentation. Firstly, I was able to prepare a presentation for JSWEC in July 2007. After spending time in preparation together, one current and one former student (both aged 18 at the start of their studies) copresented the research findings at the conference to a full room. For me, the decision to co-present the research was crucial. Allowing students/former students to have a way of voicing their experiences directly to those involved in social work education in various capacities was important in both content and more tacit ways. Although both co-presenters had initially planned to report aspects of the research without necessarily talking about their own individual experiences, they did manage to incorporate these too making for a particularly engaging and open presentation. The impact of what they experienced as a ‘deficit’ focus upon their *supposed* lack of relevant experience obscured their many strengths and contributions to the learning group, but also made many incorrect assumptions. Many of the younger students have substantial experience of other kinds. As one of my co-presenters remarked, ‘I come from a family of 11 brothers and sisters – I think I have a fair amount of experience of family life!’ Comments and discussion with those listening to the presentation afterwards were positive and showed a high level of interest in this current and important area. Both students have used this formative experience to confirm their interests in research activity more generally and this is a highly welcome unintended consequence of their partnership in this work.

In January 2008 I was able to use remaining monies to partially fund the participation of one of our current students in a presentation with me at the PEPE conference. This allowed us to explore the issues of age and experience in relation to professional study in an inter-professional and international context. In addition, Rebecca, having now attended and presented at two conferences, was able to write up her experiences for publication in an international journal and this has been a further

unintended but welcome outcome! Co-presenting with current and former students has also been a wonderful learning experience for myself and hopefully for those participating in the sessions in which they have been involved and has furthered my interest in supporting students to experience research environments and to develop their own involvement in research processes and communities.

### Future plans

The two conference presentations have also been written up for publication and although this was not completely finished at the end of the dissemination project (largely because of the initially unexpected decision to attend and present at PEPE), it will be completed over the summer of 2008. In addition, I have been able to re-convene groups of students, contact practice assessors in order to supplement the original data and in order to look more closely at the experiences and attitudes of practice assessors involved with working with our younger students, research which is to be the focus of a JSWEC 2008 presentation along with a colleague from a different HEI. This latter development emerged from discussions and meetings with colleagues in other HEIs about carrying out follow up work in this field by way of a larger scale comparative study. This has already involved sharing research findings and exploring similar and different experiences and we hope to be able to secure funding to enable a longer term and larger scale project to take place.

### Concluding comments

The research findings have potentially wide-ranging implications for supporting younger students within social work education, as well as for working with student cohorts around issues of difference. I have spent time during the life of this project exploring mentoring and peer support schemes and have also devised a training session for practice assessors about these issues. In addition, my research findings have informed our interviewer/selector training and work with schools and colleges in our recruitment work. Much of this work is on-going, but my work on this during the life of my dissemination project highlights the relevance of this topic for further exploration – particularly in the context of current changes to the 14-19 curriculum and changes to the social work profession. Liaisons with schools, careers services prior to admission as well as continuing our work with practice assessors will be important in the coming months. Exploring the feasibility of a larger, comparative study jointly with other HEIs is now a priority too.



**Social Policy  
and Social Work  
(SWAP)**

The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)  
University of Southampton School of Social Sciences  
Southampton  
SO17 1BJ



Printed on recycled paper