

Transforming social work education in the UK



National teaching of communication skills with children and young people has been shaped by research evidence from Sussex, and communications with children have improved as a direct result.

Research at Sussex has significantly influenced the national curricula content of, and entry standards for, social work education in England and Wales. This work has established new guidelines for setting admissions standards for all English social work courses, resulting in the selection and training of better-quality candidates. It has also improved the teaching and learning of communication skills with children and of law in social work programmes and resulted in the development of prize-winning educational resources.

Overview

In recent years, a series of high-profile child deaths led to escalating perceptions that poor practice by social workers might partly be attributed to national inconsistencies in the extent to which social work education (SWE) courses were selecting suitable candidates and/or producing high-quality graduates for the profession. Over a decade of research excellence in the Department of Social Work and Social Care at the University of Sussex, led by Imogen Taylor (Professor of Social Work and Social Care) in collaboration with Barry Luckcock (Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Social Policy), Michelle Lefevre (Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Social Care), Suzy Bray

(Professor of Social Work and Social Care), and Cath Holmström (Principal Lecturer in Social Work, University of Brighton, former Senior Lecturer in Social Work, University of Sussex), has had a transformative impact on SWE policy and practice in the UK.

Following introduction of the social work degree in 2003–2004, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) commissioned Sussex staff to undertake 10 studies of teaching, learning and assessment in Department of Health required curricula topics. During the course of this work the Department of Social Work and Social Care at the University of Sussex was selected from 300 candidates to become a SCIE Registered Provider of Research. The team used innovative methodology, involving research users in the design and implementation of their studies, and were the first to apply systematic review methodology to research in SWE. The findings significantly strengthened the evidence base for delivery of professional education in this field.

Two SCIE studies, *Teaching, Learning and Assessing Communication Skills with Children and Young People in Social Work Education* and *Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Law in Social Work Education*, exemplify the impact of their research on changing policy and practice. Both were informed by systematic literature reviews, surveys of university practices and consultation workshops with service-users, including children and young people. The findings demonstrated that teaching and assessment of communication skills with children was inconsistent, and

that the law/social work relationship was often strained – students found law learning difficult and curriculum content was variable. These studies led to further research commissions to develop innovative e-learning tools to enhance communication skills (2008) and law learning (2007) and to explore educator capacity to use e-learning resources and their impact on student learning (2011). Two core practice texts on communication with children and young people translated the SCIE study findings for higher education (HE) educators, students and practitioners. In 2009, Lefevre and Taylor were invited by the Care Council for Wales to undertake three linked studies to inform SWE and practice with children in Wales.

In 2008, the first UK exploratory study of its kind for many years examined the relationship between applicants' pre-admission information and their performance on the social work degree. This led the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to commission Holmström to study student selection in social work and inform development of admissions policy in England. The study found limited evidence to support concerns regarding low quality of social work selection processes and training and supported two further HEA commissions to survey admissions practice and write national guidance for social work admissions tutors (2011).

Achieving impact

Sussex research has significantly influenced policy and HE practice in terms of admissions standards to social work courses in England, resulting in both the selection and training of better-quality candidates. It has also impacted on the teaching of law to social work students, and has improved the teaching of communication skills with children.

In 2008, Holmström was invited to join the national Social Work Task Force (SWTF – which became the Social Work Reform Board in 2010), and lead discussions on admissions which have helped form a widely acknowledged evidence base in this area. Holmström drafted national guidance on the selection of social work students, which was drawn upon extensively by the new College of Social Work when

drafting the summary document that is now the benchmark for endorsement decisions in respect of qualifying social work courses in England. This work on admissions was commissioned by the HEA and GSCC/HPCPC to explain HCPC standards on admissions procedures and their interaction with the relevant legislative and policy drivers and widening participation and equalities issues. Holmström's outputs were designed to equip social work admissions tutors and their partners in England with technical and operational guidance, to provide exemplars of good practice, and to integrate with the criteria for programme endorsement used by the College of Social Work since 2012. This guidance was predicted by the HEA to impact on some 97 per cent of the 250 courses currently being offered.

Research conducted by Sussex in partnership with the University of Bedfordshire has helped shape law teaching in SWE nationally. Following the original research, Braye and colleagues were commissioned by the HEA to conduct further research in the law curriculum. Braye provided evidence to the SWTF working group on the law curriculum and commented on its proposals. Law learning has improved as a result of e-learning resources commissioned from Sussex/Bedfordshire by SCIE on behalf of the Department of Health. These resources were awarded first prize for innovation by the HEA Association of Learning Technology.

Finally, national teaching of communication skills with children has been shaped by research evidence from Sussex, and communications with children have improved as a direct result. In 2013, the Care Council for Wales reported that they have used the three studies they commissioned to improve education practice with children in Wales, including revising National Occupational Standards for Social Work upon which the Wales social work degree is based. Teaching and publications based on the SCIE research have led to social workers feeling better prepared for work with children. Two books on good practice with children have been cited as core texts in the training of social workers and other professionals.

Future impact

Lefevre has further developed her research on social workers' communication with children by undertaking a prospective longitudinal study that examined how social work students learned how to become effective communicators with children. This study has led to three journal articles, three invited keynotes and four papers at international conferences. The research has been considered by the Department for Education and the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families as part of a current review of the qualifying degree.

Holmström continues to develop research interests in respect of selection decisions and processes, as well as associated areas such as professional suitability and fitness to practise. She recently co-authored revised guidance for social work course providers on managing suitability considerations and has published (in 2013) a journal article examining the relevance of moral character in admissions and suitability debates.

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