

Succession and Success: New Generation Capacity Building in Social Work Education Australia

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade in Australia, a considerable body of research into the academic workforce as a whole has highlighted a number of key issues for long-term workforce planning. The broader picture is of a rapidly ageing workforce, particularly in senior leadership positions, of increasing casualization of the workforce and of a shrinking pool of likely applicants ready to take up positions as they become available. These issues are reflected in the social work academic workforce raising questions about succession planning, sustainability of programs and the reproduction of the discipline. The evidence base for an examination of these issues in the social work academic workforce in Australia is weak. In this article we consider the nationally and internationally available research in order to explore the key challenges in building and sustaining a strong social work academic workforce. We conclude by advocating for a comprehensive plan for capacity building underpinned by more integrated relationships between practice and academic social work.

Keywords:

Social work leadership; workforce; research capacity building; inter-professional research

INTRODUCTION

While social work education at undergraduate and masters' (Qualifying) levels is thriving in Australia with social work programs established in 31 universities across the country (AASW, 2016), challenges, including an undersupply of qualified practitioners, an ageing workforce, and disparate or uncertain long-term career structure (Healy & Lonne, 2010) remain front and centre for the development of a strong and self-renewing workforce. These challenges are even more prominent for the social work academic workforce in Australia which, along with the academic workforce overall (Bexley, James, & Akoudis, 2011), must address issues of recruitment, capacity building and succession planning as a matter of urgency given the age profile of the current workforce.

Regarding capacity building in the academic workforce, anecdote and conjecture have ruled over hard evidence. There have been few studies in Australia focussing on the nature, experiences and status of social work academics but much commentary. Concerns expressed in the Bradley Review (2008) on the shortage of Australian academics and researchers reverberated across social work, noted by Healy and Lonne (2010) in their broad workforce review, and in the discussion papers underpinning the 2012 publication of the Australian Social Work Education Standards (ASWEAS). Additionally, Thomson (2011b) signalled the need for concerted efforts to build capacity for the future. In this respect Australia is not an outlier by comparison with other nations but, to date, there has been little systematic effort to address what are known issues confronting the discipline.

In this article we examine the key challenges in building and sustaining a strong social work academic workforce looking at current local research and learning from international work in this area. A search of relevant databases for research literature as well as reports, reviews and commentary over the past 10 years was undertaken focused on academic workforce capacity building, academic workforce development, social work education, social work academic workforce and leadership in social work education. The article provides a critical analysis of literature found both in Australia and overseas. We conclude by suggesting how we might proceed strategically and practically to develop a comprehensive plan for capacity building in social work, which forges more integrated relationships between practice and academic social work.

Academic and Social Work Workforce Capacity Building: Australian Context

During the past decade in Australia, considerable research and scholarship has been undertaken with regard to long-term workforce planning in academia overall (Hugo & Morris, 2010; Bexley et al., 2011; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014; Turner & Brass, 2014). The combination of steadily increasing enrolments across the higher education sector (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014; Turner & Brass, 2014), a rapidly ageing workforce, particularly in senior leadership positions (Hugo & Morris, 2010; Bexley et al., 2011) and an increasing casualisation of the academic workforce (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014; Turner & Brass, 2014) along with the role played by higher education as a significant contributor to the national economy (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2014) have precipitated increased attention and anxiety regarding the health and longevity of the academic workforce. Hugo and Morris (2010) found that representation by baby boomers in

the Australian academic workforce (56%) was higher than in the workforce overall (42%) meaning that the impacts of this generation retiring in the next 5–10 years would be felt more severely and require more comprehensive succession planning to ensure longer-term sustainability in the national tertiary education sector. Further, they argue that this succession planning (which will involve the replacement of half the current workforce) will be exacerbated by the growth in student numbers and the sector as a whole requiring a larger workforce.

Support for younger people completing PhDs and entering the academic workforce in much larger numbers has been identified as a focus for current planning. There are however, a number of challenges here. Bexley et al. (2011) found that, amongst academics, the lowest satisfaction levels were to be found in early career researchers and particularly in younger people in these positions. Specific dissatisfaction was focused on employment security and income level in this study. These were identified as areas for urgent attention in academic workforce planning. In the report – *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia* (2014) – the challenges described above impacting on the academic workforce as a whole were found to be greater in relation to Humanities and Social Science (HaSS) disciplines. While student numbers were outstripping workforce growth across the university sector (36% student growth to 27% increase in workforce in 2011–2012) in HaSS disciplines, the workforce had only increased by 22%. Urgent action in relation to workforce renewal in response to imminent retirement amongst senior leadership in Australian universities is outlined in detail in this report, however, the question of available ongoing academic positions, and a suitably qualified workforce to fill even a reducing number of positions is cast into doubt by the report findings:

The evidence is that the current climate of employment for early career academics is steadily reducing the pool of likely applicants ready for the moment when the task of renewal begins. Graduates are exiting the sector. (2014, p. 89)

The picture is not all bleak, though. In recent research on academic workforce capacity building, Edwards, Bexley, and Richardson (2010) found most Higher Degree Research (HDR) students who participated viewed an academic career as desirable and the university as a preferred workplace. For this group, major barriers to their career aspirations included a perceived lack of available positions, and as with early career researchers, lower incomes than in other employment sectors. The task of ensuring that this group is able to transition to the academic workforce on completion of their studies, and that they can be retained in that workforce to support renewal over the next 5–20 years is a priority.

In relation to the social work academic workforce and workforce planning, much less research is available examining the Australian context. Healy and Lonne's (2010) research on workforce development across social work, social welfare and human services reported that, apart from psychology, all other human services graduates (including social workers) have the lowest take-up rate (less than 10%) for postgraduate study of any other sectors included in the workforce census. Similar to the academic workforce, they found the social work workforce to be rapidly ageing and currently older than the Australian workforce as a whole, with impending workforce shortages expected.

Structural Challenges

Structural challenges, including the convergence of all of the factors outlined above, create an environment where simultaneous staff shortage, reduced available positions and increasing student numbers may precipitate a crisis in academic workforce sustainability. The loss of knowledge and human capital as well as organisational memory which will accompany the retirement of over half the workforce in coming years, will be high if detailed and resourced succession planning is not in place. As the *Mapping the Humanities* report (2014), warns:

While the teaching and research outcomes generated by this workforce are impressive, and bring credit to the system, it is reasonable to predict that such a level of performance will be difficult to sustain into the future as senior staff move into retirement. ...While staffing profiles are highly variable across disciplines, they are often unbalanced ... and this impacts upon succession planning, continuity of programmes and the reproduction of disciplines, as well as upon career development and the resources for academic leadership. (2014, p. 3)

All of these factors impact directly on the social work academic workforce in addition to discipline-specific challenges. A number of factors proscribe the standing of social work in the academy in Australia. The staffing requirements within the ASWEAS (2012 V1.4 Guideline 1.4-1), often regarded as providing a positive push by the accrediting body for adequate, appropriate and quality staffing complements to deliver programs, can also be seen as a double-edged sword. The ASWEAS stipulate a minimum of five full-time (or full-time equivalent) social work qualified staff, at least three of whom should be full-time appointments, 60% of whom must be research active, with at least one at Professor or Ass/Professor level in the senior leadership role. The expected norm is that recruits to university will have a research doctorate or professional doctorate at minimum on entry, with established or emerging research records. The research requirements are also explicitly stated as more than 50% of the social work qualified staff having at least 30% of their time allocated to research activities and publishing at the minimum rate of three peer-reviewed journal articles in the preceding three years at the review of their program. Staff are also expected to demonstrate teaching quality, active involvement in field education and be up to date with “contemporary and relevant knowledge and practice experience to teach in areas relevant to their field of practice.” (AASW, 2012, v.1.4)

This credentialing is acknowledged to present challenges to recruitment for small, rural and remote programs, but also across the board, and raises issues in an increasingly competitive and austerity-conscious higher education environment. Thomson (2011b) notes the great variability and resourcing of social work courses in Australian universities and points to workforce capacity issues and professional leadership problems, in particular for institutions beyond the Group of Eight:

...it is a particular issue in regional areas where programs undergoing their cyclical program AASW review under the ASWEAS guidelines often cannot staff their programs at the senior levels of academic leadership required by the AASW. (2011b, p. 11)

One size clearly does not fit all and the AASW's provision to acknowledge staffing partnership arrangements between smaller institutions to square the circle has been seen as more of a gesture than a substantive solution. The leadership issue is particularly pertinent given the demographic profile of the Australian academic workforce, in particular the ageing workforce, and no small amount of sensitivity surrounding the international recruitment of social work professors. The issue here is not international competition but the fact that insufficient attention has been given, in-country, to strategies for career advancement and leadership training for those at mid-career level to make them more competitive in an international market. Too little is known about the constraints they face and the type of inputs they are given for career advancement.

Brew, Boud, Sang Un Namgung, Lucas, and Crawford (2015) tangentially address part of this question through their exploration of research productivity amongst English and Australian academics. The research team surveyed over 2,000 academics across a number of disciplines in six Australian and six English universities. Their interest was in the relationship between identification as a researcher and productivity – operationalised as whether academics considered themselves to be research active irrespective of whether their university defined them as such and whether they considered themselves to be an active member of a research team inside or beyond their university. Their argument posits that the academic environment both constrains and enables depending on how people interpret situations in which they find themselves and that levels of productivity were related to how academics viewed themselves and how they viewed research. What is instructive about Brew et al.'s account is the influence of disciplinary contexts and cultures, which act to construct or disable research identities in individuals. It is now well documented that social work academics face considerable barriers to such identifications (Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2015; Teater, Lefevre, & McLaughlin, 2016) including variable access to training, support mechanisms and resources as well as grappling with high teaching loads. Research context and disciplinary orientations clearly have a bearing. Teater et al. (2016) argue:

... a key challenge is how to create a social work academic workforce which can balance expertise in both research methodology and practice concerns, and provide a facilitative academic environment which ensures its staff have time to conduct high quality research alongside preparing students for practice. (p. 3)

In recent decades, national research assessment exercises, institutional and international league tables and changing priorities in government funding of research, (*publish or perish*), have pushed forward the emphasis on quantity and good quality applied research and income generation. The higher education sector is changing rapidly: internationalising, globalising and creating new mobilities, engaging with new technologies and methodologies of learning and teaching, all of which present challenges for existing staff, for the recruitment of new staff with different skill sets and for the development of senior leaders. The expectations are growing as the resources are shrinking. At the same time, the marketization of tertiary education in Australia and the demand-led system has produced unprecedented growth in student numbers (Healy & Lonne, 2010). This rapid growth, or what Karger (2012) calls the model of a "big" social work profession responsive to the undersupply of social workers nationally, necessarily has its impacts. These parallel pressures compromise the ability of individual academics and

teams to resolve the known tensions between research vital to their career advancement and the plethora of other activities vital to the sustainability of programs.

Interestingly, Teater et al.'s (2016) analysis of the situation in the United Kingdom (UK) concludes that universities may well be unlikely to commit to the circumstances needed to ensure high-quality research activity in social work and, accordingly, call for "macro intervention" on the part of organisations such as APSW and JUC-SWEC (Australian equivalents being ACHSSW and ANZSWER) to advocate for, and spearhead, developmental activity.

Research Capacity Building in Social Work

While research in Australia focused on capacity building with either the social work academic (or more general social work) workforce is limited, there have been some studies on research capacity building within social work practice, as well as strategies for building university-based research in social work. These studies are important to consider as attention to questions of academic workforce capacity in social work must be answered firstly, further upstream, by asking how a larger pool of researchers might be supported. Strategies for encouraging the development and practice of research knowledge, skills and practice taught in bachelors' and masters' level degrees, make up a key part of the workforce capacity-building environment. Both Beddoe (2011) and Harvey (Harvey, Plummer, Pighills, & Pain, 2013) argue that the development of a strong research culture in social work is increasingly important for both academics and practitioners in Australia and New Zealand to build credibility for the discipline and support social work interdisciplinary engagement. This echoes the earlier call by Agbim and Ozanne (2007) for social work to engage and to position itself as a legitimate and contributing discipline in a rapidly changing higher education sector.

A number of specific challenges identified by Beddoe (2011), Harvey et al. (2013) and others in developing a strong research culture and capacity in social work included lack of confidence, time and workload pressures, need for support, increased knowledge and skill development. It is here where particular attention should be focused at a local, regional and national level in developing academic social work.

Beddoe suggests that a process of building a research culture in social work from both practice and the academy simultaneously offers promise in building confidence amongst potential researchers and relationships between practice and universities, which may seed new research projects. Both this approach and Harvey and colleagues' argument for the development of a range of strategies to increase the research capacity of social work practitioners as a key component of research capacity building in social work overall, disrupt dichotomous constructions of or a split between research and practice, which have pervaded the discipline for a long time. (Drisko, 2014).

Research Learning

Taking the question of workforce capacity building in academic social work a step further back along the teaching and learning timeline, there is also a small body of research which examines the way in which research is taught to social work students.

The impact and experience of student learning about research and beginning to build confidence at this stage is an additional question for consideration in academic workforce capacity building. Some work has been done in pro-active engagement of social work students in research training and simultaneous engagement of human services agencies in developing “real world” research projects (Blakemore & Howard 2015; Pack, 2013; see also Joubert et al. in this special edition). Addressing fear and a perception of research as difficult amongst students was found in these studies to improve confidence, learning and integrating research skills and knowledge and, in many cases, students recast themselves as both end users of research and researchers. This represents an important beginning stage in a broad strategy to build a stronger research culture and self-renewing academic workforce in social work.

Dispersed or Ambivalent Research Agenda in Social Work

Ensuring good-quality, next-generation leadership is critical to sustaining the place and standing of social work within the Academy. The AASW requirements may provide a push factor to ensuring the representation of social work qualified people in leadership roles but research recognition for the discipline is fundamental to the social work academic profile. Emerging leaders are reliant on strong research environments, supportive infrastructure and positive evaluation in research assessment exercises.

Despite the limitations of such research measures, the Excellence in Research Australia ERA cycles 2012 and 2015 provide a touchstone of the standard of research being undertaken across Australia by social work academics. In 2012 for the 1607 Field of Research (FoR) code there were 16 submissions from a possible 28 institutions that offered social work (57%) of which nine were rated three or above which equates to world standard or above. One institution was rated *five* (well above world standard) and three were rated *four* (above world standard). In ERA 2015, 50% of eligible institutions submitted 1,607 (14 submissions from a possible 28) of which one university attained a *five*; four universities attained a *four*, and five achieved world standard at a *three*. Many schools of social work are ambivalent about the ratings given the internal manoeuvrings and the politics of attributing works to the various subject codes within submissions. There is also ongoing questioning of the products that are included and those excluded from ERA rankings with social work academics experiencing a *no* count on outputs that are heavily practice oriented. New measures focussing on impact in the forthcoming ERA 2018 are conducive to social work but only time will tell how well the discipline is able to engage with demonstrating this type of outcome. Notwithstanding, the published ratings and the ERA processes behind them, are the essential measures of the discipline and a key indicator of the perceived “health” of social work as an academic discipline. A dedicated strategy to *lift our game* in terms of the types and nature of products, how they are perceived, who our key collaborators should be and dovetailing outputs with university priorities for example, on impact and industry engagement, is needed to garner collective impact.

Powell and Orme (2011) identify the Research Evaluation Exercise (REF) in the UK as a contributor to further erosion of confidence amongst social workers with regard to research performance. This might, or might not, be the case in Australia as engagement with the ERA process amongst social work academics is patchy and there is no published evidence indicating their experience. What is known is that a large proportion of quality HaSS

research is taking place in metropolitan universities, especially the Go8 (Turner & Brass, 2014). What is implied is a systematic mapping of the state of play in order to determine the issues for building research capacity. Such a scope could consider the nature of outputs, quantify the extent of government funding for social work dedicated projects (ARC Discovery and Linkage and sector funding), consider how “impact” is being approached and identify training needs, mentoring and support needs and infrastructural development.

Workforce Diversity and Capacity Building

Attention to the issues of greater representation from diverse groups in the social work academic workforce and in leadership positions in Australia is sorely neglected. This is an area where research evidence is much needed, both quantitative and qualitative. Walter, Taylor and Habibis’ (2011) provocative questioning of social work practice and education, “How white is social work in Australia?”, focuses on the epistemological and pedagogical challenges posed to the lens of Whiteness theory. They stop short, however, of a rounded consideration of the issues of Indigenous and other diverse representation in staffing groups and the transformative potential such minority representation can make to social work education (Williams, 2014). These issues have troubled social work education elsewhere but remain neglected in Australian writing. Beyond initiatives to engage Indigenous peoples more fully in shaping social work education (see for example, Paul, 2013; Elston, Saunders, Bainbridge, & McCoy, 2013), the rapid growth of international students and the representation of CALD groups in the student body should give pause for thought and signal the need for a more strategic approach to enabling their transitions into leadership and other decision-making positions. Addressing diversity proactively should be part of a comprehensive strategy to build new generation leadership.

Building a Diverse Workforce

Addressing issues of workforce diversity has been highlighted by a number of researchers as a critical strategy in terms of both general and academic workforce capacity building. For example, Fletcher, Bernard, Fairtlough, and Ahmet (2015) in a UK national qualitative study of diversity in social work education report that social work educators have had a tendency to focus on recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds while often ignoring support and processes to ensure students succeed and graduate. They argue that not enough attention is paid to safety, welcome and support for minority students. Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletcher, and Ahmet (2014) reported on the same study focused on student perceptions of social work education and learning. They described subtle ways in which discrimination excludes some students influencing their completion of social work qualifications and engagement in postgraduate study.

What can we Learn from Work on Similar Issues Internationally?

In the UK, considerable work had been undertaken focused on building research capacity in social work (Lyons, 2000; Powell & Orme, 2011); Moriarty et al., 2015), re configuring and developing the social work workforce (Taylor, Sharland, & Whiting, 2008), and developing a discipline specific as well as interdisciplinary research culture in social work (Sharland, 2009, 2012).

The UK ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) identified social work as a priority area for research development and initiated a program of work under a strategic advisor to lift the range and quality of social work's research base (Sharland, 2009, 2013). Through the nation-wide scope, a number of key areas were identified where new research was needed, methodologies required development and infrastructural support was needed to build capacity. Sharland's work is significant in advancing debates about the nature and distinctiveness of social work knowledge which she posits as characterised by interdisciplinarity, "practice nearness," promotion of social justice, participation and empowerment, and fundamentally concerned to make a difference via knowledge transfer. In sketching out the state of play in the UK, her work pointed to strategic directions forward to achieve "a step-change" in the breadth, depth and quality of research. She argued, in reporting to the ESRC (Sharland, 2013), for a program of capacity development that required "not just infrastructure but leadership and vision" (p. 16) and places the responsibility for support firmly with the government funding body. She continues:

We need to maximise and develop disciplinary strengths along with inter-disciplinary synergies, to grow research confidence, capability and critical mass, and to nurture a culture that treasures both the inner and outer science qualities of social work and social care research. This in turn takes money... (p. 17)

Social Work and Inter-professional Research Capacity Building

Sharland (2012) describes social work in the UK as:

...in historical terms emergent, in developmental terms immature and in social and economic terms neither powerful nor well resourced. (p. 217)

She notes that this is less the case in the US, Europe or Australia, though research findings from her study about the importance of building capacity in social work research as both a professional and inter-professional activity given the multi- and even trans-disciplinary context in which social workers practise, are timely and directly relevant. There are important lessons here for Australia in relation to both university-based research learning for students, research engagement between universities and agencies, and considerations for increased recruitment and development of the social work academic workforce. Work in the US is also further advanced than in Australia, and offers similar lessons on research and workforce capacity building. For example, Dickinson and Fisher (2015) report on a comprehensive and multi-layered strategy to increase workforce capacity in child welfare via the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute implementation of a partnership approach which included all levels of organisations, student placements, on line and face-to-face support and organisational change. This research points to the links between social work academic workforce development and a multilevel strategy which includes practitioners, agencies and students.

Research, Teaching and Practice

Challenges discussed earlier in the Australian context are similar to those identified in UK research. Powell and Orme (2011) argue that the primary focus of social work undergraduate education, and subsequent workforce culture, values practice over research and establishes a binary relationship between practice and research as opposing forces in social work

knowledge. In evaluating the success of the ESRC Research Development Initiative, they also found that limited exposure to knowledge about research design and implementation has created further challenges to engagement with research amongst social workers. MacIntyre and Paul (2013) echoed this finding in their audit of social work research teaching, where ambivalence and resistance to research engagement was combined with limited skills, knowledge and confidence to create significant ongoing challenges in research capacity building for students and educators. Moriarty and colleagues (2015) found the research/teaching split an ongoing challenge for building research capacity along with increasing pressure on time from teaching responsibilities in the context of increasing student numbers and limited research infrastructure and support. They also found, however, that the majority of respondents in their study had undertaken some research activity in the past two years, were positive and even enthusiastic about further involvement in research, and were supported to some extent by their university to undertake research. One interesting note in their study was the level of academic qualification of respondents. Only 43% had completed a PhD. This is slightly lower than the finding by Tight (2012) that, overall, only 45.7% of academics working in UK universities had PhDs. In Australia, a significant increase in PhDs amongst the academic workforce from less than half in 1991 to 70% in 2013 (Norton & Cherastidham, 2014) paints a slightly different picture in terms of research focus and qualification level across the academic workforce.

HDR Recruitment and Support

Related to this is PhD recruitment and support. The age and experience profile of doctoral (including professional doctorate and PhD) students in social work in UK-based research (Moriarty et al., 2015; Scourfield & Maxwell, 2010) differs from that of other disciplines which means recruitment strategies and support (financial and other) in place are often ill suited to encouraging an increase in social work higher degree research. Scourfield and Maxwell (2010) found that social work PhD students were older (over 60% were aged 30–49 and a further 29% were aged over 50), often in senior practitioner roles, female, and over 60% were studying part-time while working full-time. Financial commitments for this cohort meant that scholarships or stipends were not attractive due to the significant pay cut for practitioners. Part-time study was chosen as the preferred option, but Scourfield and Maxwell identified challenges with completions as an area of concern in this context.

On completion of their doctoral studies, further disincentives for joining the academic workforce include the requirement to start in a junior position in a university and, in effect, move from an established career in social work to one seen as wholly new in social work academia (Moriarty et al., 2015).

Efforts to capture the extent, nature and content of social work PhD theses or initiatives aimed at discipline-specific support to doctoral students have not been a feature in the Australian context to date. The ACHSSW ran an initiative over three years, with some success, to collate the available information on social work focussed PhD theses with the aim of capturing the nature and extent of work being produced. This data, however, remained internal to the organisation and quickly fell into attrition. Efforts elsewhere which have been made to systematically support and generate new generation researchers provide useful directions for the Australian context (Scourfield & Maxwell, 2010; Sharland, 2009).

Investment in emerging researchers has been flagged by the AASW in their annual 2015 symposium. Engagement and capacity building at this level could form part of a strategic approach to career development, new leadership and disciplinary knowledge generation (Orme & Powell, 2008).

Research Culture

Finally, establishing an intentional research culture has been discussed in detail by Barner, Holosko, Thyer, and King (2015) in their study of research culture impact on academic performance. They found that psychology outperformed social work consistently due to the differences in research culture between the disciplines. In psychology, the close links between research and practice and the culture of research use by practitioners was significant in producing a higher number of research publications with a higher impact in the field. Barner and colleagues argue that the nexus between social work practice and research needs to be considerably strengthened to encourage increased productivity and impact of research on the profession. They point to historical factors shaping an antagonism between social work practice and research as a critical problem, which must be addressed in order to develop a stronger research culture in the profession.

What can be Learned Here?

A number of important lessons from work undertaken internationally in relation to social work academic workforce development and linked research capacity building.

Framing, Relationships and Positioning of Social Work Research in Universities and Practice

Positioning social work both within the university and externally as a strong, professional discipline and inter-professional contributor as Sharland (2010, 2012) recommends, plays to both the long-term strengths of the profession connecting real world research with the academy and also to social work practice history as part of multi- and trans-disciplinary teamwork in health, child protection, justice, disability and community development fields. A critical element in longer-term development of this kind of strategy is the improvement of the research–practice nexus and Barner et al.'s (2015) argument for improved research culture in social work. Building a strong academic workforce with a focus and skill set which includes within-discipline and inter-professional partnership development, strong two- or multiple-way relationships with social work practitioners and inter-professional fields of practice (Sharland, 2012) will go a considerable way in supporting the generation of high-quality, usable research and a strengthening of the value and recognition of research contributions to improved practice.

Multiple, Simultaneous and Strategic Approach Needed

Powell and Orme (2011) emphasise the importance of multi-stage and -level capacity building including structured action learning strategies, the establishment of communities of practice and a national forum for discussion of social work research. Their recommendations directly address challenges regarding confidence, knowledge and support voiced by social work educators in the UK and practitioners in Australia (Harvey et al., 2013) and New Zealand (Beddoe, 2011) through the development of multi-layer and -scale strategies for research engagement and capacity building. Connecting local action learning strategies

to a national agenda for capacity building is essential and Powell and Orme's suggestion of a research capacity building continuum is helpful in linking actions to different stages of research knowledge and confidence.

Building on this approach, Sharland proposed a multi-tiered, well-funded and strongly led strategy. Her Summary report (2010,p.iii) cautioned that:

... piecemeal support for one or two mechanisms is unlikely to pay dividends without complementary mechanisms to maximise benefits and argued that: a 3-5 year initiative with funded leadership and co-ordination, would catalyse development of capacity, infrastructure and stakeholder engagement sufficiently to provide the springboard for sustainable growth and excellence in the longer term. (Sharland, 2010,p.iii)

Development of a National Narrative and Action Plan

A critical lesson from studies in the UK with regard to social work research and workforce capacity building was the establishment of national discussions, planning and action (Powell & Orme (2011). In Australia, little research has been published which documents, maps or analyses key questions in academic workforce and research capacity building in social work. Questions remain either sparsely answered or not addressed at all including: who is undertaking a PhD in social work and what are key focus areas? What is the makeup of the current academic workforce in social work in Australia? How can we support and develop early career researchers to take up leadership roles? How can we support and integrate practitioners in research engagement, as HDR candidates and as future academics?

Sharland's (2009, 2013) work is invaluable here in outlining the process for, and shape of, a national approach to research and workforce capacity building and succession planning in academic social work in Australia. Avoiding piecemeal or inconsistent approaches, as she argues, is essential given the scale and urgency of workforce change already under way.

In this context there is an urgent need for the development of a national conversation and baseline research to establish a detailed picture of how things are in order to determine what exactly should be done at every level to build capacity. Little is currently known about the characteristics, motivations, supports and challenges within the social work academic workforce from early career researchers to professors. Healy and Lonne's (2010) study represents the first stage in a much bigger project mapping and analysing Australia's academic workforce. This is an essential next step in developing an understanding of what effective capacity building, workforce renewal and leadership planning might entail.

Dispersed and Multi-level Leadership

Powell and Orme (2011) identify dispersed leadership as a key factor for sustainability and ongoing capacity building. An important lesson here is the role played by networks, which include both academic and practice leadership. A dispersed leadership structure operating at multiple levels within academic social work and with research practitioners increases the leadership base across social work creating a more diverse and sustainable renewal process and building a networked research culture.

Taylor, Sharland, and Whiting (2008) also detailed a model for multi-level leadership and connecting roles. They focus on re-configuring the children's workforce in response to child deaths so the range of professionals working with children, young people and families, need to be able to navigate and adopt similar key roles in leading or co-ordinating responses. Social work is part of this call for multi-disciplinary approaches which also includes teachers, nurses, psychologists, teachers and others. The role of a broker in developing inter-disciplinary activity and boundary crossing is key in their argument. This kind of connecting role, which traverses disciplinary boundaries and can act as a conduit for knowledge, network and relationship development is invaluable in reshaping notions of leadership capacity building to include better co-ordination at local and national levels.

Addressing Issues of Diversity Proactively

Although in Australia, Healy and Lonne (2010) found the social work workforce did include an increasing number of workers from a range of equity groups; they note that far more work is required to provide adequate opportunity and support for diverse groups in completing social work degree programs. Representation in the social work academic workforce of diverse groups is much less understood in Australia and the lessons from Fletcher et al. (2015) are valuable in progressing further research and policy action in this area. Proactive strategies and intentional support systems to recruit, retain and promote greater diversity in social work academia are critical for both overall succession planning and for the development of a workforce, research agenda and research culture reflective of Australian society.

What Can and Should We Do?

The foregoing discussion represents a broad sweep of a number of issues attendant on what is often called succession planning, the core elements of which raise questions about the sustainability of the discipline both in relation to research capacity, career progression and leadership. More work needs to be done on scoping and prioritising the key issues raised in the Australian context and developing an evidence base to underpin a capacity building strategy. A consideration of key constraints and enablers is implied. A phased approach might include a more in-depth consideration of the available literature at home and away, deep consultation with key stakeholders, a review of tried and tested strategies for change in order to develop a multi-tier, multi-level development strategy. The moment is opportune. A powerful argument for investment exists triggered not least by the available evidence that emerges from the *Mapping HASS* report. Such an investment in a national agenda for capacity building could be considered by a partnership of key organisations such as ACHSSW, ANZSSWER and the AASW. The potential benefits attendant on research growth, career and leadership development are immense – a default to the status quo potentially costly.

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