Strengthening the Knowledge Base: A Research Framework for Social Work Education

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the current emphasis upon evidence-informed practices, the future evolution of social work education, including its accreditation and practice standards, relies on the use of rigorous evidence from studies of the efficacy of various teaching and learning practices. Yet research into social work education tends to occur in an ad hoc way with little strategic attention to identifying specific information needs and how they might build to form a picture over time. The creation of research strategies that address integrated evidence needs can help to structure potential research responses ensuring that the best possible advantage is gained from current and future research. This paper discusses the development of a research framework for Australian social work education that captures key research domains across service user, academic workforce and institutional systems settings.

INTRODUCTION

Although notions of evidence-informed practice are now pervasive in social work, the Australian social work education standards relating to the ways in which social work content will or should be taught are generally developed within a research vacuum. Rather than being informed by research from social work or education, the standards are invariably influenced by traditional preferences, for example, practice conventions that argue for individual supervision rather than group or peer supervision for students on placement. The standards are also influenced by assumptions that one way of teaching is inherently better than another, for example, face-to-face teaching rather than online delivery and they are often influenced by benchmarking against social work education internationally which is, of course, important for international transferability of qualifications, but can also inhibit innovation.

Accordingly a number of perennial questions haunt social work education and particularly in relation to the evidence base for Field Education. Why a 1,000 hours of assessed practice? What constitutes a good placement? What are the most appropriate models of Field Education for practice competence? Why 20 days of face-to-face teaching rather than 16 or 25, or more? Many of these questions are raised by stakeholders including academic staff, employers, and graduates and summarized by the accrediting body themselves in their ambition to state, and restate, the standards for social work education (see AASW 2016).

That research does not necessarily underpin standards and influence the shape of social work education more generally does not necessarily reflect a lack of interest in research. Nor does it reflect views about the value of knowledge-informed practice in Australian social work education. Rather, it reflects a lack of volume of social work research upon which decisions could be made.

The lack of a strategic approach to the development of research-informed practice is not unusual (Connolly, 2004; Williams, 2016). In many fields of practice, practitioners, managers of frontline services and policy makers legitimately use their practice knowledge and wisdom as guidelines which are often grounded in principled approaches, experiential knowledge and interpretative frameworks. With respect to empirical research, however, they have to make do when research findings are either limited or are unavailable to them within pressured timeframes. Decisions need to be made quickly and the absence of helpful-outcome research is a common reality. When reviews of practice take place, they invariably lament a lack of empirical research and make recommendations that research efforts increase across multiple domains. Recently, reform efforts have signaled the need for field of practice research strategies (DHHS, 2016). Recommendations relating to the training and education of social workers are often found in these fields of practice reviews (see for example, the recent Child Protection Systems Royal Commission, 2016). When this happens, providers of social work education tend to become reactive: looking at ways in which review findings might be integrated into the curriculum, or exploring ways in which training and education might better respond to the issues exposed by the review. There is rarely relevant research to hand that would support or challenge review recommendations leaving the discipline on the back foot in determining the future of social work education.
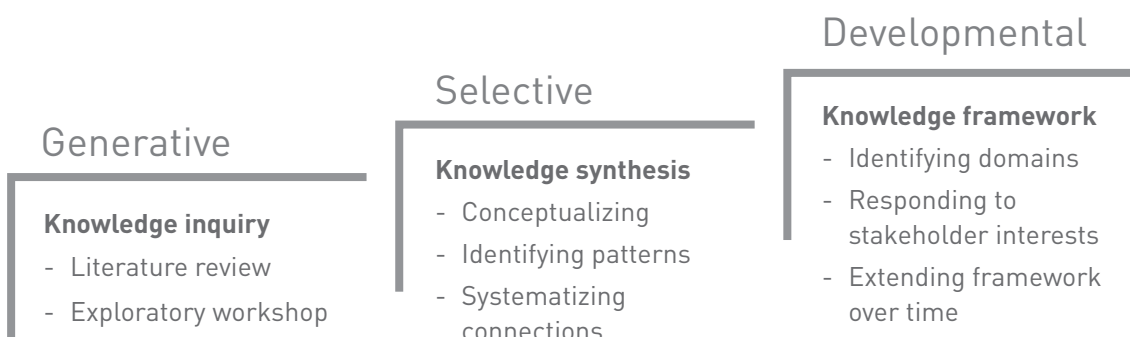
We argue that a more strategic, less reactive way of anticipating the demands of contemporary practice and strengthening the knowledge base is to build a research framework for social work education that captures the broad-ranging policy and practice concerns, effectively harnesses the research that has been done, and creates the opportunity to positively inform the development of social work education through research-based knowledge. Such an approach takes us beyond convention towards innovation and the building of novel research trajectories to drive change.

This paper discusses the development of a strategic research framework for Australian social work education, exploring its methodological approach, and some of the implications for the future development of research-informed social work education. It is anticipated that this planned approach could provide a blueprint for professional bodies, governments and interested parties such as the Heads of Schools of Social Work, to help shape and influence future research.

BUILDING THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The development of the framework was informed by two key areas of inquiry: a selective scan of research undertaken in the area of social work education, and insights from a national meeting of leaders in social work education where the question of social work education research priorities was explored and debated. This formed the generative stage of the development of the framework (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Process of research framework development (adapted from Connolly et al 2016)

Generative

Knowledge inquiry
- Literature review
- Exploratory workshop

Selective

Knowledge synthesis
- Conceptualizing
- Identifying patterns
- Systematizing connections

Developmental

Knowledge framework
- Identifying domains
- Responding to stakeholder interests
- Extending framework over time

An analysis of recent literature and research over two years (2015 and 2016) from three journals was undertaken: the *Journal of Social Work Education; Social Work Education: The International Journal;* and *Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education.* This analysis involved a review of all the abstracts of articles appearing in the 2015/2016 editions. Although limited, the review of the abstracts generated a myriad of issues relating to: *students and stakeholders* (e.g., learning needs, ethics, cultural competence, disciplinary identity, readiness for practice); *academic workforce and practice* (for example: social work faculty development; modes of delivery in social work education; pedagogy); and *institutional systems* (e.g., evidence-based education, the evaluation of programs; knowledge systems, sustainability). Many of these issues were also identified at the national ACHSSW (Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work) meeting of social work educators in 2015 and, in particular, the need for: a more flexible and sustainable curriculum; a cohesive framework for practice readiness in social work; building an outcome-focused curriculum; service user needs across multiple domains;

service-user-informed curricula; better understanding graduate destinations and disciplinary identity; insights from interdisciplinary practice; and understanding and advancing the place of social work in the academy, including the impact of increased casualization of the academic workforce.

The second stage involved a knowledge synthesis whereby the data related to the issues generated in stage 1 from the literature analysis and workshop were conceptualized into manageable categories through the selective identification of themes. The last stage of the process was developmental – where the categories were reconceptualized into framework domains across stakeholder interests (see Figure 2).

This threefold process provided rich information relating to the current demands and expectations of social work education, stakeholder needs and issues, and the context in which social work education is delivered.

THE FRAMEWORK'S DOMAINS

From the knowledge synthesis, three broad framework domains were identified: *Democratizing access and experience; Pedagogy, methods and practice of teaching*; and *Social work education experiences and outcomes*. These domains were then explored across three stakeholder interest groups identified in the generative phase of the process: students and stakeholders; academic workforce and practice; institutional systems (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Research Framework for Australian Social Work Education

RESEARCH STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION	STUDENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS	ACADEMIC WORKFORCE AND PRACTICE	INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS
Democratizing Access and Experience	• ATSI engagement in and experience of swe • Specific population issues: cald; lgbi; disability; rural and remote communities • Low ses students	• Advancing in the academy • The sw academic workforce • Casualization of the academic workforce • Adjunct workforce	• Demographics and pathways: cross-national comparisons • Program sustainability • Life-long learning
Pedagogy: methods and practice of teaching	• Professional identity • Experience of teaching and learning • Cultural proficiency • Intersectionality • Social justice and human rights • Service users and carers in the curriculum	• Modes of delivery • Use of technology • Interdisciplinary and interprofessional practice • Practice teaching and learning • Skills training • Problem-based learning	• Evidence-based education • Utilization of administrative data • Practice learning demographics • Program evaluations and pedagogical improvement
Social work education experience & outcomes	• Readiness for practice • Suitability for professional practice • Fields of practice • Post-qualifying jobs, salaries and skills • Doctoral experiences and outcomes	• Critically reflective practitioners • Integration of theory and practice • Academic and field partnerships and experience • Research translation & knowledge exchange	• Commitment to sustainable societies • Cultural responsiveness • Scholarship of teaching and learning • Internationalising the curriculum • Growth and demand for social work education

Each of the domains, with their corresponding research areas, will now be explored more fully.

Democratizing Access and Experience

Engaging, retaining and supporting students and staff in social work education is important to the longer-term sustainability of social work programs. The Commonwealth has funded the Higher Education Participation, Partnerships Programs (HEPPP) to ensure that Australians from low-SES backgrounds who have the ability to study at university have the opportunity to do so. The goal is to improve student access, retention and completion. Some social work programs have benefitted from this funding program implementing transition programs for low-SES students from TAFE, Aboriginal communities and from regional areas.

Universities across Australia apply efforts to provide for the learning needs of students, particularly the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students, a clear imperative in Australian social work education (Zubrzycki et al., 2014). Understanding the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse populations (CALD), LGBI peoples, and people with specific needs and interests such as those with disabilities, and those from rural and remote communities is also important as programs focus on equity and responsiveness to diversity and diversity of need. In addition to exploring the experiences of diverse student populations, the framework also recognizes the need for systems to better utilize administrative data to compare demographics and student pathways through institutional systems over time. This would enable a better understanding of access to social work training nationally, and would also prepare for future cross-national studies. Routinely collected information through audits of the baseline demographics and population characteristics of student and educator populations could well be part of annual reporting by programs to the AASW and the monitoring and review of this data more efficiently evaluated to calibrate issues of growth and demand and the implications for quality and sustainability of social work education. As Karger (2012, p. 323) points out, "this kind of study could look at guidelines around what constitutes an adequate supply of social workers, and provide benchmarks on the optimal geographical density of social work programs." Data on recruitment, retention and progression of underrepresented groups are critical to promoting access and equity in social work education. Currently the AASW does not collate or publicly release data on social work education (Karger, 2012).

Democratizing access and experience also has a staffing dimension adding to the sustainability of social work within the academy, the field, and the discipline more broadly. It is clear that Australian social work education faces many challenges with the casualization of the workforce, creating significant inequities, an issue that is also apparent internationally (de Sax Zerden et al., 2015; Wilson & Campbell, 2013). The report *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Australia* (Turner & Brass, 2014, 2015) identifies key issues significant to the social work academic workforce, including the ageing of that workforce leading to an impending shortage of senior staff available to take on leadership roles, shrinking opportunities for new entrants to the profession and limited career paths for junior academics. All of these issues impact on succession planning, the continuity of programs and reproduction of the

discipline. Concerns are also raised about the representation of particular groups within the academic workforce, and in particular those from Indigenous backgrounds (Zubrzycki et al., 2016).

The framework recognizes the potential for research to contribute toward a stronger context for advocacy in these areas creating better understanding of the ways in which people advance within the academy. The roles and development of the academic adjunct workforce – liaison staff and fieldwork educators – is also critical to this reinforcing the importance and significance of life-long learning and professional development and access to life-long learning (Halton, Powell, & Scanlon, 2015; Webster, 2015).

Pedagogy: Methods and Practice of Teaching

Pedagogy clearly sits at the heart of social work education, both with respect to classroom teaching and practice learning. The importance of building a critically reflective, integrated disciplinary identity (Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery, & Van Stratum, 2015; Pullen Sansfacon & Crete, 2016), aligned with social work values such as social justice, intersectionality and the support of human rights, is necessary preparation for the realities of practice within diverse practice settings (Betts, Maidment, & Evan, 2016; Bubar, Cespedes, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2016). Indeed Betts and colleagues argue that "action is required at all levels of learning to create substantial change in this area of social work education. This action can include challenging existing student and faculty perceptions and prejudices, incorporating relevant, appropriate, and critical course content, and to foster critical curiosity and engagement in students" (p. 99). Research to better understand these issues across programs needs to move beyond current student evaluation processes that universities typically rely upon to assess teaching efficacy. It is important to understand, for example, how cultural competence is taught, learned and ultimately evaluated (Jani, Osteen, & Shipe, 2016) and how programs engage with the requirements on the Indigenous curriculum. Indigenous epistemological and methodological challenges to the curriculum and pedagogic development are implied by the *Getting it Right* initiative but will need to be consolidated through rigorous research (Zubrzycki et al., 2016). Research into the ways in which student assessment can build upon a coherent and integrated knowledge base also has the potential to strengthen pedagogical practices (Hodgson & Watts, 2016). This relies on creating culturally safe learning environments and using reflective practice to build "culturally responsive pedagogy" (Tsuruda & Shepherd, 2016, p. 29).

Research into teaching and learning has clear implications for academic and fieldwork practice. Universities collect a huge amount of data relating to, for example, fieldwork practice. It is important that insights are drawn from this wealth of information to build the knowledge base and better inform program development. The literature review underpinning the ASWEAS 2012 consultation (Thomson, 2011) identified a number of issues associated with the lack of evidence to underpin Field Education standards, including supervision models, skills development and assessment strategies. Increasingly developments in technology provide important opportunities to increase access to social work education through online program delivery. These advances also push forward pedagogical innovation. While fully online programs are offered extensively in the US (see Moore et al., 2015), Australia continues to debate whether it is possible to provide online courses that fully meet the learning needs

of students. One of the consequences of focusing on the technology, is that we overlook the fundamentals of teaching practice – that is the relationship between the learner and the teacher and how this can be facilitated using online technology. There is no question that rural and remote communities in Australia present unique challenges to the delivery of social work education (Jones-Mutton, Short, Bidgood, & Jones, 2015). Crisp and Hosken (2016, p. 506) argue for a "fundamental rethink of practice learning in social work education" that creatively responds to the needs of rural and remote communities in ways that do not compromise quality learning. The challenges facing international students in practice learning and the value of student mobility and international learning to the portability of qualifications are all areas for focused research. Developing alternatives to the traditional apprenticeship model of field education (Hosken et al., 2016; Vassos & Connolly, 2014) also has potential, and studies that explore new and different ways of delivering quality social work education need to be encouraged. This would involve collaborations between researchers and the professional body to enable flexibility in meeting current standards throughout the research process.

Creating co-design curriculum and action research opportunities also provides potential for pedagogical innovation worthy of investment (Driessens, McLaughlin, & van Doorn, 2016). For example, involving service users in curriculum development is not new (Irvine, Molyneuz, & Gillman, 2015), but is relatively underdeveloped in the Australian context, despite some notable exceptions (Martin, 2016). Interdisciplinary research has also been identified as largely fragmented within Australian universities, undermining its potential contribution to cross-disciplinary learning (Stewart, Betts, Chee, & Ingamells, 2015).

Finally, the role that programs have in driving and developing pedagogical change in social work education creates important research opportunities, particularly through the development of Evidence-Based Education. According to Pollio (2015, p. 619), "EBE is the process of teaching students to understand, evaluate, and incorporate evidence into their practice." Pollio goes on to suggest that, whilst practitioners do use EBP, "many (or even most) practitioners continue to use unsupported or ineffective practices" (p. 620). Reinforcing these ideas internationally there have also been calls for a greater evidence-based approach to the development of accreditation standards (; Yaffe, 2013). Again this will involve moving beyond student evaluations of teaching and adopting a stronger emphasis on program evaluation (Higgins, 2015). This includes understanding the roles and responsibilities of academic and field staff, their views and perceptions of satisfaction with the all aspects of the program, including field placements; the experiences of students on placement, and the ways in which social work education is influencing the future generation of social workers (Hay, Dale, & Heung, 2016).

Social Work Education Experience and Outcomes

The concept of *student experience* has been elevated on the agenda of higher education providers in an increasingly marketised and competitive environment. Higher Education Institutes (HEI) vie to provide *added value* in terms of student employability and graduate attributes. Qualitative experience data, outcomes and destinations data are critical to understanding how social work students fare in the contemporary university. Work, for example, has recently been conducted for the AASW on student poverty and the ways in

which this represents a major constraint on their learning (AASW, 2016). There is a need to chart the development of student learning across their degree scheme and the specific outcomes for particular groups in terms of destinations in the workforce. A considerable field of research has opened up in relation to understanding demographics and pathways of student groups, including international students and Indigenous students.

This last domain of the framework focuses upon the transition from classroom to social work practice, and the broader development of the discipline through the fostering of critically reflective practitioners, the integration of theory and practice, and the broader movement supporting the scholarship of teaching and learning (Grise-Owens, Owens, & Miller, 2016). Drawing upon the work of Shulman (2004), Grise-Owens and colleagues identify this movement as "promoting teaching as community property, that is, happening in a larger context of critical enquiry" (p. 7). This points to the broader aims and vision of social work education, and its potential to impact on issues beyond the classroom, and indeed, the teaching environment. This includes institutional responsiveness to cultural issues, and advancing new and important areas of scholarship, for example, environmental social work and ecological justice (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015).

Beginning with the transition from the classroom to practice, whilst research attention has been focused on student readiness for practice nationally and internationally (e.g., Staempfli, Adshead, & Fletcher 2015; Howard, Johnston, & Agllias, 2015), there is still a good deal to know particularly given Pollio's comments relating to the lack of outcome-focused practice in the field. The integration of theory to practice, and the way in which social work education prepares students for specific fields of practice continues to generate research, for example in mental health (Martin, 2016), ageing (Park, 2015), and other specialist areas such as working the context of sexual violence (Thorburn, 2015). This kind of research is important in all areas of practice, including child welfare and family violence. Whilst there has been a longstanding emphasis on using research to inform practice, the way in which research is translated and disseminated to practice systems is often not presented in practitioner-friendly ways (Connolly, Healey, & Humphreys, 2016). More work on knowledge translation is required to address what would appear to be a poor take-up of research utilization in both student and practitioner fields practice.

Given the complexity of contemporary practice, it is also is clear that new graduates face many challenging issues when they enter the workforce, particularly in their first year (Hunt, Lowe, Smith, Kuruvila, & Webber-Dreadon, 2016). Frequently asked questions are: How well equipped are graduates in terms of the transferability of skills across fields of practice and their aptitude for policy analysis? How flexible and adaptable are they to rapidly changing practice environments? Within the Australian context, recent research into the job satisfaction and workforce retention of new graduates draws attention to the invisibility of newly qualified workers in community services, and particularly the need to better understand the needs of workers in rural and regional areas (Healy, Harrison, & Foster, 2015). Understanding the experiences of new graduates, and their early career patterns (Choi, Urbanski, Fortune, & Rogers 2015), requires both qualitative and quantitative research. What happens to new graduates early in their careers is largely uncharted territory in Australia yet it is essential to better understand post-qualifying

work experiences, including skill readiness for practice, as well as patterns of remuneration, retention and, conversely, the loss of people from the discipline.

The discussion so far has generally been focused on entry to practice social work education. PhD programs nevertheless provide the primary feeder into the academic workforce, and it is important that research facilitates both the development and improvement of this area of teaching and learning (Petr et al., 2015). While a PhD, or a near completed PhD, is required to secure an academic post in most universities in Australia, its value to the field is an important area of research.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The value of developing a research framework within a national context should not be underestimated. Such frameworks can provide the basis for the development of an integrated knowledge base, provide the spur for marshaling effort around a coherent agenda and avoid waste, attrition and duplication. It allows the profession to garner and consolidate its developing knowledge base and to push innovation in the field. In addition, such strategies open up possibilities for new forms of collaboration and highlight the efficiencies of cross-institutional working in an era of resource constraint. In a relatively small research community, the need for a strategy to avoid duplication of effort and attrition of effort is compelling. The recent emergence of the National Field Education Network is encouraging in this respect. There is an urgent need to share data sets and resources and to collaborate and cooperate in the collection of baseline data to which this network can contribute. Alliances between the AASW and ACHSSW could also be productive towards this end.

This notwithstanding, there are important reasons to highlight a strategic approach to the development of a body of knowledge in social work education in terms of the standing of social work in the academy. An evident contemporary trend has been the loss of dedicated social work schools and the subsuming of social work knowledges and pedagogical practices in the push towards inter-disciplinarity. In many ways social work research is losing ground to other disciplines and looking to other disciplines for its evidence base. Social work education has strong contributions to make to the inter-disciplinary mix and strong contributions to make to broader communities of practice. International collaborations alongside many of the indicators outlined in this framework will bring new insights to bear on social work education in Australia and, at the same time, proffer innovations forged in-country to international attention.

The importance of developing a portrait of social work education in Australia for both national development and international benchmarking provides a mandate for social work leadership. These matters should not be subject to "ad hockery" or whim, they should not be reliant on employer expectations alone or the push of crises in practice and the vagaries of what is/is not in fashion. They deserve to be crafted by design and deliberation over key priorities amongst stakeholders if there is to be a strong evidence base to underpin requisite standards and to push forward innovation. The positive growth in research outputs in social work research across institutions in Australia needs to be harnessed to make necessary changes to social work education policy and practice and bolster the sorely needed evidence base.

This paper has outlined an approach to the development of a research agenda as a first step. User and other stakeholder involvement in scoping the prioritizing of such a research agenda would usefully enhance this development.

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