Selection of Social Work Students: A Literature Review of Selection Criteria and Process Effectiveness

Catherine Hughes, David McNabb, Paul Ashley, Roz McKechnie and Helen Gremillion

Social Practice, Health & Community and Sciences Network, Unitec, Aotearoa New Zealand

....

Address for Correspondence:

chughes2@unitec.ac.nz

....

ABSTRACT

This article is a review of international literature on the effectiveness of student selection processes for social work programmes. Adopting a narrative and thematic approach, we present findings from research considering whether programmes are selecting capable students, or whether there is, in fact, little or no predictive reliability between selection criteria and eventual student success. A focus on selection criteria fits within a broader context of the factors that contribute to the success of students in completing their social work programme and in their future practice. Findings suggest that there is no simple formula for selecting students who will go on to complete their social work programme, and that many of the tools used during the selection process are unreliable predictors of eventual student success. Findings also indicate that existing research is limited; further research is needed, particularly on the value of specific selection tools and measures. This article also highlights related issues that require attention, namely inherent tensions between: the values of the social work profession, which promotes diversity and life experience; the academic requirements that inform selection processes; selection bias and student recruitment; the impact of an increasingly regulated profession; and the challenges that arise when we get it wrong.

INTRODUCTION

This article is a narrative review of the international literature in which discussions about student selection for social work programmes are taking place. Occasionally we also draw on literature that considers student selection for programmes allied to social work. The literature reviewed considers the types of selection processes being used, the tensions inherent in not granting access to education for some applicants, factors contributing to the likelihood of students completing the degree, and the issues that arise when students who do not meet suitability criteria gain access to the degree.

This article is a precursor to a research project being undertaken by the authors which is focused on the Aotearoa New Zealand context. This latter project is a multivariate analysis of scores achieved during selection processes by different groups of applicants to one social work programme, examined in relation to eventual student success. A planned article reporting on this project will begin to address gaps identified in this current literature review.

The Overall Approach and Literature Selection

This article adopts a narrative approach to the literature review as it seeks to summarise, and interpret holistically, a diverse body of literature surrounding a subject area (Jones, 2004). The review is thematic, focusing on key findings and knowledge gaps evident within a few framing topic areas that are linked to student selection for social work programmes.

Using social sciences and health research databases, we located articles relevant to an international discussion on social work education, published within the past 10 years, which address one or more of the following general topic areas: admissions and selection processes; professional requirements; and selection tools such as interviews, paper applications, and psychometric testing. Where a paucity of literature exists in the social work field for a given topic (or sub-topical) area, we include relevant analogous research from an allied field. Limiting our literature search to the past 10 years keeps our review both manageable and current. A few earlier seminal publications detailing significant background on the development of social work education are also included.

Literature Review Findings

Selection Procedures and Tensions

Over 10 years ago Lafrance, Gray, and Herbert (2004) noted ongoing concerns about unsuitable applicants gaining entry to social work programmes. Yet many of the research articles reviewed have stated that this topic is still under-researched today. Ross (2010) notes that selection and admission processes are a "highly complex and contested domain" (p. 473). Karger (2012) suggests that a market-driven approach to continuously increase student numbers, to generate external funding, and increase staff research outputs – all with fewer resources – has resulted in less-suitable applicants gaining entry to social work programmes, which, ultimately, puts vulnerable clients at risk.

Such concerns with at-risk vulnerable populations being exposed to an unregulated workforce were raised in Aotearoa New Zealand in the late 1990s (van Heugten, 2011). Widespread public criticism of social work management of child welfare cases had resulted in support

for the call for registration/regulation of this workforce (van Heugten, 2011). Such a move was considered necessary to enhance the public image of social work and to ensure that social work standards were raised (Beddoe & Duke, 2009; Rennie, 2013; van Heugten, 2011). However, the impact of registration on education and practice has been rigorously critiqued (Rennie, 2013). Other countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) have formalised social worker registration by making it compulsory for all such titled professionals (Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2014). The role of educational institutes as professional gatekeepers balancing the needs of protecting future clients with legal and institutional pressures is a complex one explored by Gaubatz and Vera (2002). Their North American (USA) study examines the quality of selection processes and how they are used to screen out counselling students who are likely to be marginal. The authors note the need for further research in this area, as they found considerable variability in selection procedures.

Campbell, Campbell, and Das (2013) also highlight the need for increased rigour in the design and evaluation of selection processes. Their article focuses on potential bias around gender, ethnicity and religion as part of their investigation of admissions procedures in two universities in Northern Ireland. They identify challenges recruiting male, non-Catholic and non-white students to social work programmes in Ireland, but the data presented are limited; although most successful applicants were female, Catholic and white, the percentages of the total number of applicants who fell into these categories were not reported. Nevertheless, the researchers note that the political/religious history of Northern Ireland as well as the influence of sectarianism could have contributed to a selection bias occurring in the assessing of personal statements and face-to-face interviews. The development of more rigorous selection tools, and the establishment of equal opportunity workshops for selectors in an attempt to limit selection bias, was an outcome of this research.

The accuracy of information gathered during selection and admission processes was considered in a UK study carried out in six sites that provided social work degrees (Manthorpe et al., 2010). Using admission data and interviews with academic staff, this mixed methods study identified a wide range of admissions and administrative processes, ethos and practice across the six sites. In addition to the diversity of processes rendering comparison difficult, no one set of institutional practices could be recommended in relation to information accuracy or consistency. Supporting the findings of Gaubatz and Vera (2002), the authors suggest that further research is needed to examine the accuracy of selection information that is gathered, the link between processes and outcomes, and the reliability and consistency of decision making.

A number of studies address implications of social work programmes admitting unsuitable students due to unreliable selection criteria. Sowbel (2012) carried out a literature review focusing on the ambivalence of USA social work schools regarding both admissions policy and termination of students once admitted. Few students are excluded once admitted; fear of litigation, unclear suitability criteria, conflicting educator roles and lack of valid field placement evaluation measures all contribute to the complexity of the process. Lafrance et al. (2004) also note that few Canadian social work programmes have well defined policies for termination of unsuitable students for reasons other than academic failure which further emphasises the need for the development of accurate selection processes.

A number of researchers discuss tensions between screening out students and intrinsic social work values such as inclusiveness and supporting change in individuals, concluding that this issue presents a challenge for social work (Dillon, 2007; Pelech, Stalker, Regehr, & Jacobs, 1999; Sowbel, 2012). Furthermore, a study carried out by Griffith University in Australia (Griffith University, 2009) found that at-risk students were difficult to assess at selection. Its findings align with those reported above indicating that selection tools are unreliable or require further research to determine their reliability. This study suggests that task-focussed advice during students' course of study regarding, for example, time management, planning, study skills and life problem solving may be more effective than screening out applicants (see also Moriarty et al., 2009).

Ensuring that students are suitable for the profession is important for ensuring the safety of future clients; much of the literature addressing this topic discusses "suitability" versus "unsuitability" for practice. The disjuncture between such an assessment role for the profession, particularly at the point of student selection, and the values of social work practice in appreciating diversity and developing potential amongst students will likely always be evident. The fraught nature of selection alongside the resource-heavy nature of selection processes, as well as an international trend that has indicated an increase in applicant numbers (Manthorpe et al., 2010), coupled with a market-driven pressure to admit more applicants, have resulted in some schools in the USA abandoning selection processes and implementing open access policies instead (Karger, 2012). However, most programmes internationally continue to implement a selection process.

Research on the Predictive Reliability of Selection Processes for Student Success

A longitudinal study, carried out in a South African University from 2008 to 2011, aimed to determine if there was any correlation between the scores achieved at selection day and eventual successful completion of the degree (Ross, 2010). The study was split into two projects, the first being an assessment of the socio-demographic profile of applicants and the second, potentially, being a full report on student completion numbers to be published on completion of the data analysis. The report on the correlation between socio-demographic data and student completion involved 878 applicants who identified social work as one of their choices for study in 2008. They were predominantly female (73%) and 84% identified as black[1]. One of the interesting findings was that, of the 878 applicants, only 280 had initially indicated that social work was their first choice of study. Many of the students who were ending up in the social work degree were doing so because of the scholarships being offered by the Ministry of Social Development, and not necessarily because they wanted to study social work. The majority of students who genuinely wanted to become social workers had chosen the profession because of their own difficult or traumatic experiences and although they were seen to have the right motivation for study, societal and economic influences often made completion impossible. This study found that, although targeted selection processes such as a biographical questionnaire are laudable attempts to screen for the most appropriate students, the reality is that applicants will often report information they think staff will find desirable in order to gain entry to education. While the biographical questionnaire can be regarded as having content validity it is yet undetermined if it provides any predictive validity leading to a higher rate of completion.

Holmstrom and Taylor (2008b) conducted a small-scale study of students' performance as applicants, measured by pre-admission criteria, in relation to their eventual level of success within two postgraduate and one undergraduate social work programme in an English university (see also Holmstrom & Taylor, 2008a). This study replicates a research project carried out in a Canadian university (Pelech et al., 1999) and was conducted to address the paucity of research on student selection into social work programmes. It involved forming two cohorts: the first was representative of the student body, and the second consisted of students who had been identified by academic staff as "struggling". The second cohort may not have met suitability criteria, and tended to be more resource-heavy, causing more concerns for their peers, placement agencies, and social work educators. Both studies examined a number of criteria from the application forms including previous academic study, time since last study, timeliness of application, whether social work was the applicant's first choice of degree, application route, and previous work experience. Holmstrom and Taylor (2008b) also included the interview score given to applicants at the selection interview. Both studies found that more male than female students experience interpersonal difficulties and struggles and are significantly more likely to withdraw. Another shared finding indicates that older students experience more difficulties during study than their younger counterparts. Holmstrom and Taylor (2008b) found no correlation between how students performed during selection interviews and how they performed once admitted. This finding supports other research, reviewed later, indicating that interviews are highly subjective and inadequate as an accurate indicator of eventual student performance. Pelech et al. (1999) note a positive correlation between the ratings given to the assessment of paper-based applications and students' eventual success. However Holmstrom and Taylor's findings raise caution about the use of exclusionary criteria being applied during the selection of suitable candidates, arguing that programmes should instead focus on providing appropriate support to applicants during their course of study (Holmstrom & Taylor, 2008a, 2008b).

Previous Academic Study as a Predictor of Success

A number of research projects consider whether there is a correlation between performance during previous academic study and student success in social work programmes (Conlon, Hecker, & Sabatini, 2012; Engler, 2010; Holmstrom & Taylor, 2008b; Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006; Pelech et al., 1999; Ryan, Cleak, & McCormack, 2006). Although academic ability has been one of the primary measures used in the assessment of applications, academic competence as measured by tools such as Grade Point Average (GPA) scores has been found to be an unreliable predictor of success (Conlon et al., 2012). Only the Ministry of Education (Engler, 2010) and Pelech et al. (1999) have found a positive correlation between good performance in previous academic study and student success in social work programmes.

While Pelech et al. (1999) identify high GPA scores on admission as a factor that contributes to ease in completing a course of study, Holmstrom and Taylor (2008b) note a complex relationship between previous academic study and success. The latter identified applicants with the least amount of academic experience as not struggling, and the group that had very limited study experience as struggling little, while students who had completed a university preparation course were over-represented in the group who were struggling. There was no significant correlation between higher levels of education and success.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education (Engler, 2010) carried out a review of the academic performance of first year bachelor's degree students at university who had achieved the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 3 and University Entrance standard. In contrast to most research examining correlations between good performance in previous academic study and eventual student success, this study found that academic achievement at school was the strongest predictor of performance in the first year. However, in spite of expectations otherwise, lower-achieving students from low decile schools performed better in the first year than lower-achieving students from high decile schools. This finding suggests that NCEA results, as an indicator of potential at tertiary level, can lead to the underestimating of ability of those from lower decile schools and the overestimating of ability of those from high decile schools. Studies have indicated that personal characteristics correlated with success in the practice-based components of social work training (such as fieldwork placement) may be more relevant to the selection of suitable social work students than are academic scores (Pelech et al., 1999; Poole, Moriarty, Wearn, Wilkinson, & Weller, 2009).

A number of studies examine the exclusion of potentially promising students that can result from a focus on academic qualifications. One such study involved a survey of 14 universities in Australia (Long et al., 2006). The finding was that students with potential were excluded due to selection processes that emphasised GPA scores, yet there was a 30% attrition rate among the students who were offered a place because they met the selection criteria. Moxley, Najor-Durack, and Dumbrigue (2000) argue that, when there is an over-emphasis on applicants' academic qualifications, particularly GPA scores from prior study, the resulting group of selected applicants may not be representative of the general population demographic and therefore may not result in graduates who meet the needs of the populations they are serving. Ryan et al. (2006) recommend future research to identify the relationship between pre-admission criteria and successful programme completion so that selection processes involving non-academic criteria may be refined. In keeping with these findings, Pelech et al. (1999) identified the need for tertiary education institutions to have support processes in place to assist those students who may have the necessary attributes to be selected into a social work programme but who may also have lower GPA scores. This study suggests that the ability of a programme to support students should be taken into consideration when selecting candidates and that the values that each institution places on specific selection characteristics should be consistent with the demands of the programme.

Applicant Characteristics and Psychometric Testing

In an attempt to address the subjective nature of selection information gathered and to focus selection processes more centrally on personal attributes, some schools have introduced psychometric testing. Gibbons, Bore, Munro, and Powis (2007) compared two selection instruments used in an Australian university and found that social work students demonstrated more empathy and tended to be less judgemental in moral orientation than non-social-work students. The authors suggest that psychometric testing could be useful in the selection process. They argue that testing could be used to identify desired traits in prospective students, which could potentially lead to admission protocols resulting in higher levels of student success.

Manktelow and Lewis (2006) carried out a study addressing this question. The authors examined personality characteristics of applicants for postgraduate social work courses in Ireland. In answering the question about what it is that attracts applicants to social work, they found that successful applicants scored highly on the trait of openness whereas there were no differences found in other personality traits. However, the findings were limited by a small sample size and observed differences were not statistically significant. Respondents may have reported socially desired answers rather than what they actually thought, so the conclusion is that further research is needed to identify the personality traits that characterise successful applicants and that may also help predict what is required to become a good and effective social worker.

However, as Holmstrom (2013) points out, desired traits can be developed through the process of education and are not necessarily present at the time of application. Holmstrom (2013) conducted a review of the literature focusing on character assessment within social work selection processes against the UK context of social work educational reforms designed to improve the quality of graduates. This study notes that assessing applicants for characteristics such as *virtue* during selection processes is problematic, identifying the challenge of uniting "the fallibility of the selection process and the fluid nature of suitability" with the course experience and preparation for employment "given the recognition that virtues may be developed through education and practice rather than being innate" (p. 464). Redmond, Guerin, and Devitt (2008) also note that the attitudes of MSW students in a Dublin university changed significantly over the two years of their degree, with students' preconceived ideas and assumptions about social work practice shifting through the process of gaining knowledge and exposure to professional values. Changes in personal attributes and preconceptions during a course of study, referred to as the process of *professional socialisation* (Cornelissen & van Wyk, 2007) may shape student success.

Sowbel and Miller (2015) make a case for a relationship between certain personality traits and subsequent performance in the classroom and in fieldwork. In their research, strong evidence of "agreeableness" was linked to higher ratings of performance in fieldwork which, in turn, support the notion of strong emotional capacity as important for fieldwork and practice. They suggest that further research on personality traits and selection processes has merits.

The Interview and Interviewer as Assessment Tools

Watson (2002) noted well over 10 years ago that there was a paucity of literature examining the use of interviews for selecting social work students. This situation remains today. Our literature search on this topic uncovered only three studies, Watson's included. As noted above, Holmstrom and Taylor (2008b) present findings indicating that successful interviews leading to admission are not correlated with student success in social work programmes. In addition, Ross (2010) notes the highly subjective and potentially biased nature of interview processes.

Watson's (2002) research also focusses on questions of bias and fairness. It identifies the subjectivity of selection processes for social work students, and compares the process involved in paper selection (assessing the written application) to an interview procedure.

Watson suggests that using a panel for applicant interviews and selection mitigates the likelihood of staff subjectivity, and both students and staff consider this process to be a fairer and less discriminatory practice. However, Watson's study indicates that, regardless of format, there is a certain level of subjectivity in the decisions made about applicants based on interviews as compared to paper assessment. Paper-based assessment was thought to be more objective as well as more cost effective.

Studies within other fields on the interview as a selection tool are informative. Poole et al. (2012) examined the correlation between interviews and student performance in medical school in Aotearoa New Zealand, and found that the interview had no predictive reliability in relation to achievement, withdrawal or failure to complete. However, they conclude that, in the absence of a better selection process, the pros of the interview format outweigh the cons. They also argue that any research on the accuracy of selection processes is problematic due to the fact that applicants with lower scores are usually excluded from programmes and are therefore not included in the research.

In 1998 a selection process was initiated at the University of Western Australia for first-year medical students, which included GPA scores alongside an interview. A prospective study of the new protocol (Mercer & Puddey, 2011) examines the selection process as a predictor of success in medical students. In contrast to Campbell et al. (2013) and Poole et al. (2009), the participant cohort in this study included not only selected students, but also those who were not selected and eventual withdrawals. Analysis of the effect of introducing interviews alongside academic scores in the selection process focused on the demographic composition of students before and after the changes in the selection process. Results indicated that the revised process had no statistically significant impact on student representation from low socio-economic areas, but the special entry quota of students of rural origin was increased (Mercer & Puddey, 2011). A further research article on this study indicated that the gender division of successful applicants was changed by the introduction of the interview process, with more female applicants being offered places in the medical school (Puddey, Mercer, Carr, & Louden, 2011). Although the context of social work programmes differs from that of medical school, in that females are over-represented in social work, it is useful to note that interviews can discern qualities and skills within under-represented groups during selection processes.

Indigenous Populations

Research on the success and retention of indigenous population groups within social work programmes, specifically in relation to student selection, appears to be very limited. The literature reviewed above on South African student selection and success (Ross, 2010) and on the Northern Ireland student applications (Manktelow & Lewis, 2006) are among the few articles that consider how indigenous populations are selected for social work student cohorts.

As a bicultural nation, Aotearoa New Zealand is notably unique in this respect. Within Aotearoa New Zealand, the social work profession has an abiding commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi to ensure that the indigenous population, Māori, are represented in our student cohort (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2013). Ka Hikitia acknowledges the right of Māori to enjoy educational success with the central tenet being the "Treaty of Waitangi

as a document that protects Māori learners' rights to achieve true citizenship through gaining a range of vital skills and knowledge, as well as protecting te reo Māori [the Māori language] as a taonga [treasure]" (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 44). Nevertheless, existing research in Aotearoa New Zealand has not examined selection criteria that predict success for Māori social work students. This gap in the literature is surprising given a focus on Māori as a priority group for tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 2013). Existing literature addressing Māori student experiences and success focuses on recruitment and retention, not selection processes. Such a focus is arguably appropriate in the current environment, in which there are efforts to create programmes that are successful for Māori, rather than fit Māori students into existing programmes (see Beddoe, 2007).

An international literature review on indigenous health workforce inequities was carried out in Aotearoa New Zealand (Curtis, Wikaire, Stokes, & Reid, 2012). The review explored articles using a *kaupapa Māori*[2] approach and was done to identify processes for recruiting Māori and other indigenous secondary school pupils into tertiary education, including social work programmes. Curtis et al. (2012) identified 70 articles that fit the Kaupapa Māori critical parameters for inclusion in their analysis. One of the main categorisations of the literature content was "recruitment activities". Within the tertiary retention and completion context, the positive contributing factors for Māori and indigenous recruitment included: student support programmes, financial assistance, flexibility around part-time and full-time options, indigenous curricula content, accommodation support, and increased indigenous – under-represented minority and Māori – academic and support staff. Thus, the imperative to recruit and retain Māori students is supported by the particular programme features and options for students cited earlier. It remains to be seen whether certain selection criteria are relevant specifically for the admission of Māori students who will be successful in social work programmes.

Regulated Environments – Fit for Practice

The component of social work education that is used to train students and establish suitability for practice is the fieldwork placement or practicum. Agencies tend to have their own criteria for taking students on placement which are based on their assessment of the student's "fit and proper" character. In Aotearoa New Zealand these criteria include suitability for registration with the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) after graduation (SWRB, 2013). As there is often competition for locating student placements, "fit and proper" criteria are often referred to when reviewing applications at the point of admission to programmes (Apaitia-Vague, Pitt, & Younger, 2011). This is the case even though fieldwork typically occurs in the final two years of social work training in Aotearoa New Zealand and if a student is unsuitable for practice, difficulties often emerge in that context. As Lafrance et al. (2004) suggest, the responsibility for selecting students who are suitable for practice arguably lies with academics who make admission decisions, not with field educators who are often left to manage students in the field.

In the early 2000s in the UK, the General Social Care Council (GSSC) formalised "fit and proper" creating an additonal burden for programmes to meet. After reviewing social work degrees, it introduced a new requirement: "[a]ll programmes seeking accreditation with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) will have to 'make sure that all graduates are fit for social work practice'" (GSCC, 2002, p. 5 cited in Furness & Gilligan, 2004, p. 466). Furness

and Gilligan (2004) have pointed out that the need for more qualified social workers in Britain is becoming progressively difficult to fulfil in an increasingly regulated profession and is likely to continue while the shortage of qualified social workers remains an issue.

The juncture at which the two conversations about application and selection, and about fieldwork placement converge is a point of tension often mentioned in the literature. Apaitia-Vague et al. (2011) note that tensions can occur when applicants are granted admission to programmes when they have a history of life experiences that may exclude them from meeting the "fit and proper" criteria required by registration bodies. Examples are: previous: criminal convictions, involvement with social service agencies, history of abuse or domestic violence which may be unresolved, substance abuse and/or history of addiction, complex social and health issues, and strongly held religious values that may lead to discrimination against future clients (Anand, 2009; Holmstrom & Taylor, 2008a). Apaitia-Vague et al. (2011) point to the conflict mentioned earlier in this article between accountability to clients to ensure that workers are safe to practise, and social work values such as inclusion, social justice, the right to education, and a belief in the power of transformative change.

Whether selection and admission criteria predict performance in field placements was the subject of a six-year longitudinal study carried out in Australia by Ryan et al. (2006). Pre-admission criteria included academic performance, life experience, work experience, positive reference checks, and interpersonal skills. These variables were found to be poorly associated with later performance in fieldwork placements, however this study was limited to one university and two fieldwork placements.

Furness and Gilligan (2004) report that, within the UK selection processes vary, but often consist of a combination of an interview, a written test, a group discussion and a role play; they do not however, carry out any evaluation of these tools as this is not the focus of their article, which examines assessment of applicants by current social work practitioners from the field alongside social work academics. Furness and Gilligan note concerns that have been raised in the UK about bias when practitioners are involved in selection processes, as those who are invited to participate are usually well aligned with the school. Conversely, the process may involve new practitioners who feel obliged to agree with the academics' viewpoints regarding applicants. They also note that in the early 2000s, in an attempt to bring more rigour to the selection process, schools were directed and funded in a limited capacity by the GSCC to involve service users in the applicant selection process. Furness and Gilligan (2004) argue that, although this is an interesting and sensible idea, the likelihood of funding service users giving up their valuable time and covering the costs associated with travel was not adequately addressed in the long term. The idea was how-ever, embraced philosophically by schools, which began to implement it within their newly redeveloped degrees. A report on the success of this scheme does not yet appear to have been published.

CONCLUSION

Selection of students into social work programmes is a highly contested and much debated topic. Overall, the literature reviewed in this article reveals little correlation between the use of assessment measures and eventual student success. Determining which applicants are going

to become fit and proper practitioners prior to undertaking a formal course of education is a formidable task that is as much based on gaining a sense of the applicants' character as it is on cold hard facts such as scores achieved on a series of tasks. It is important to continue to research student selection processes for social work programmes, as the number of relevant studies to date is limited. The stakes are high, particularly in increasingly market-driven environments that encourage higher student numbers. Unsuitable applicants may become unsuitable graduates who then pose a risk to vulnerable clients who are often the recipients of social work services.

Further research is needed on the efficacy and predictive reliability of specific selection tools and measures. Of particular interest here are findings from Holmstrom and Taylor (2008a, 2008b) as well as from Pelech et al. (1999) that male students and older students struggle to succeed in social work programmes. It would be valuable to determine if there are any patterns in selection data that correlate with student success for these groups, in keeping with the social work values of inclusiveness and diversity. The same holds for Māori and other under-represented groups. For carefully designed prospective studies, the biographical questionnaire (Ross, 2010) and the interview (Mercer & Puddey, 2011) may hold some promise in this respect, and may mitigate the ongoing conflict between assessment processes at the point of student selection and the aforementioned social work values. "Harder" measures such as GPAs from previous academic study have been consistently shown not only to exclude suitable students from programmes, but also to be unreliable predictors of student success.

Increasing requirements and regulations from regulatory bodies have added a greater emphasis on graduate competence and suitability for practice. Many of the tertiary providers covered in this literature review had recently evaluated their selection/admission processes as a result of the changing requirements by these bodies. Overall, the literature reviewed for this article indicates that social work graduates' preparedness for practice may be a result of a complex combination of previous experience, personal attributes, motivation to undertake this particular field of study, and training alongside professional socialisation. The ability of students to develop professional personae and the required attributes for social work practice throughout their education should not be ignored and needs to be considered when assessing applicants' suitability for social work education. This consideration is vital if the profession is to maintain and develop a diverse and equitable workforce that is representative of the population groups that students will inevitably work alongside.

Notes:

1. While internationally, "the term 'persons of colour' is regarded as an acceptable and non-discriminatory term to refer to coloured persons, within the South African context it denotes a person is of mixed descent and there is a degree of stigmatisation attached to this label which has been retained since the apartheid era" (Ross, 2010, pp. 466–467).

2. *Kaupapa Māori* is a methodology and can also be used in a more general way "meaning any particular plan of action created by Māori, expressing Māori aspirations and expressing certain Māori values and principles". As in Curtis et al. (2012), a kaupapa Māori framework can be employed to address a range of cultural groups' experiences. See http://www.rangahau.co.nz/methodology/59/ (paragraph 2).

References

Anand, M. (2009). Gender in social work education and practice in India. *Social Work Education, 28*(1), 96–105. doi:10.1080/02615470802404226

Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers. (2013). *Code of ethics: Ko te tauākì tikanga* (3rd ed.). Christchurch, NZ: Author.

Apaitia-Vague, T., Pitt, L., & Younger, D. (2011). "Fit and proper" and fieldwork: A dilemma for social work educators? *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work Review, 23*(4), 55–64.

Beddoe, L. (2007). Change, complexity, and challenge in social work education in Aotearoa, New Zealand. *Australian Social Work, 60*(1), 46–55. doi:10.1080/03124070601166703

Beddoe, L., & Duke, J. (2009). Registration in New Zealand social work: The challenge of change. *International Social Work, 52*(6), 785–797. doi:10.1177/0020872809342649

Campbell, J., Campbell, A., & Das, C. (2013). A study of successful applicants' views of a social work admission process. *Journal of Social Work 13*(4), 382–399. doi:10.1177/1468017311434876

Conlon, P., Hecker, K., & Sabatini, S. (2012). What should we be selecting for? A systematic approach for determining which personal characteristics to assess for during admissions. *BMC Medical Education, 12*, 105–115.

Cornelissen, J. J., & van Wyk, A. S. (2007). Professional socialisation: An influence on professional development and role definition. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 21*(7), 826–841.

Curtis, E., Wikaire, E., Stokes, K., & Reid, P. (2012). Addressing indigenous health workforce inequities: A literature review exploring "best" practice for recruitment into tertiary health programmes. *Journal for Equity in Health, 11*(13), 1–16.

Dillon, J. (2007). The conundrum of balancing widening participation with the selection of suitable students for social work education. *Social Work Educaton, 26*(8), 827–841.

Engler, R. (2010). *Academic performance of first-year bachelors students at university.* Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

Furness, S., & Gilligan, P. (2004). Fit for purpose: Issues from practice placements, practice teaching and the assessment of students' practice. *Social Work Education, 23*(4), 465–479.

Gaubatz, M. D., & Vera, E. (2002). Do formalized gatekeeping procedures increase programs follow-up with deficient trainees? *Counselor Education & Supervision, 41*, 294–305.

Gibbons, J., Bore M., Munro, R., & Powis, D. (2007). Using personal quality assessment for selection of social work students. *Australian Social Work, 60*(2), 210–221.

Griffith University. (2009). *Operation student success: Griffith's student retention strategy 2012-2014.* Brisbane, QLD: Griffith University. Retrieved from http://www.griffith.edu.au/learning-teaching/student-success/retention-and-student-success.

Holmstrom, C. (2013). Suitability for professional practice: Assessing and developing moral character in social work education. *Social Work Education, 33*(4), 451–468.

Holmstrom, C., & Taylor, I. (2008a). Mapping the terrain of selection for social work: A critical analysis of policy, theory and research. *Social Work Education, 27*(5), 519–535.

Holmstrom, C., & Taylor, I. (2008b). Researching admissions: What can we learn about selection of applicants from findings about students in difficulty on a social work programme? *Social Work Education, 27*(8), 819–836.

Jones, K. (2004). Mission drift in qualitative research, or moving toward a systematic review of qualitative studies, moving back to a more systematic narrative review. *The Qualitative Report, 9*(1), 95–112.

Karger, H. (2012). Lessons from American social work education: Caution ahead. *Australian Social Work, 65*(3), 311–325. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2012.678498

Lafrance, J., Gray, E., & Herbert, M. (2004). Gate-keeping for professional social work practice. *Social Work Education, 23* (3), 325–340.

Long, M., Ferrier, F., & Heagney, M. (2006). *Stay, play or give it away? Students continuing, changing or leaving university study in first year.* Melbourne, VIC: Monash University.

Manktelow, R., & Lewis, C. A. (2006). A study of the personality attributes of applicants for postgraduate social work training to a Northern Ireland university. *Social Work Education, 24*(3), 297–309.

Manthorpe, J., Moriarty, J., Hussein, S., Stevens, M., Sharpe, E., Orme, J., … Crisp, B. R. (2010). Changes in admission work arising from the new social work degree in England. *Social Work Education, 29*(7), 704–717.

Mercer, A., & Puddey, I. B. (2011). Admission selection criteria as predictors of outcomes in an undergraduate medical course: A prospective study. *Medical Teacher, 33*, 997–1004.

Ministry of Education. (2013). *The Māori education strategy: Ka hikitia – Strategy overview – Introduction to ka hikitia – Accelerating success 2013–2017*. Wellington, NZ: Author.

Moriarty, J., & Manthorpe, J. (2014). Post-qualifying education for social workers: A continuing problem or a new opportunity? *Social Work Education, 33*(3), 397–411. doi:10.1080/02615479.2013.806468

Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Chauhan, B., Jones, G., Wenman, H., & Hussein, S. (2009). "Hanging on a little thin line": Barriers to progression and retention in social work education. *Social Work Education, 28*(4), 363–379.

Moxley, D. P., Najor-Durack, A., & Dumbrigue, C. Y. (2000). Seven strategies for facilitating access of non-traditional students to graduate education in social work. *Social Work Education, 19*(4), 335–348.

Pelech, W., Stalker, C., Regehr, C., & Jacobs, M. (1999). Making the grade: The quest for validity in admissions decisions. *Journal of Social Work Education, 35*(2), 215–226.

Poole, P., Moriarty, H., Wearn, A., Wilkinson, T., & Weller, J. (2009). Medical student selection in NZ: Looking to the future. *New Zealand Medical Journal, 122*(1306), 88–100.

Poole, P., Shulruf, B., Harley, B., Monigatti, J., Barrow, M., Reid, P., … Bagg, W. (2012). Shedding light on the decision to retain an interview for medical student selection. *New Zealand Medical Journal, 125*(1361), 81–88.

Puddey, I., B., Mercer, A., Carr, S., & Louden, W. (2011). Potential influence of selection criteria on the demographic composition of students in an Australian medical school. *BMC Medical Education, 11*, 97. doi:10.1186/1472-6920-11-97

Redmond, B., Guerin, S., & Devitt, C. (2008). Attitudes, perceptions and concerns of student social workers: First two years of a longitudinal study. *Social Work Education, 27*(8), 868–882.

Rennie, G. (2013). Registration ten years on: A perspective from a social work educator. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 25*(3), 3–10.

Ross, E. (2010). Selection tests and social justice: A profile of applicants seeking admission to the social work undergraduate degree at a South African University. *Social Work Education, 29*(5), 459–474. doi:10.1080/02615470903177630

Ryan, M., Cleak, H., & McCormack, J. (2006). Student performance in field education placements: The findings of a 6 year Australian study of admissions data. *Journal of Social Work Education 42*(1), 66–84.

Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB). (2013). *The process for recognition/re-recogntion of social work qualifications in New Zealand*. Wellington, NZ: Author.

Sowbel, L. (2012). Gatekeeping: Why shouldn't we be ambivalent? *Journal of Social Work Education, 48*(1), 27–44.

Sowbel, L. R., & Miller, S. E. (2015). Gatekeeping in graduate social work education: Should personality traits be considered? *Social Work Education, 34*(1), 110–124. doi:10.1080/02615479.2014.953046

van Heugten, K. (2011). Registration and social work education: A golden opportunity or a Trojan horse? *Journal of Social Work, 11*(2), 174–190. doi: 10.1177/1468017310386695

Watson, D. (2002). Just a paper exercise? *Social Work Education, 21*(1), 79–89.