The kinds and quality of social work research in UK universities: a summary

The kinds and quality of social work research in UK universities

A study was carried out in 2005 and 2006 on the nature and quality of social work research in UK universities. The lead researchers were Ian Shaw and Matthew Norton, of York University[1]. Funding was provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, and the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC).

The aims of the research were to develop a framework for criteria and standards to appraise the nature and quality of social work research in universities in the UK, and complete exploratory tests and refinements of this framework.

The outputs from the research are:

- a basis on which the social work and social science communities can profile the nature and quality of social work research

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[1] It was carried out with Audrey Mullender (Ruskin College, Oxford), Joan Orme (Glasgow University), Ian Sinclair (University of York) and Baljit Soroya (Ruskin College, Oxford).

- a quality framework that includes and integrates applied and practice-based social work research and evaluation
- a frame of reference for the social work community and the ESRC, which will function as a resource and potential information base on which to build research capacity in social work
- a resource that will facilitate the further development and implementation of a national social work research strategy in higher education.

The fieldwork comprised an initial phase of electronic consultations, key informant interviews, a UK workshop of all stakeholder groups, and a literature review. A classification of kinds of research was developed through a sample of social work research outputs from the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) followed by a series of inter-rater reliability exercises linked to development of the scheme. The report's conclusions regarding the quality of social work research were developed through an illuminative review of the literature, an analysis of the rhetoric of quality as evident in the text of social work returns to the 2001 RAE, and in particular four case studies of universities in Scotland, England and Wales. The case studies were based on interviews exploring examples of respondents' reflections on their own good research, and focus groups of all stakeholder groups.

We developed the classification of kinds of research according to two different dimensions: What is the primary substantive focus of the research? What is the primary problem focus of the research? The subsequent development of the classification scheme was carried out through a series of ratings and inter-rater reliability exercises on a sample of forty papers published in selected issues of the *British Journal of Social Work*.

First dimension: primary research focus

On whom is the primary research focus?	
Actual or potential service user or carer groupings	1. Children, families, parents, foster carers
	2. Young people (not offenders)
	3. Young offenders/victims
	4. Adult offenders/victims
	5. People with mental health problems
	6. Older people
	7. People with health/disability problems (including learning disabilities)
	8. Drug/substance users
Citizen, user and community populations	9. People as members of communities
	10. Service user, citizen or carer populations
	11. Women/men
Professional and policy communities	12. Social work practitioners/managers
	13. Social work students/practice teachers/university social work staff
	14. Policy, regulatory or inspection community
	15. Members or students of other occupations
Not applicable	16. For example, theorising that crosses categories; methodology

Second dimension: primary issue/problem

What is the primary issue or problem focus of the research?
1. Understand/explain issues related to risk, vulnerability, abuse, resilience, challenging behaviour, separation, attachment, loss, disability or trauma.
2. Understand/explain issues related to equality, diversity, poverty and social exclusion.
3. Understand/assess/strengthen user/carer/citizen/community involvement in social work; partnership; empowerment.
4. Understand/promote the nature and quality of informal care, carer activity, volunteering, and their relationship to formal care.
5. Describe, understand, explain, or develop good practice in relation to social work beliefs, values, political positions, faith, or ethics.
6. Understand/develop/assess/evaluate social work practices, methods, or interventions.
7. Understand/evaluate/strengthen social work/social care services, including voluntary/independent sector.
8. Understand/explain/promote good practice in social work/social care organisations and management.
9. Understand/address issues of ethnicity, racism. and management.
10. Understand/address issues of gender, sexism, the role of women, the role of men.

11. Demonstrate/assess the value of inter-disciplinary approaches to social work services.

12. Demonstrate/assess the value of comparative, cross-national research.

13. Develop theorising.

We recommend:

- identification of kinds of social work research in terms of these two dimensions
- a minimum information base for raters comprising information about authors and affiliation, an abstract or equivalent, and key words
- basic familiarisation with and induction to the classification scheme
- use of the scheme only with full guidance notes to hand, provided in the main report
- trial adoption by different stakeholder groups in the social work community of the scheme, and its use as part of the implementation for the JUC SWEC 'strategy' and of the development of a practice research database by SCIE
- further trialing and testing by the social work community and other interested colleagues, including inter-rater measures between different stakeholder groups.

Quality of research

The case studies suggest that claims of quality are of two general kinds. First, there are *intrinsic* signifiers of quality that form around methodological and epistemological criteria. These signifiers occur in a variety of forms but all refer to inherent qualities of research. Secondly, quality judgments are made that draw on criteria that are *extrinsic* to the research, e.g. its use value or its direct value to people who participate in the research.

There was a consensus amongst the focus groups and interviews that there are certain intrinsic epistemological and methodological criteria that characterise and promote good quality social work research. These were not different from criteria shared across the social sciences, and are implicit, for example, in the generic research methodology requirements of the ESRC postgraduate training guidelines. The data suggested there are five elements of epistemically soundly-based research:

- a well considered and argued epistemological and theoretical position
- well informed research that draws on the existing knowledge base
- choice of methods related to the question and justifiable in the context of the aims and objectives
- appropriate analytical techniques which are used and justified

- conclusions that are valid, in the sense of being carefully founded and plausible.

While social work researchers acknowledged the need to ensure research is conducted to the best possible standards, there was also a resistance to adopting purist stances on methodology.

Extrinsic quality criteria principles were often referred to, and usually in connection with fundamental social work values. This was one of the areas where the more deep-seated debates emerged within the study, ranging from those who would probably place 'value-for-people' and 'value-for-use' above strictly epistemological and knowledge-building standards to those who believe that extrinsic, outer-science quality criteria may not always be appropriate for a particular piece of research, especially studies which focus on less applied aspects of social work. For example, the involvement of users as partners and co-producers in the research process was often seen as the litmus test of distinctively social work research. However, the standing of this as a fundamental mark of quality is not agreed within the social work community.

Application of research to practice was an area where a range of positions could be readily traced. Some believed that a direct contribution to practice is of greatest importance, and what matters in social work is providing research that focuses on improving practice and pushing

a social justice agenda. Others thought contribution to theory more important. The most frequent position was one that can best be hyphenated as 'rigour-with-relevance'.

We recommend that the framework developed by Furlong and Oancea (2005) will serve with some modification for other applied social sciences, including social work, but we recommend that when elaborating the 'value for people' dimension, it is augmented to include 'receptiveness to service users' and carers' viewpoints, and to a wider distribution of individual and social justice'.

We recommend exploring the feasibility for cross-discipline collaboration on assessing and developing the quality of research.

We also recommend that assessment of the quality and value of research use should take into account:

- different ways in which members of the social work community use research and other knowledge and develop best practice models of knowledge use
- the extent to which research aims to be useful, rather than actually achieves use and impact
- longer-term, and not only shorter-term, impacts, for example through the use-potential of research.

Reference

Furlong, J. and Oancea, A. (2005) 'Assessing Quality in Applied Educational Research', ESRC (available at www.esrc.ac.uk, accessed 11 April 2007)

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