

Men's Progression Issues on English Social Work Courses:
What do we know, and what is missing?

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There has been a recent call (Matthews, 2014) by the head of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to increase the number of men in social work as well as related, women-majority, occupations such as nursing and primary school education (women-majority' is used decidedly here, instead of 'female-dominated', because while women are more numerous they do not dominate positions of authority, power or financial reward (Pringle, 1995; Christie, 1998; see also McPhail, 2004)). But research into the progression rates of social work students in the UK has shown consistently that men have poorer progression rates than women (Hussein, *et al.*, 2005; 2006; 2008; 2009; Moriarty *et al.*, 2009). These progression problems are usually compiled into several broad categories: deferral, referral, withdrawal and failure.

Whilst we know that men do not progress as well as women, we know relatively little about the experience of social work student men. As a result, it seems helpful, though less preferable, to seek corroboration from other, related, fields. Professions that have a numerical majority of women (*i.e.* social work, nursing, primary school teaching) are often grouped together to ascertain similarities across the professions of men who undertake 'women's work' (Williams, 1991; Simpson, 2009).

This literature from related professions suggests similar progression issues for men studying to become nurses and primary school teachers. British research into nursing student retention finds progression problems for men students (Muldoon & Reilly 2003; Anionwu *et al.* 2005; Mulholland *et al.* 2008; Prymachuk *et al.* 2008). Similar issues have been found for men undertaking initial teacher training to become primary school teachers (Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004; Drudy *et al.*, 2005; Szwed, 2010). Research has found experiences of 'knock-backs' and 'identity bruises' (Foster & Newman, 2005) on the way to becoming a teacher, these are suggested as issues with identity feeling under pressure from friends and family. These men also experience

scathing commentary by friends, family and the wider public (Weaver-Hightower, 2011).

The Study

Using a FOI request to the GSCC (the former regulating body for social work, now replaced by the HCPC [Health Care Professions Council]), quantitative progression data was obtained for 38 038 students from academic years 2006/7 – 2010/11. This data includes full time, part time, and distance learning (as identified by the programme), undergraduate and postgraduate pre-qualifying social work courses in England.

Multinomial logistic regression was used to investigate the association between gender and progression outcomes. Passed was considered as the 'reference' category, and the association between gender and each subsequent outcome category relative to passing was examined. Other demographic variables were collected, these include: age; year of attendance; ethnicity; disability; previous educational qualification; course type (undergraduate or postgraduate); and attendance route (full-time, part-time, distance learning). The analysis was performed in two stages. Firstly the separate association between demographic and the outcome was examined separately in a series of univariable analyses. Subsequently the joint association of all demographics upon the outcome were assessed in a multivariable analysis.

Results

Table 1 shows that in each of the categories denoting progression issues (failed, deferred, referred, withdrew), men had higher numeric rates than women. There is also a large disparity in enrolment proportion, with men only 15.3% of the total social work student pre-qualifying population. When these findings are examined more closely using a multivariate analysis (Table 2), they suggest a more starkly gendered presentation. This multivariate analysis manages the impact of the other variables to isolate the effect of only the variable in question – gender. The

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size of each variable is presented the form of odds ratios (fuller statistical details are available). These give the odds of each variable relative to the odds of passing relative to a baseline category. It is important to note that odds ratio can at times overestimate the size of effect, which requires additional analysis to support findings.

Of note, the odds of deferral for men were 15% greater; the odds of withdrawal were almost 50% greater; and most concerning, the odds of failure were 60% greater for men. Men's referral rates had slight evidence of a gender difference, but after adjusting for the effects of other variables this difference wasn't significant.

Discussion

These findings are consistent with previous studies (Hussein *et al.*, 2006; 2009), suggesting that men do not progress as well as women on social work courses, even when managing the various other variables that might be involved. In particular, the most significant results occur for the categories of withdrawal and failure. This is concerning because withdrawal and failure have greater finality for student progression. Referral and deferral suggest a potential of returning or continuing with the course, withdrawal and failure both suggest that the student will not be continuing (or attempting to continue).

The literature suggests that many men may experience issues when studying to join women-majority occupations. Unfortunately, much of this deliberation is drawn from outside the profession. The previous qualitative studies concentrating on men in social work (Cree, 1996, 2001; Parker & Crabtree, 2014) are either small local studies or prior to the implementation of the new degree requirement. Literature from nursing and teaching education can help us think about the possible underlying reasons for the progression issues seen here. These issues

can include: feeling isolated, a gendered educational environment, poorer study habits, or gendered expectations about the profession.

It is clear from the previous studies, and the current findings, that our understanding of the situation is less than clear, warranting further study. In particular what is needed are larger qualitative studies gathering men's experiences of studying social work, as previous studies have reliably shown that men do not progress as well as women in social work education in England. What is missing is a clear indication of what men say might be the reasons for these progression issues. What is also needed is a better understanding of the ways that we can work to resolve these issues.

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Word Count: 998 **Table 1** Progression results of students by gender for years 2006/7 -2010/11

Variable	Women	Men	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Passed	18,866 (58.6%)	3,122 (53.5%)	21,988 (57.8%)
Deferral	3,420 (10.6%)	667 (11.4%)	4087 (13.5%)
Failure	710 (2.2%)	174 (3.0%)	884 (2.3%)
Referral	5,272 (16.4%)	981 (16.8%)	6253 (16.4%)
Withdrawal	3,938 (12.2%)	888 (15.2%)	4826 (12.7%)
Total	32,206 (84.7%)	5832 (15.3%)	38,038 (100%)

Table 2 Uni- and Multi-variable regression analysis, managing for alternative variables (age; year of attendance; ethnicity; disability; previous educational qualification; course type; and attendance route)

Variable	Category	Univariable	Multivariable		
		Odds Ratio (95% CI)	P-value	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	P-value
Deferral	Women	1	<0.001	1	0.02
	Men	1.18 (1.08, 1.29)		1.15 (1.02, 1.29)	
Failure	Women	1	<0.001	1	<0.001
	Men	1.48 (1.25, 1.76)		1.60 (1.28, 2.01)	
Referral	Women	1	<0.001	1	0.06
	Men	1.12 (1.04, 1.22)		1.11 (0.99, 1.23)	
Withdrawal	Women	1	<0.001	1	<0.001
	Men	1.36 (1.26, 1.48)		1.47 (1.32, 1.65)	

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