WHAT TO DO ABOUT STUDENT SELECTION FOR SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMMES?

Social Work in Changing times: towards better outcomes
Massey University, Palmerston North
18-19 November 2016
Associate Professor Helen Gremillion

Our article In Press

RESEARCH PROJECT:

- This paper is a precursor to a research project being undertaken by the authors which is focused on the Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ) context – A single school case study from Unitec

- Multivariate analysis of scores achieved during selection processes by different groups of applicants

- Selection scores will be examined in relation to eventual student success

- Second article will report on the findings.
• 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 international 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.
PARAMETERS OF THE LIT REVIEW

• social sciences and health research databases
• articles relevant to an international discussion on social work education
• published within the past ten years

• addresses one or more of the following topic areas:
  • admissions and selection processes
  • professional requirements
  • selection tools such as interviews, paper applications, and psychometric testing
THE TERM “UNSUITABLE APPLICANTS”

• Used by Lafrance, Gray, and Herbert (2004) over ten years ago
• However, the topic remains under researched.
• 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 has resulted in less suitable applicants gaining entry to social work programmes
Concerns about an unregulated workforce (van Heugten, 2011).

Public criticism of social work management of child welfare cases (van Heugten, 2011).

Needed 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).

Impact of registration rigorously critiqued (Rennie, 2013).
THE CHALLENGES OF UNRELIABLE SELECTION CRITERIA

- Termination of students, once accepted, is fraught
- Fear of litigation, unclear suitability criteria, conflicting educator roles
- Academic failure is still the primary means of exiting students
- Tensions exist between screening out students and intrinsic social work values (Dillon, 2007; Pelech, Staller, Regehr, & Jacobs, 1999; Sowbel, 2012).
- At risk students can be difficult to assess at selection & the tools used are unreliable or require further research to determine their reliability (Griffith University, 2009).
SUPPORT VS SCREENING OUT

• Task focussed advice during students’ course of study
• Time management
• Planning
• Study skills and life problem solving may be more effective than screening out applicants (Moriarty et al. [2009]) & Holmstrom & Taylor, 2008a, 2008b
• Virtues may be developed through education and practice rather than being innate
• Ability of schools to provide this needs to be considered (Pelech et al., 1999)
STUDENT SELECTION STUDIES

• Three key studies:
  • 1. Pelech 1999 – Canadian study, first major study on social work student selection
  • 2. Holmstrom & Taylor 2008+ - English study, replicating Pelech
  • 3. Ross 2010 – South African longitudinal study
SELECTION CRITERIA & STUDENT PERFORMANCE

• Found that more male than female students experience interpersonal difficulties – are significantly more likely to withdraw.

• Older students experience more difficulties during study than their younger counterparts.

• No correlation between how students performed during selection interviews and how they performed once admitted.

(Holmstrom and Taylor, (2008a & b) replicated study by (Pelech et al., 1999).

• Many had chosen the profession because of their own difficult or traumatic experiences.

• The biographical questionnaire can be regarded as having content validity but it is yet undetermined if it provides any predictive validity.

(Ross, 2010)
PREVIOUS STUDY AS A PREDICTOR OF SUCCESS?

• Pelech et al. (1999), Holmstrom and Taylor (2008b)

• complex relationship

• least amount of academic experience as not struggling

• group that had very limited study experience as struggling a little

• students who had completed a university preparation course over-represented in the group who were struggling.

• There was no significant correlation between higher levels of education and success.
GPA AS A PREDICTOR OF SUCCESS?

• NZ Context
  • NCEA results found to be unreliable predictor (New Zealand Ministry of Education - Engler, 2010)
  • Can lead to the underestimating of ability of those from lower decile schools and the overestimating of ability of those from high decile schools.
  • Personal characteristics more important
  • Risk that selected applicants may not be representative of the general population demographic and may not result in graduates who meet the needs of the population
PSYCHOMETRIC TESTING

- PT addresses the subjective nature of selection information (Gibbons, Bore, Munro, and Powis (2007).
- Focus is on personal attributes
- Social work students demonstrated more empathy and tended to be less judgemental
- Testing could be used to identify desired traits

- Manktelow and Lewis (2006)
- Successful applicants scored highly on openness,
- No differences found in other personality traits
THE INTERVIEW AND INTERVIEWER AS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

- Only three social work studies:

- Successful interviews leading to admission are not correlated with student success
- Highly subjective and potentially biased nature of interview processes.
- Paper selection vs written application
- Subjectivity in the decisions made about applicants
- Paper based assessment more objective & more cost effective
- Poole (2012) medical schools study found the interview had no predictive reliability
FIELDWORK OR PRACTICUM

• Assessing suitability for practice via the fieldwork placement or practicum
• Based on student’s “fit and proper” character.
• Suitability for registration with the SWRB after graduation

• 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.
“FIT AND PROPER” CRITERIA

• 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).

• Need qualified social workers in Britain - progressively difficult in an increasingly regulated profession

• Apaitia-Vague et al., (2011) 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

• Inherent tension - accountability to clients to ensure that workers are safe to practice, and social work values such as inclusion, social justice, the right to education, and a belief in the power of transformative change.

• The challenges that arise when we get it wrong.
**INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS**

- Existing research in New Zealand has not examined selection criteria that predict success for Māori social work students.
- Research on indigenous populations is limited.
- Ka Hikitia acknowledges the right of Māori to enjoy educational success with the central tenant being the “Treaty of Waitangi as a document that protects Maori learners’ rights to achieve true citizenship through gaining a range of vital skills and knowledge, as well as protecting te reo Māori as a taonga” (p.44) (Ministry of Education, 2013).
- Existing literature focuses on recruitment and retention, this focus may be appropriate (Beddoe, 2007).
- Our second article will focus more on Maori and Pasifika success.
INDIGENOUS HEALTH WORKFORCE INEQUITIES

ANZ - (Curtis, Wikaire, Stokes, & Reid, 2012).

• Identified seventy articles that fit the Kaupapa Māori critical parameters for inclusion in their analysis.

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.
LIT REVIEW CONCLUSIONS -1

• Little correlation between the use of assessment measures and eventual student success.

• Many of the tools used during the selection process are unreliable predictors of 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.
LIT REVIEW CONCLUSIONS -2

• Ongoing research into student selection processes is required.

• The number of relevant studies to date is limited.

• The stakes are high as unsuitable applicants may become unsuitable graduates.

• Need to consider the risk to vulnerable clients who are often the recipients of social work services.
Holmstrom and Taylor (2008a, 2008b) and Pelech et al. (1999) claim that male students and older students struggle to succeed in social work programmes.

The same holds for Māori and other under-represented groups.

Using previous GPA to determine suitability is flawed as it may exclude suitable students and is an unreliable predictor of success.
LIT REVIEW CONCLUSIONS -4

• Climate of increasing requirements and regulations poses certain challenges for schools of social work and their applicants.

• This trend is international with many schools reviewed having recently completed an evaluation of their criteria for selection.
GRADUATE PREPAREDNESS FOR PRACTICE

• Complex combination of:
  • previous experience
  • personal attributes
  • motivation to undertake this particular field of study
  • training alongside professional socialisation
GRADUATE SUITABILITY FOR PRACTICE DEPENDS ON

• Students ability to develop a professional persona during study

• It is necessary to support this development and not expect applicants to have all the required attributes prior to completing their education


REFERENCES


