Building Social Work and Social Care Research: The Capacity Fix

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Aim

- to make strategic recommendations to the ESRC and stakeholder co-funders for development of capacity and engagement to achieve research excellence in social work and social care

Objectives

- to identify current strengths and deficits in the social work and social care research and capacity base
- to establish priority interdisciplinary research themes for development
- to identify optimal mechanisms and co-funding arrangements to strengthen research capacity in the discipline and field
Rationale

‘There needs to be a fundamental step change in breadth, depth and quality of the UK research base in social work and social care… The knowledge base to underpin existing social care services, to support their improvement and to make judgements about cost-effectiveness in their delivery is currently inadequate. Despite some notable exceptions, social work and social care policy and practice have developed largely without an adequate, closely connected research evidence base. It is essential that a stronger connection is made and that the social work and social care research can then deliver high quality evidence to the policy and practitioner communities. High quality, high impact research requires capacity to produce it; at present capacity levels fall far short of what is required.’

Strategic Adviser Commissioning Brief, ESRC, 2008
Methodology

Desktop review and informal consultation:
  ◦ extensive review of literature; academic and stakeholder discussions; Resource Paper for circulation to consultants

Consultation Stage 1:
  ◦ web based qualitative questionnaire to 20 key representatives of social work academy; additional input from others, including learned society

Consultation Stage 2:
  ◦ interviews with 15 key cognate discipline representatives, and 2 research funders

Consultation Stage 3:
  ◦ further iteration with all consultants - feedback on draft report incorporated into final report and recommendations
Whose knowledge is it anyway? Defining and distinguishing between social work research and social care research

Social work:
- defined field of professional practice
- recognised academic and research discipline - claims to ‘distinctiveness’ contested, but largely practice focus
- ‘pockets of excellence’; but academic research workforce/students bring practice expertise but not social science excellence

Social care:
- no agreed definition as a (semi-professional) practice or policy field
- not a formally recognised academic or research discipline but ‘field of enquiry’ (is there a self recognising social care research community?)
- ‘cognate’ disciplines have better established capacity for research excellence; lack practice nearness, but may contribute problem knowledges, policy relevance and links to proximal professional domains
- lack engagement in social work and social care research fields?
Whose knowledge is it anyway? Balancing pragmatics and politics of pluralism

- Meaning and politics of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity in this context
  - thoroughgoing integration of disciplinary approaches, perspectives, researchers in same enquiry?
  - or — genericism, multidisciplinary (separate but combined) contributions, import/export, cross discipline collaboration, broad cross-fertilisation?

- Building research capacity and engagement — (inter)disciplinary opportunities and threats
  - social work is an emergent discipline ‘poor relation’ — in danger of submergence within interdisciplinary mix
  - cognate disciplines — fear dilution of ‘purity’, disciplinary status, prestige and resource

A Strategy for All?
To illustrate – social work perspectives

What social work research does that others don’t is understanding practice on the ground, appreciation of the face to face aspects of delivery of service, and capacity to write meaningfully to practitioners. (Social work research funder)

Social work needs to allow itself to be led by other more self-confident and better trained disciplines, while making a full contribution to the definition of research problems and methodological design and so on. (Social work consultant)

Social work practice can be colonised by other disciplines with little acknowledgment of the culture of practice – as happened with the introduction of care management on the advice of social policy researchers with little or no consultation with social work. (Social work consultant)

Interdisciplinarity increases our methodological and research capacity and knowledge base and also reflects the interdisciplinary nature of much of our practice. (Social work consultant)

Interdisciplinary approaches to building the knowledge base for social work are integral to its survival. Social work barely has a knowledge base at all if you remove that which is drawn from cognate disciplines. (Social work consultant)
To illustrate – cognate discipline perspectives....

If you stick with the practice based research you’re always going to be operating in a pretty narrow area aren’t you? And you’re always going to be struggling to have a take on context that’s not just superficial, it’s what drives the way in which people practise and how people respond to that practice seems to me ... You have to look at the wider context in which things are placed. (Cognate consultant)

If somebody came and said “we want to look at social work or social care contribution to x or y”....., it wouldn’t get me Brownie points to do that. I think if it was strongly policy oriented and particularly strongly practice oriented, you’re not likely to publish in a high impact journal which is what people here are expected to do. And you’re also expected to be focusing on a scientific issue, rather than necessarily a policy based one, and have an international presence and that’s difficult to do in areas where it’s actually practice, because it doesn’t work like that somewhere else. (Cognate consultant)

If you think about how difficult it is with some of the kind of groups you’re talking about.... vulnerable groups, really, really difficult to follow people.....They’re hard to get in in the first place, hard to keep in, hard to find if they move.... Also there’s a perception of this as a short term, very political, very problematic kind of field which actually does the opposite of attract you, it makes you think, “It’s really intricately difficult and how would we measure it? I don’t understand it, run away, run away, run away”. (Cognate consultant)

People need rewards for coming out of silos... People follow money. It’s as simple as that. And as far as I’m aware there’s not much of it in social care. (Cognate consultant)

You need to capture the imagination or the feeling that they’re going to be extended in some way, or a different perspective on an old problem for them.... It’s got to be something that lights the fire a little bit. Else why would they put themselves out? (Cognate consultant)
Emergent priorities for Strategic Adviser Initiative

- To balance needs and contributions of distinctive disciplines and paradigms, with overarching priority of promoting interdisciplinarity in social work and social care research.

- To consider development at individual (micro), institutional (meso) and research community (macro) levels.

- To look at stakeholder as well as research producer perspectives, and look beyond capacity building brief to wider research development agenda.

- To manage the politics, principles and pragmatics of pluralism.

A balance between the disciplinary contributions from other areas of social sciences and other professions, and from the emerging discipline of social work. It’s avoiding the ‘either/or’ type of arguments and recognizing that all disciplines have blurred and overlapping boundaries, some more closely guarded than others. (Social work consultant)
**Research Priorities**

1. The case for research quality and impact
2. Strengths and deficits of the research base
3. Priority substantive and methodological research themes

**Researcher/Stakeholder Engagement**

1. Researchers without doctorates:
   - Social work graduates
   - Cognate discipline graduates
   - Experienced practitioners/managers
   - Social work academics (non doctorate)
2. Researchers with doctorates:
   - Mid-career social work academic researchers
   - Early/mid-career cognate researchers
   - Senior career researchers from all relevant disciplines
3. Stakeholders:
   - Governments
   - Non-government agencies/centres
   - Employers
   - Regulators
   - HE funding councils
   - HEIs (DTC/DTUs)
   - Other research funders
   - JUCSWEC, SCIE, IRISS
   - Professional associations

**Mechanisms (Capacity Development)**

1. Postgraduate and early career researcher training – inter- and intra-discipline
2. Researcher support and career development mechanisms
3. Mid- and senior career researcher training

**Mechanisms (Research Funding)**

Direct research funding of:
- Projects
- Programmes
- Centres and networks of research excellence

**Dialogue with senior research, practice and policy funders**

**Stakeholders and (co)funding mechanisms**

**Strategic Infrastructure and Outcomes**

- Infrastructure for strategic leadership, dialogue and co-ordination of sustainable research and capacity development
- Research capacity:
  - Robust research community
  - Inter and intradisciplinary engagement
  - Practice and policy engagement

**Excellent Social Work and Social Care Research on Priority Themes**
Substantive interdisciplinary themes for research and capacity development

- Demographic change and diversity: the contribution of social work and social care

- Professionalism and service provision in social work and social care, in contemporary management, economic and welfare contexts

- Tackling health and wellbeing inequalities: the contribution of social work and social care

- Risk, decision making and choice in social work and social care

- Promoting social inclusion and engagement in social work and social care

- Practice development and innovation in social work and social care
Interdisciplinary methodological themes for research and capacity development

Broad:

• Using quantitative methodologies
• Developing and diversifying qualitative methodologies
• Using and developing mixed methods

Specific:

• Evaluation research
• Developing and using measurement
• Use of large datasets and service data
• Analysis of costs, cost benefits and cost effectiveness
• Systematic and research review
The Capacity Fix?

Politics, principles and pragmatics:
The postgraduate research training example
Engaging postgraduate research students

We don't teach our [qualifying social work] students enough about research and why research is important, and we don't inspire them enough to make them hungry for answers and for interesting questions unfortunately. Most come on a qualifying course with the intention of becoming practitioners. Research opportunities need to be integral and visible from the start of courses just as in other disciplines. (Social work consultant)

Funding is a key issue...[social work] practitioners can earn far more in work than on studentships. There is not much incentive at present to do doctoral research unless following an academic career as research is still not sufficiently prioritised in practice and service delivery by managers, and barely features in post qualifying training. Pressure on completion targets works against part time study and the balancing of full time work with families and other demands. ESRC must consider this especially in applied subjects such as social work. (Social work consultant)

Doctoral courses are not that accessible to early career [academic social work] staff already. Because you've got these people appointed usually to teaching .... if you're teaching and you've got placements you can't go and you can't move on. You've got staff struggling to do part-time PhDs which is atrocious because they have neither the time nor the learning to do that. And that's just to get people started. (Social work consultant)

Postgrads from psychology, or sociology, or economics for example.... They might have all the right credentials, but what's to attract them? There's got to be a carrot, make it not just possible but desirable. I do think it's important that that foundation is laid at doctoral level and it's a matter of persuading people to do research on topics that are important in the social work arena. And then of course to follow that with postdoctoral opportunities. Over a long period of time I think that's the thing that's going to actually change things most. (Cognate consultant)
Postgraduate research training

- **‘Purposeful interdisciplinarity’** of core and advanced training content
  - including core generic social science, and disciplinary fitness for purpose

- Maximise flexibilities in training structure (pathways) and delivery modes
  - to diverse discipline backgrounds, knowledges, skills and needs

- **Distinct training opportunities**
  - eg internships and attachments – to centres of excellence and policy/practice settings

- **Maximise funding flexibilities**
  - variable stipend levels, discipline hopping incentives; stakeholder co-sponsorship

- **Concentration of research excellence?**
  - ESRC priorities; critical mass but risk marginalising social work and social care

- **Targeted ‘non-standard’ provision?**
  - eg. dedicated doctoral studentships, career/discipline transition fellowships and

- **Professional doctorates?**
Towards a research capacity development initiative

Given the range and diversity of disciplines to be engaged, career stages at which intervention is required, and capacity needs at individual, institutional and cross institutional levels, there needs to be a fixed term, multifaceted and co-funded programme of research capacity development. Piecemeal support for one or two mechanisms is unlikely to pay dividends without complementary mechanisms to maximise benefits. A 3 -5 year initiative, with funded leadership and co-ordination, would catalyse development of capacity, infrastructure and stakeholder engagement sufficiently to provide the springboard for sustainable growth and excellence in the longer term. Signs of existing strength indicate that there is sufficient capacity now to make good use of such investment.

ESRC Strategic Adviser Final Report, 2009
ESRC recognises a need for better coordination amongst stakeholders in the social care research field. At an early opportunity, we will take a lead in bringing stakeholders together to explore the full potential of an initiative to strengthen capacity for excellence in social care research. The aim of any initiative will be to engage a broad range of perspectives on social care issues, underpinned by excellent research.

The ESRC recognises a need for better signposting of current research initiatives and opportunities across a range of funders that may be of interest to researchers working on social care issues. The ESRC will work with stakeholders to identify synergies between research agendas and capacity building priorities in the social care field, and to ensure opportunities are promoted widely across the social science research base.

The ESRC does not see added value in ring fencing support for specific discipline areas as a means of addressing the capacity needs of the social care field. However, where it is evident in the bids received to the [new Doctoral Training] Framework that training in social care is of a high quality and will address current capacity concerns in the field, the ESRC will seek to ensure that studentships are available for those pathways.
Summary Report:


Main Report: