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Making Advanced Entry Work: The Experience of Social Work Education in Scotland

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The Open University



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Introduction

From April 2004 until March 2008 a project examining the ways in which the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework could be embedded in the social services sector was undertaken by and managed through the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC),

As part of this project, a pilot examining credit transfer to degree programmes in social work was commissioned. Universities are developing different arrangements for advanced entry to the degree in social work either through credit transfer from courses such as the HNC in Social Care, SVQ3 in Health and Social Care or through informal experiential learning. This pilot study explores how prepared students are for a social work honours degree course and what supports they might need when they are admitted from employment or from the HNC Social Care or SVQ3 with advanced standing (<http://www.scqf.org.uk/ForEmployers/SCQF-Social-Services-Sector.aspx>)

1. Background

Since the introduction of the new honours degree in social work in 2005, there has been an interest in addressing issues of articulation between Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and the new degree. In 2006 a group of employers, universities and representatives from the SSSC was convened by SIESWE¹ to explore the possibility of extending credit for candidates with SVQs into the degree in social work. A number of universities were represented at those discussions, but at that time no university offered credit for SVQs below Level 4 because SVQs were not at that time credit rated². Also in 2006, a report was published³ that reported on a scoping exercise for the use of flexible entry and progression including credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL) as advanced entry into social work degree programmes (SSSC 2006). This study was commissioned and funded by the SCQF social services project through the SCQF Partnership. This small study found that there was interest in and support for RPL and advanced entry from employers and students. It also identified several issues that would need to be addressed to make advanced entry possible. These included support and articulation arrangements for advanced entry, support from employers, and financial viability.

This current project grew from these earlier efforts and was commissioned and funded by the SCQF social services project managed by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Several HEIs had implemented RPL and advanced entry on a limited basis and the next logical step was to examine the experience of students who had received recognition of prior learning within the new degree. The aim of this study was to do just that – to explore the experiences of students entering social work education with advanced standing. In addition, the researchers wished to tentatively compare these experiences with those of students who did not obtain advanced entry. Specifically the researchers were interested in the following questions:

1. To what extent do students feel that their previous experience and training has prepared them for social work training with advanced standing?
2. Do their qualifications and experience at the point of entry reflect their perceptions of their readiness to undertake social work training?
3. What are the supports required for successful transition into and completion of an honours degree programme when entering with advanced standing?

¹ Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education is now known as the Institute for Research and Innovation in the Social Services (IRISS)

² In 2007 the SQA gave the SVQ3 in Health and Social Care (Adults) and the SVQ3 in Health and Social Care (Children) a credit rating of 65 points at SCQF Level 7.

³ Scottish Social Services Council (2006) *Recognition of Prior Informal and Certificated Learning and HEI Pilot*.

The students in the current study are studying the B.A. (Hons.) Social Work: Scotland offered by:

- The Open University⁴
- Glasgow Caledonian University⁵
- The University of Dundee⁶.

These are professional degrees which meet the Standards in Social Work Education (Scottish Executive 2003a). The academic credit rating of the programmes is 480 points at SCQF Levels 7-10 (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework 2007). Each programme is organised into four stages, each of which comprises 120 academic points (Appendix 1).

It is possible for students to enter the programmes with a variety of qualifications which offer credit against a range of university courses or modules⁷. This includes:

- credit for a Scottish Vocational Qualification [SVQ] in social care at Level 3 linked to a Higher National Certificate [HNC] in social care
- credit for modules taken at another university
- direct entry into higher stages of the social work programmes for students already with a university degree.

This allows students to enter the programme at various stages, though most often it is at Stage 2. As the direct entry and credit transfer arrangements are different it is more appropriate to describe these students as having advanced standing and this is the term which will be used from here onwards.

2. Policy context

The research was concerned with evaluating the extent to which prior study, for which the students have gained credit, equips them to study a programme of professional education. It has relevance and a potentially wider application because of the current political and funding imperatives in favour of credit transfer.

Credit transfer systems are one response to policy directives to widen participation in higher education (SCQF 2007: 43-44; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). They also fit well with the agenda for lifelong learning (Scottish Executive 2003b; SCQF 2007) which encourages people to build on their existing qualifications to gain more, or more advanced, awards. Government spending plans for higher education in 2007/08 are in excess of £1 billion (Scottish Executive 2004) and even given a change of government since the plans were published, reductions in this budget seem unlikely (Scottish Government 2007).

⁴ www.open.ac.uk

⁵ www.gcal.ac.uk

⁶ www.dundee.ac.uk/

⁷ The OU uses the term “course” to denote what GCU and University of Dundee call modules.

The literature on parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications tends to favour academic study (Robinson, 1997; Howieson, 1993; Conlon 2005). Those studies which compare SVQs favourably with academic qualifications have been commissioned or undertaken by providers of vocational training (Pavey, 2004; Hevey, 1997; Perth and Kinross Council 2007). In any case, the literature on vocational qualifications is sparse and the theoretical framework for research into such qualifications underdeveloped (Unwin et al 2004).

3. Methodology

As this was an exploratory study and the number of students with advanced entry was small, a qualitative approach to the research was undertaken. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured telephone interviews with students from the three universities participating in the study (i.e. The OU, GCU and Dundee University). The study received ethical approval from GCU Research Ethics Committee. As the study occurred across three institutions, the research protocol was slightly different at each. However, efforts were made to standardise as much as possible. Differences in the protocol are described below.

3.1 Sample

Two main groups of students were to be studied: those entering a social work degree course with advanced entry and those completing the entire four year degree programme. Within the group obtaining advanced entry, three subgroups were identified: those entering with HNC/SVQ3; those with another university degree; and those completing some education at another HEI before receiving advanced entry. In total 24 students were interviewed, five from Glasgow Caledonian, one from Dundee, and 18 from the OU. All the Glasgow Caledonian and Dundee students and 12 of the OU students had advanced standing, and had joined the second year of the degree programme. The six remaining OU students did not have credit transfer for prior qualifications and so entered the first year of the programme.

At the OU a message was placed on the students' course website indicating that the study was taking place and students were asked to inform the researchers if they did not want to participate. No student declined. At GCU and Dundee University a recruitment e-mail was sent to all students receiving advanced entry. The sample at GCU included students who had received credit transfer from another HEI as the basis for advanced entry. The OU and Dundee advanced entry sample was limited to those with recognition of prior certificated learning based on HNC/SVQ3 or completion of another university degree. In addition, the OU was the only institution to interview students who did not receive advanced entry.

3.2 Interviews

The same semi-structured interview schedule was used across all three institutions. The interview schedule included open ended questions asking:

- about respondents' experiences of the social work programme
- if it was what they were expecting
- the level of difficulty they were experiencing across a range of programme elements
- their perceived level of preparation for the programme
- ways in which previous study could have better prepared them
- challenges adjusting to the degree programme
- supports received that eased the transition and
- other supports that would have made the transition easier.

At the OU three tutors teaching on a second year course (module) conducted the telephone interviews with students from one of the three groups under study (HNC/SVQ3, graduates, non-advanced entry students). None of the tutors interviewed any students known to them. The tutors took notes during the interviews and immediately following the interviews completed their field notes.

At GCU and Dundee University, a research assistant was employed to conduct the telephone interviews, which were recorded with the participants' consent. One of the research team listened to the telephone interviews and completed field notes based on the recordings.

3.3 Qualitative data analysis

The field notes from each telephone interview were analysed using thematic content analysis. At the OU the initial analysis was conducted by the interviewer and a member of the research team for each group of students (HNC/SVQ3, graduates, non-advanced entry students). For each question, the respondents' answers were summarised and themes identified. Overarching themes were then identified for each group. At GCU and Dundee a similar process was followed; however the number of participants was too small to analyse by separate groups according to route into the programmes. Instead, the themes related to all advanced entry students. The final step of the qualitative data analysis involved cross group comparison. For this analysis the entire research team met together and presented the findings for the group of interviews they had conducted and/or analysed. Common themes across all four groups were identified and discussed to ensure consistency of analysis. In addition, tentative differences between subsets and mode of delivery were identified.

4. Research findings

The interviews conducted with students from the three universities provided a detailed account of their previous experience and its impact on their current learning. Some of their perceptions related to their particular course of study, whilst others had broader applicability for entry to social work programmes. The findings reported will focus on these broader themes, which include both overarching similarities between the experiences of students, irrespective of their point of entry to training and differences between three cohorts of students (HNC/SVQ3, graduates and students without advanced standing). The data also provided an opportunity for some comparison of students' perspectives on the OU's distance learning route, and on the face to face teaching programmes at Dundee and Glasgow Caledonian Universities.

4.1 Overarching themes

The purpose of the research has been to focus on the experience of advanced standing students and to explore whether there were any differences between their experiences and those of others students. Overall the findings demonstrated that there were many commonalities among all the students, irrespective of their point of entry. This finding echoes that from research in the USA (Knight, 1993; Thyer, Vonk & Tandy, 1995) concerning advanced standing into post-graduate social work programmes. Any differences were more to do with nuances within the main themes. There were some strong similarities between student experiences of undertaking social work training, despite considerable differences between their mode of entry to the three programmes, and the delivery methods used. These common themes related to both their adjustment to the programme, and to the supports that they identified as helping them to make the transition to social work degree training.

Adjusting to becoming a student

Nearly all students were positive about their achievements and the experience of participating in the social work programme but had also experienced some challenges in adjusting to becoming students. A strong theme in the interviews was the difficulties students experienced in finding sufficient time to balance their coursework with work and family commitments,

Nothing quite prepares you for the time factor – I knew it would be difficult to squeeze everything in but I probably didn't anticipate how difficult.

All students, even those who did not have advanced standing, experienced some problems adjusting to the new learning environment. These challenges varied to some extent between face to face and distance programme delivery (see 4.2) and between different subsets (see 4.3). However, students shared common ground in their need to adjust to a new learning context. For students at GCU and Dundee this meant learning to get round a university campus and

use facilities such as the Learning Resource Centre. For OU students it meant getting used to travelling to and participating in practice-related workshops and to using discussion forums and other online resources in the virtual learning environment (VLE). The new social environment for learning was also very significant for students, and building relationships with other students was seen as an important part of the transition process (see also Supports).

Most students also had to get used to different ways of learning. For example, the requirement to write reflectively for assignments in their second year of study was new for all students. The referencing system prescribed by one of the universities was also perceived as a challenge by most of the interviewed students, including those with previous degrees.

Some students with advanced standing had entered the social work programme after as much as a 10 year gap since they completed their degree or HNC/ SVQ. Those students generally thought that this break made returning to study more difficult than for those students whose studying had been more continuous. One student with advanced entry (HNC/SVQ) thought she took longer to get into studying mode than others who had not had a break. However, all these students found that they were able to gradually settle back into the discipline of studying. One graduate student described this process as feeling **like dusting off the covers of an old book**.

Supports that helped students to make the transition

The importance of both life and practice experience to undertaking a social work degree was highlighted by all of the students who took part in the research. In many instances students thought that such experience, especially that of social care practice, was as, or more, important to their current learning than previous academic or vocational study. As one student put it,

Without practice everything would have been text book stuff.

Students' previous experience of study, whether a degree, HNC/SVQ, or the first year of the social work programme, was generally most valued for the generic study skills it equipped them with. For example, previous study had given most students experience of structuring and writing essays, time management, organising work, and gathering information from both online and paper sources. A student with advanced standing through HNC/SVQ said,

I would have struggled without the HNC even though I had 15 years experience in social care. It would have been a huge shock getting used to deadlines, to reading and studying.

Some students also thought that previous study had helped them understand their own learning style. Whilst students generally referred less to the content of previous study than the process of studying, some students did comment

on the importance of bringing a grounding into the social work programme from, for example sociology or psychology,:

the theories came back to me..... having a basic knowledge to start with helps

Many students, irrespective of entry point, said that the programme was helping them to apply knowledge, especially theory, which had been difficult to apply to practice when first learnt whilst, for example, undertaking a previous degree or an HNC. For some students this integration of practice and theory brought important new insights about themselves and their practice. For example, one student found that **the tutorials were like switching on a light**. Another said that the theoretical approaches that informed the programme **make more sense now due to general life and practical social work experience**. Some students, especially those that had undertaken SVQs, thought that they had also benefited from past experience of reflecting on practice, and reflective writing (see also 4.3). The importance of taking knowledge and understanding back to the workplace was also stressed by some distance learning students who were sponsored onto the degree programme by their employers:

It has been good to relate the course materials to the job – it got me thinking and... re-energised in that sense.

The importance of the support and social environment provided by the university was emphasised by all students. Having access to approachable lecturers, tutors and course advisors was seen as a crucial element of integration into the social work programme whether or not students had advanced standing. Students mentioned a number of attributes of tutors that they particularly valued. These included patience, current practice experience, academic ability, accessibility and the ability to communicate well with students. Equally important was support from other students, both at workshops or tutorials and on a more informal basis. Students from the OU said that face to face workshops enabled them to learn from each other, provide mutual support and to build positive relationships with tutors. A student commented:

meeting and sharing experience was helpful, you didn't feel isolated, people were going through the same things and supporting each other.

Some participants with advanced standing also found that contact with students who had already completed the stage of programme that they had recently entered helped them understand the expectations of the programme better.

Some students also particularly commented on the importance of constructive feedback from tutors on their assignments,

the tutor's feedback was fantastic – standard English, straight to the point, and always constructive – nicely done in a very supportive way.

Some students who had been apprehensive about their ability to undertake assessed work said that their confidence grew once they started to get detailed feedback, including suggestions for improving their assignments. Students particularly commented on the encouraging and personal tone of tutor feedback, which helped students feel that the tutor understood their particular circumstances, such as the demands of having a young family to care for at the same time as studying and working.

For advanced standing students, support from both other direct entrants and from students already on the programme was perceived as helpful. Support from family, friends and, where applicable, work colleagues was also cited as being very important for some students. One student explained that support from **those people who know what you are going through** was crucial to her success on the programme.

Whilst there were some varying views about the usefulness of different types of learning resources on the social work programmes, the importance of high quality materials, and good access to information was highlighted by most students. For Dundee and Glasgow Caledonian students this was facilitated by physical access to a Learning Resource Centre. OU students frequently commented on the value of accessing a range of distance learning media, such as easily portable reading material, audio materials, and the virtual learning environment. Clear guidance, for example for referencing and writing assignments, and for structuring studying e.g. course calendars was also valued by several students.

4.2 Differences between distance learning and face to face programmes

Differences in adjusting to becoming a student

Eighteen of the students interviewed were on the OU's distance learning programme and six were undertaking face-to-face programmes. Although students appeared on the surface to be having very different learning experiences, contrasts between their accounts of transition onto the social work programme were of nuance and degree rather than substantial differences in perception.

Students attending physical university sites clearly had to become accustomed to their new geographical environment. For some students starting the programme also involved physical relocation, and adjusting to moving away from familiar locations and personal support from family and friends. Distance learning students had not experienced this change since

they continued to live at home and remained in their workplaces whilst they studied.

There were some differences in students' adjustment to the social environment of university. Those with advanced entry on face-to-face programmes found themselves **out of sync** with other classmates who had entered the programme together. This could make the advanced standing student feel like the odd person out, struggling, for example, to identify who were students and who were the lecturers. Some distance learning students commented that they sometimes felt isolated and wanted more contact with other students outside face to face workshops and online discussion forums. For example, one student commented that she had at times felt isolated:

Having colleagues who were studying for the degree closer at hand would have assisted..... to feel more supported and made the transition to open learning easier.

Attending regular face-to-face workshops with a consistent group of students was perceived by all the distance learning students as an essential way to break down isolation and provide contact with tutors and other students. Students were extremely positive about these workshops, described by one student as a life saver. Face-to-face learners found that they had to make an adjustment to more social learning in their programme, participating in small group activities and seminars.

Although some distance learning students found that it took a little while to feel confident enough to participate in small group learning, and needed to adjust to a more informal and interactive style than they had previously been used to, they seemed to take this in their stride quite quickly. It may have helped these students that the modular style of learning used by the OU meant that they were not, for the most part, joining an established group of students but a newly formed group for each of the courses studied at this stage of the programme.

Face-to-face students consistently reported finding the adjustment to independent learning on entry to the programme quite a challenging one. For example, they found it hard to locate materials that they needed to support their study. This was not mentioned by distance learners, which might partly be explained by greater use of university-produced materials to support learning. In fact, some students with advanced standing found the reverse, that they felt that students were, to some extent, a little **spoon-fed**, and not sufficiently encouraged to go beyond the in house materials to locate other sources of knowledge (see also 4.3). Face to face students also mentioned that it was hard to adapt to having strict deadlines for assessed work, although this was not raised by any of the distance learners.

Finally, a consistent issue for OU distance learning students was the requirement to undertake a programme of ICT activities and assessed work, integrated into their social work programme. Most students found this was

time-consuming, and sometimes unnecessarily complicated. As one student put it, it was **a lot of work for little reward**. This component was delivered live in face to face settings, and the students interviewed did not raise any concerns about this part of the programme.

Differences in the supports that helped students to make the transition

Students on the OU social work programme were sponsored by their employers, so that the relationship between their studying and work life was very significant for them. They commented on the importance of support from their employer and, conversely, the difficulties that arose when employers were unaware of their need for support and protected study time. Sometimes students had to be assertive to ensure they received the support they felt they required,

I have been more ruthless, have got off the treadmill working silly hours and have protected my study days.

Other students appreciated support from their line managers and other colleagues, especially when they felt under pressure when completing assignments. The support of other students sponsored onto the programme by the same employer was also perceived as important,

I would have struggled more if I hadn't had contact with other people from the same authority.

Although many of the face-to-face learners were employed whilst they were studying, they were not sponsored by employers so did not experience either the potential supports or tensions involved in the relationship between employee and student roles.

A helpful form of support for face-to-face learners was an induction programme for direct entrants. This was not available on the distance learning route, although several students said that they would have found it helpful to have more information about the programme and support to prepare them for studying, before it started, either from the OU or their employers.

4.3 Comparisons between student subsets

The research design, involving interviews with students with and without advanced standing and with different types of advanced standing (either with prior degrees or HNC/ SVQ), made it possible to make direct comparisons of their experiences on the social work degree programme. As described above there were more similarities than differences between the three subsets.

Where there were differences these were relatively subtle. The most substantial difference seemed to be in students' confidence levels. Both students without advanced standing and graduates appeared to have come into the programme fairly confidently. The six OU students who had already undertaken the first year of the programme felt familiar with the university's

systems and expectations, and some commented on how the previous year's courses gave them a good foundation of knowledge,

I was glad to have studied with the OU before starting this [second year] course.

Several students commented on feeling apprehensive about participating in practice workshops, which had a more informal style than they were used to, but these initial anxieties seemed to have dissipated quite quickly. All students who were completing the full programme said that the foundation courses they had done had given them an advantage over advanced standing students who they thought were disadvantaged by their later point of entry to the programme.

Many of the graduates also thought that they came into the programme with an advantage over other students. As one student explained, knowing that she already had **a good level of academic attainment** helped her approach the social work degree with some confidence in her own abilities. More specifically, some thought that they were more able to grasp the course content and had better study skills than those without a degree. Several students said that their previous academic study had helped them understand the expectations of the programme,

Knowing what to expect from a degree course and I would have to work at it allowed me to be mentally ready for the social work degree.

Graduates also said that previous study had given them confidence to be active participants in learning, for example by taking part in group discussions, and being able to proactively seek and use feedback from their tutor and other students. Some graduate students had initially feared that they might be disadvantaged by not having undertaken earlier courses in the programme, but this had not been the case in practice. Most of the interviewed students had relevant degrees, but those that had other degrees seemed to be equally positive about the advantages conveyed by being a graduate as opposed to an undergraduate learner as those with qualifications related to social work.

In contrast most of the HNC/SVQ students perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage both to established students and graduates with advanced standing when they first started the social work programme,

I think all of us thought we would be dunces in class. We were all very critical of our abilities, and thought if we only had HNC and SVQ we would be struggling.

The prospect of undertaking a degree was initially perceived by some as anxiety-provoking, but once students settled into studying, they seemed to increase in confidence quite rapidly,

I found sometimes that the word ‘degree’, you think, ‘what’s all this about?’ It can be intimidating if you haven’t done that kind of thing before. And then you look at the course itself and think, ‘I can do this’..... a lot of this fear is in your head.

Most HNC/SVQ students also found the transition from their previous qualifications a **big jump** in terms of the expectations on them as students. In particular students mentioned the higher frequency and length of assignments and more stringent assessment requirements, such as correct referencing, and accurate spelling and grammar,

Past study has stood me in good stead but the expectation now is much higher.

Support from tutors and other students with HNC/ SVQ seemed to be particularly important to this subset of students. Many had been anxious about writing and submitting their early assignments. These students found tutor feedback especially helpful in giving them direction and building their confidence that they were capable of succeeding on the programme. Some students also thought that they had underestimated how much they had already learned from previous qualifications,

If anything, I was expecting it to be tougher, given that we had only done SVQ and HNC and we were going into the second year of a degree course.

This group of students also more frequently commented on the demands of using ICT skills than other students. For example, one student who had undertaken HNC/SVQ 3 some years previously had only ever hand written assignments **so it was an ask for me to type an essay.**

Student experiences of HNC and SVQ varied considerably. Generally the HNC was perceived as most useful for providing experience of studying, and writing assignments. Some students thought that their HNC had been too superficial in its coverage of theory and other knowledge, although other students said that this knowledge had provided them with a good foundation for entering the degree programme. Half the students in this subset had not found SVQ to be particularly useful or enjoyable, one student saying that, **I didn’t feel I got any learning from it, to be honest.** Nevertheless all but one of the OU students said that undertaking an SVQ had given them experience of reflective writing that had been helpful to them when they entered the social work programme,

SVQ has been very helpful for writing..... assignments – reflecting and letting your feelings go with a pen.

In contrast, students without advanced standing and graduates mostly found reflective writing, though often very enjoyable, and, for some **liberating** and **therapeutic**, a new and challenging skill. Many said that they needed to learn

to make the shift between reflective writing and the more academic style that they were more accustomed to.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Probably the most striking finding from this research is the commonality of students' perceptions of the process of transition onto the social work programme and the supports that helped them to make this adjustment successfully. Although conducted with a relatively small number of students, the research suggests that, whilst students may have entered the social work programme with apparently very different previous academic and vocational experiences, these differences became less significant as students settled into the programme. One reason for this may be related to the holistic nature of social work training itself, which draws considerably on individual personal attributes, such as values and beliefs, and both life and social care experience.

The importance of these factors was strongly emphasised by all the research participants. This perception accords with growing understanding of the importance of the personal capabilities of social service workers (SSSC, 2008). The need for attention to the personal qualities and values of social workers was also stressed by service users and carers during the 21st Century Review of Social Work (Scottish Executive, 2006). Another supportive factor seems to be through the advantages conveyed by previous study in developing skills for learning, as opposed to specific knowledge or academic qualifications. At the same time it is possible that prior knowledge was more important than students acknowledged at this stage of training, or that they found it difficult to identify to what extent and how their accumulated knowledge from study, practice and life experience informed their learning.

Nevertheless, there were observable, if often subtle and not entirely consistent, differences between the cohorts of students studied. Graduate advanced entry students came into the degree programmes with greater confidence and a sense of their own capabilities than those with HNC/SVQ.

This is consistent with previous research about perceptions of the value of vocational versus academic qualifications (e.g. Robinson, 1997). Student accounts suggested that these differences might have been considerably greater had we interviewed students contemplating or just embarking on entry to the programme. By the time these initially less confident HNC/SVQ students were contacted they were almost at the end of their first year of the programme or in their second year of study. They were, for the most part, pleasantly surprised with their achievements and how they had coped with transition, whilst still acknowledging that the programme had felt like a big 'step up' for many of them. To some extent this was assisted by their prior experience of reflection and reflective writing in their SVQs. However, there were also some very variable perceptions of the value of SVQs, and considerable differences in the way that these qualifications were delivered, so it is hard to generalise from this particular sample. Such variations in the

quality of the learning experience at a local level for SVQ candidates have already been documented in previous Scottish research (Pavey, 2004).

There were also many similarities noted in the challenges faced by students on social work programmes, particularly the need to juggle their studying with family and social life and, in many cases, employment. These competing pressures are already known to be significant barriers to adults re-entering education in Scotland (Ormston et al., 2005). Students' pre-existing support systems, including colleagues, managers, friends and family, seemed crucial to their adjustment to the programme and their ability to sustain their involvement.

This research has provided an opportunity to gain some in depth information about how students engaged in social work training perceive their transition onto programmes. However, the research also has some limitations. It was small scale, only involving 24 students, and is a 'snapshot' of student experience, taken after students had embarked on training, which does not provide a full picture of the experience of starting the programme, or of the outcomes of different entry routes as students reach the point of qualification and start to practice as social workers. The differing structures of the three different courses, whilst offering some opportunities to compare the experience of distance and face to face learners, also make interpretation of some of the findings somewhat tentative.

5.1 Main findings

The research suggests that in many respects the social work programmes under scrutiny were perceived to support the successful transition of students with advanced standing, at least until the end of the first half of a four year social work programme. Students also suggested a number of ways in which programmes might improve the type or quality of support offered. A key underlying theme is that of identifying ways to support student confidence and self-belief, both at the time students embarked on their training and as the programme progressed. It is important to note that many of the supports described were also perceived to be important to students without advanced standing, some of whom were also initially somewhat apprehensive about their ability to tackle the next stage of the programme.

Support to get started

All advanced standing students found they had to negotiate new systems, structures, and social groups, whether they came into the programme with degrees or HNC/SVQ, and whether they were primarily distance or face-to-face learners. Having access to a formal induction process helped students make this transition. Conversely some of those students who had not been offered a formal induction suggested that they would have benefited from more information about the programme they were about to embark on and help to begin studying again. This was a particular issue for students who had had a gap between their prior qualification and the social work programme, and those who did not have a degree, and were consequently apprehensive

about their ability to undertake academic study at this level. Students made a number of suggestions about where this information and support might come from, including the university, and for students undertaking a work-based route, their employer (for example, their training service, or line manager). Some students would have valued opportunities to meet other advanced standing students who had already completed their first year of study.

An enabling learning environment

The environment for studying, including social aspects of that environment, especially interactions with other students, was highly significant for participants. A prior connection with other students, for example students sponsored by the same employer, provided useful support. However, being the new face in an already established group was more difficult, and increased students' sense of difference and of disorientation. The skills, knowledge and practice experience of tutors seemed to be particularly important in helping students to settle in to both studying and feeling part of the student group. Students particularly valued tutors who saw them as individuals, and appreciated their personal circumstances and the impact of these on their involvement in the programme. Ongoing written and verbal feedback from tutors was important in establishing and maintaining student confidence and improving performance with assessed work.

Support to become an independent learner

One of the major adjustments for students on the face-to-face programmes was a move to a more independent learning style than they were used to. This was not evident for distance learners. There are probably a number of reasons for this, including possible differences in characteristics of students who choose to follow the two routes. There was some evidence that the relatively prescribed course materials and detailed assignment guidance characteristic of the OU route was especially helpful to less confident learners coming through the HNC/SVQ route. Gaining ICT skills was, however, more difficult for distance learners without opportunities for direct, face-to-face assistance with skill development.

Working in groups

There also seem to have been important supportive factors within the structure of social work programmes themselves. Regular group experiences that enabled students to meet face to face and learn from each other were perceived as very supportive to transition, and the success of these experiences again partly related to tutor expertise in establishing an encouraging and interactive learning environment. This mode of learning was more informal than many students had previously experienced but seemed to increase confidence, provide mutual support and enable practice/theory linkage in a safe environment.

Employer support

The OU students, who were all on work-based routes, found it important to have supportive employers who understood the particular challenges they faced. Having regular study time was particularly valued, but it was also important to students to have support to access opportunities to use and reflect on new skills and knowledge in the workplace.

5.2 Implications for policy

This research study suggests that students with advanced standing from both graduate and HNC/SVQ routes are able to make a successful transition onto the social work programme. The students interviewed in this study shared some very similar perceptions about the experience of social work degree training, irrespective of the stage they entered their programme or the type of training undertaken. All students stressed the importance of maturity and experience as well as their personal support networks. There appear to be some key characteristics of social work programmes that support students making the transition into social work programmes. These include good quality induction information and processes and an effective learning environment that builds confidence to support independent learning, taking account of students' needs for social as well as academic support. These supports are likely to be important for all students with advanced standing, but appeared particularly vital for students with HNC/SVQ, who seemed to find the 'step up' between their previous study and the social work degree more challenging than other students with advanced standing, at least in the initial stages of their entry to the programme.

The research, though small scale, supports recent initiatives in Scotland to break down the boundaries between different qualifications by enabling progression from one qualification to another and giving recognition through credit transfer to prior qualifications (SCQF, 2007). This is congruent with Scottish Government policy to develop a cohesive lifelong learning system that is responsive to both individual and employer need (Scottish Government, 2007). In particular, the recognition of qualifications, such as HNC and SVQ, often gained whilst in employment by adults who may have lacked previous educational opportunities, may offer the potential to promote greater inclusion and equality of opportunity for under-represented groups in the social work profession.

6. Messages for students and employers

- Entering a qualifying degree in social work is a life transition which brings inherent stresses. This will be true irrespective of mode of entry. Students in this study found that prior academic learning had helped them to acquire sufficient study skills, irrespective of the content of the study to cope with advanced entry to the course. Equally students found that life and work experience helped them, especially to make sense of the course material.

Overall there was no one route to entry which advantaged students particularly. Rather, we found that students came to the course with many skills that were transferrable to social work education. The important factor was that students felt they had some prior experience, which could be practice or academic experience, which provided a secure foundation on which they could build.

- While prior study had been formally recognised by the universities as an acceptable basis for advanced entry, this was not true for practical experience. None of the universities in this study has a procedure for acknowledging prior informal learning (RPL) or such procedures were not utilised. Students may need to be helped to value their work and life experiences. As students in this study found, these skills can provide a gateway to understanding the theory and knowledge base in the degree.
- All students need help to recognise that they can build on their past experience in preparing for social work training but this will take a different form depending on the precise nature of the experience.
- Students in the research reported that having a gap between periods of study made them less confident about their study skills. Where this occurs students may find it helpful to undertake short link courses such as an OU's Openings course to refresh their skills. Employers may wish to consider this point as part of their sponsorship strategy.
- Students found it helpful to have structured support from their sponsor and from other prospective students before the course started and in the early stages. A further implication from the research is that it would be helpful if systems were in place to ensure that all students with advanced standing were supported in this way. This might include allocating new students a student mentor who is further on in their studies.

7. Recommendations

- The research suggests that there are promising outcomes for advanced entry students on social work programmes, both with HNC/SVQ and prior degrees. The findings can give HEIs and employers confidence in the efficacy of credit transfer. We recommend the development of a more seamless system of recognising prior certificated learning.
- Advanced entry students need support from universities to adjust to their new social and academic environment and develop confidence in their ability to learn and succeed. This is likely to be particularly important for HNC/SVQ entrants. There should be early provision of information, induction processes, interactive group learning opportunities, and responsive support from University staff in order to contribute to effective transition into programmes.

- The employers of students on work-based programmes would benefit from more information about advanced entry and the support that students may require to manage the transition into degree level study, particularly when time has elapsed between their previous qualification and the degree. This would enable employers to take a more proactive role in identifying potential advanced standing entrants, in helping employees to make the transition between qualifications, and in providing ongoing study support and relevant practice opportunities as their employees undertake the degree programme.
- The research suggests that policy and practice initiatives should be strengthened to broaden the range of recognised qualifications and experiences for advanced entry.

8. Further research

This exploratory study has produced some interesting findings about the potential of advanced entry to social work training. A logical next step would be to undertake a larger scale study of students, and to look at the progress of advanced standing students as they move through a social work programme, against a contrast group of students completing the full programme. This would give important insights into whether the apparent levelling effect of the first year of training continues into subsequent stages of the programme, to meet increasing expectations that students can undertake assessed practice placements, further integrate practice and theory, and become increasingly reflective and analytical practitioners.

The research has also found that students perceived that personal aptitude, experience and the ability to learn as important as the knowledge that they brought to the programme. This finding merits further exploration, with a greater focus on both tacit and explicit knowledge, and how this is transferred between different study programmes and practice settings.

This study has produced some indicative findings about the transition of students with advanced standing. Further in depth research is needed about the strengths and limits of advanced standing and of what knowledge and experience can be counted as sufficient grounding for later entry to social work education.

Appendix One
Structure of social work degree programmes
2006/07

Open University Honours Degree Programme			
Course	Title	SCQF Level	Credits
Stage One	DD100: Introduction to the social sciences	7	60
	and K100: Understanding health and social care or KZX100	7	60
Stage Two	K113: Social Work: foundations for social work practice	7	60
	and	8	30
	K224: Social work with children and families		
	and	8	30
	One option from:	8	30
K222: Care, welfare and community for social workers	8	30	
K225: Diverse perspectives on mental health	8	30	
K260: Death and dying	8	30	
K272: Challenging ideas in mental health			
Stage Three	K207: The law and social work in Scotland	9	60
	and K216: Applied social work practice (100 days practice learning)	9	60
Stage Four	One option from:		
	K303: Managing care	10	60
	K309: Communication in Health and Social Care	10	60
	KE308: Youth: perspectives and practice	10	60
	KE312: Working together for children	10	60
and			
K315: Critical social work practice (100 days practice learning)	10	60	

Glasgow Caledonian University Honours Degree Programme			
Level	Module Title	SCQF Level	Credits
1	Working in an Information Society	7	20
	Social and Public Policy Context	7	20
	Understanding Welfare	7	20
	Sociology	7	20
	Psychology	7	20
	Inter Professional Studies for Health and Social Care	7	20
2	Social Work Values and Ethics	8	20
	Social Issues	8	20
	Lifespan Development – An Applied Perspective	8	20
	Social Work Assessment and Skills	8	20
	Social Work Law	8	20
	Theoretical Frameworks for Social Work		20
3	Supervised Direct Practice 1	9	40
	Assessing and Managing Risk	9	20
	Organisational Aspects of Social Work Practice	9	20
	Social Work Practice and Process	9	20
	Using Research in Practice	9	20
4 D	Developing Professional Practice	10	40
	Honours Project	10	40
	Supervised Direct Practice 2	10	40

Dundee University Honours Degree Programme			
Level	Module Title	SCQF Level	Credits
1	Reflective Practice 1	7	20
	The Developing Professional Professions in Context	7	20
	Formation of Social Work 1	7	20
	Formation of Social Work 2	7	20
	Communication	7	20
	+ 15 days Practice Learning		
2	Reflective Practice 2	8	20
	Lifespan Development	8	20
	Contexts of Practice	8	20
	Social Policy	8	20
	Ethics and Diversity	8	20
	Developing Professional Practice	8	20
	Reflective Practice 3	9	30
	Evidence Based Practice	9	30
	Practice Learning 3	9	60
4	Reflective Practice 4	10	30
	Specialist Practice	10	30
	Practice Learning 4	10	60

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