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Change and continuity: a quantitative investigation of trends and characteristics of international social workers in England

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Abstract

The United Kingdom (UK) has long experienced a shortage of social workers and has recruited internationally to meet demand. There has been little specific data quantifying the scale of social work mobility to the UK through which such experiences can be set in context. The analysis reported in this article uses data from October 2008, relating to registered social workers working in England. As part of a wider study of migrant social care workers in England, the article reports analysis of data records of over 7000 non-UK social workers registered to work in England and compares their characteristics to UK-qualified social workers. These analyses are supplemented by analysis of more recent application and registration data from the General Social Care Council pertaining to social workers qualified within and outside the European Union during 2008 and 2009. The findings highlight several important observations in terms of non-UK qualified social workers' profile as well as some possible trends in migration and variations in rates of qualification verification. Over half of all international social workers in England were trained in four countries: Australia, South Africa, India and the United States. Findings are contextualised with qualitative data obtained from the wider study and policy debates.

Key words
International social work, Immigration, Quantitative methods, Recruitment

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) has long experienced a shortage of social workers, with declining applications to study social work (although a recent upturn has

occurred, see Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree, 2008), high turnover among practitioners (Harlow, 2004) and short professional career 'lifetimes' (Curtis *et al.*, 2010). There have been specific attempts to address these shortages: for example, one aim of the new degree qualification in England and systems of financial support for those in training was to attract greater numbers of students to offset the steady decline in the numbers of newly qualified social workers (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2010a). Another strategy emerged in the context of government migration policies permitting entry to the UK of skilled workers in shortage occupations, which enabled employers to encourage and actively solicit applications by social workers who trained outside the UK but whose qualifications are equivalent and verifiable. The social work profession in the UK was not party to agreements at national levels about ethical recruitment from developing countries as have affected other professions such as nursing (Hussein *et al.*, 2011).

Vacancies have been a major 'pull' factor for international social workers to the UK (Simpson, 2009), but they are not the only one. The UK social work profession has a strong tradition of colonial links and exchanges with countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States (US), South Africa, the Republic of Ireland and India, arising from academic, historical, political and linguistic commonalities with the UK. This has meant that social workers have, for many years, moved into and out of the UK to and from these countries. Global mobility of social workers is not confined to the UK but reflects similar approaches to addressing specific shortages among many developed countries, through active recruitment overseas and international exchange (Lyons, 2006; Lyons and Lawrence, 2009; Welbourne *et al.*, 2007; Walsh *et al.*, 2010) (enhancing the 'pull' factors) and often taking account of the oversupply of professionals in some developing countries (the 'push' factors) (Yeates, 2009; Hussein *et al.*, 2011).

Individual professional decisions about mobility, whether temporary or permanently, take place in the context of national and supranational migration policies, and the salience of this for social work was highlighted by the changes to UK immigration policies in the context of its membership of the European Union (EU) (Moriarty *et al.*, 2008). While initially the principles of free movement of labour did not notably affect social workers, there developed growing interest in attempts to facilitate and standardise qualification transferability across the EU with the underlying intent that movement across EU states would be easier (Harris and Lavan, 1992). This was initiated through the Bologna Declaration of 1999, whereby EU states committed themselves to the '*Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees*' (European Ministers of Education, 1999: 3), triggering ongoing developments in comparability of social work qualifications. Such discussions covered the portability of social work qualifications (Lyons, 2006) though less frequently the potential for social workers to promote social justice and to practice some of their social work skills, such as developing peer support, on themselves (Dominelli, 2010: 147).

Simpson (2009) linked such developments to globalisation and identified what he called the 'globalisation of ideas' resulting from increasing interchange at academic levels, as well as more deliberately focused attempts to develop

common education standards to promote professional mobility within Europe. However, he noted the difficulties encountered by a group of Eastern European qualified social workers in adapting to local circumstances and systems in the UK, which he classified as '*the dialectical tension between the 'local' and the 'global'*' (p. 656). This possible tension is important in considering the experiences and impact of internationally recruited social workers in England and has recently been explored in a study of which the findings reported in this present article are a part (Hussein *et al.,* 2010a).

It may be surprising that there has been little specific data quantifying the scale of social work mobility to the UK through which such experiences can be set in context, leading to a reliance on anecdotal information or localised accounts. With the creation of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in England and its counterparts in the rest of the UK, reliable information from its major datasets has become available to researchers. The opportunity to explore this dataset arose as part of a larger study of international or migrant social care workers that took place 2007-09 and was funded by the Department of Health's Social Care Workforce Research Initiative. The study included secondary data analyses of most up-to-date records of social workers registered to work in England, supplied by the GSCC; data related to social care workers as reported by employers completing National Minimum Data Set for Social Care (NMDS-SC); and 254 in-depth interviews with international workers, their colleagues, employers, service users and other stakeholders in six diverse areas in England. Other elements of the research are reported elsewhere (Hussein *et al.*, 2010a; 2010b; in press).

The focus of this article is to critically discuss observed trends in the contribution of non-UK qualified social workers in England within the changing global economic and labour movements. It also explores specific profiles of social workers qualifying in different parts of the world and reflects on the implications of such findings. The quantitative analysis is informed by a conceptual framework that highlights, among other factors, the importance of migrants' home countries economic and political relationship with the UK on their work experience and stability. We thus use the data to investigate trends in sending countries within the changing international relations between the UK and other non-EEA countries.

Methods

The analysis reported in this article uses the most up-to-date data at the time of analysis (October 2008) relating to registered social workers working in England. This was undertaken as part of a wider study of migrant social care workers in England, which included 254 semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including 93 with migrant social care and social workers, and which is reported elsewhere (Hussein *et al.*, 2010a). This article reports primarily on part of the quantitative analysis undertaken for the study, which has since been supplemented with analyses of more recent data.

This database contained anonymised records of over 7000 registrants held by the GSCC, relating to social workers currently working or registered in England

who gained their professional social work qualification (or equivalent) outside the UK. The GSCC holds the register for all social workers working in England, incorporating a separate register for those who have trained outside the UK and who satisfy its requirements. Three similar registers also exist in the UK:– held by the Care Council for Wales; the Scottish Social Services Council; and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. The GSCC register primarily reflects the 'stock' of international social workers in England at this point of time. It is not possible from the data to identify accurate movement, and thus explore transitory social work. These records were used to extract information about international social workers in England. We then used a similar anonymised dataset from the register of social workers who had received their training in the UK and were working in England at the same time point, a total of 78,823 records. The latter was used to analyse differences in social workers' characteristics, particularly age and gender, among those trained in and outside the UK. We refer to the first register as the international social workers' register, and the second as the English social workers' register.

To our knowledge this is the first time such a large database of social workers in England has been used for research purposes. It provided a unique opportunity to profile non-UK qualified (hereafter referred as 'international') social workers in terms of personal characteristics, country of training and sector of employment. The database also contained information about when non-UK social workers obtained their first jobs in the UK, which facilitated some explorations of recent trends in terms of country of training, age and other characteristics. These data, however, reflect the number of non-UK social workers who were registered to work in England, but do not provide information on the characteristics of applicants who have not had their qualification recognised. To complement this dataset, in early 2010, we obtained more recent aggregated data on the number of applications and successful registrations by country of qualification during 2008 and 2009. These were used to supplement the main analyses and to provide a sense of more recent changes related to volume of applications from within and outside the EU.

The GSCC register does not include any information on date of arrival to England, but, for those who are in employment, date of first employment is included. However, we should not assume that the date of first employment corresponds to the date of a person's entry to the UK because of several possible factors. First, the GSCC registration started in late 2004; therefore the vast majority (94%) of 'date of first employment' data was reported in 2004 or later and so this may include many social workers who had already been in the UK for several years. Second, around 29 percent of records did not include any information on date of first employment. Missing dates are more likely to refer to earlier dates; however, it is not possible to be certain of this. Nevertheless, the trend of registration numbers from 2004 to 2008 may be used as an indication of the 'trend' of employment of international social workers. Some other variables, such as reported disability, included large missing values. We did not attempt to impute any missing values due to the lack of substantial benchmark information that could aid imputation. We used exploratory and descriptive statistics with non-parametric tests, which do not assume that data are normally distributed,

the analysis being performed using SPSS statistical package version 16 and R statistical environment version 2.

Findings

Table 1 shows that around 32 percent of international social workers were from two countries: Australia and South Africa (16.4 and 15.5% respectively). This was followed by 13 percent from the United States (US) and 12 percent from India. Around 5 percent (N=372 and 370) obtained their social work training in Canada and Germany respectively. Four regions of the globe provide around 67 percent of all international social workers in England: these are, in order, Australia and New Zealand, North America, Southern Africa and South Central Asia. It is worth noting that 'South Central Asia' is based almost entirely on those who gained their qualifications from India. This was then followed by Western Europe, East Africa and Eastern Europe, excluding the new accession states of the European Union – the A8 countries (A8 includes The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia).

Table 1 Distribution of international social workers in England by country and world region of qualification, GSCC international social workers register October 2008

World region and country of Training	Number of social workers qualified outside the UK by country and registered to work in England	Percent
Australia & New Zealand	*1409*	*20.8*
Australia	1107	16.4
New Zealand	302	4.5
North America	*1254*	*18.5*
United States	882	13.0
Canada	372	5.5
Southern Africa	*1067*	*15.8*
South Africa	1051	15.5
Namibia	12	0.2
Botswana	4	0.1
South Central Asia	*810*	*12.0*
India	797	11.8
Pakistan	9	0.1
Iran	2	0.0
Sri Lanka	2	0.0
Western Europe	*505*	*7.5*
Germany	370	5.5
Netherlands	80	1.2
Belgium	18	0.3
France	15	0.2
Austria	13	0.2
Switzerland	8	0.1
Luxembourg	1	0.0
Eastern Africa	*372*	*5.5*
Zimbabwe	262	3.9
Uganda	42	0.6

World region and country of Training	Number of social workers qualified outside the UK by country and registered to work in England	Percent
Mauritius	21	0.3
Kenya	19	0.3
Zambia	17	0.3
Tanzania	9	0.1
Malawi	1	0.0
Rwanda	1	0.0
Eastern Europe (not A8)	*273*	*4.0*
Romania	244	3.6
Bulgaria	28	0.4
Russia	1	0.0
Western Africa	*219*	*3.2*
Ghana	113	1.7
Nigeria	105	1.6
Sierra Leone	1	0.0
Southern Europe	*195*	*2.9*
Spain	102	1.5
Portugal	30	0.4
Greece	22	0.3
Malta	15	0.2
Italy	14	0.2
Albania	7	0.1
Croatia	4	0.1
Macedonia, Former Yugoslav Republic	1	0.0
A8 countries	*187*	*2.8*
Poland	83	1.2
Hungary	33	0.5
Slovakia	26	0.4
Czech Republic	16	0.2
Lithuania	14	0.2
Estonia	6	0.1
Slovenia	6	0.1
Latvia	3	0.0
South Eastern Asia	*169*	*2.5*
Philippines	162	2.4
Singapore	6	0.1
Thailand	1	0.0
Northern Europe	*163*	*2.4*
Sweden	54	0.8
Ireland	44	0.7
Denmark	25	0.4
Norway	20	0.3
Finland	19	0.3
Iceland	1	0.0
Caribbean	*45*	*0.7*
West Indies	38	0.6
Trinidad and Tobago	5	0.1
Puerto Rico	1	0.0
Grenada	1	0.0

| World region and country of Training	Number of social workers qualified outside the UK by country and registered to work in England	Percent
Western Asia	*39*	*0.6*
Israel	29	0.4
Turkey	9	0.1
Armenia	1	0.0
South America	*32*	*0.5*
Guyana	11	0.2
Brazil	8	0.1
Colombia	7	0.1
Chile	5	0.1
Peru	1	0.0
Eastern Asia	*16*	*0.2*
Hong Kong	15	0.2
Japan	1	0.0
Northern Africa	*8*	*0.1*
Egypt	6	0.1
Sudan	2	0.0
Number of international workers with information on country of qualification	6765	100
Non-UK qualified social workers with missing information on country of training	437	
	7200	

The data reveal clear differences in the characteristics of social workers trained in the European Economic Area (EEA, who have the right to freely enter and seek employment in the UK) and those of non-EEA workers, mainly in relation to age and gender. Analysis showed that the percentage of male social workers was significantly higher among non-EEA than EEA trained workers (20% vs. 16%; χ^2= 12.9, P=0.002); and social workers trained in EEA countries were significantly younger, with a mean age of 34.7 compared to 36.8 years ($\underline{F}$=54.9, P<0.001).

International social worker trends by region

The qualitative interviews with national informants undertaken in this study (as reported in Hussein *et al.,* 2010b; Manthorpe *et al.,* 2010b) suggested some recent trends in source countries over the past few years in respect of social care and social workers, particularly an increase in workers from Poland and other A8 countries. Participants referred to the recruitment of those already living in the UK as well as to direct recruitment from other countries. The intake in the earlier period was seen to be mainly from 'White' Commonwealth countries (Canada, Australia and New Zealand), other Commonwealth countries such as India, South Africa and Zimbabwe, the US, and the Philippines. Participants observed that this trend has recently altered, with an increase in the number of Eastern Europeans, especially those from Poland but also from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania, as a consequence of European Union (EU) enlargement. To examine if this experience was confirmed by data relating to international social workers who registered during the past few years, Figure 1

presents the trends of those who arrived from the top 10 regions listed in Table 1 by year of their first employment in England.

Figure 1 Percentage of international social workers registered to work in England by world region of qualification and year of first employment in England, GSCC international social work register, October 2008
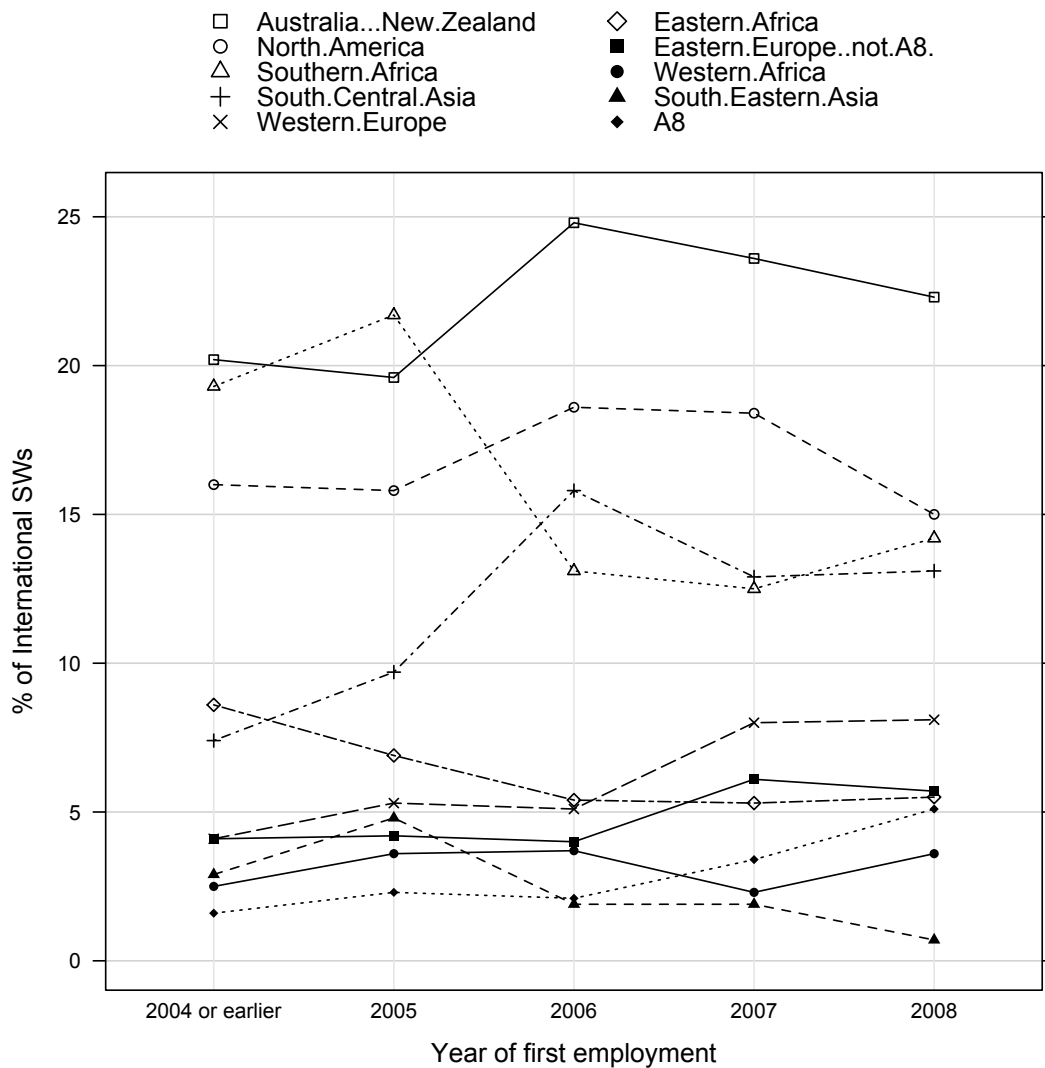
When examining trends over the three years from 2006 to 2008, several notable changes emerge. First, in the past few years both the proportion and numbers of social workers working in England who trained in North America exceeded those from Southern Africa. Secondly, although the percentage of social workers working in England who qualified in Australia and New Zealand remains the highest when compared to those qualified in other regions, their absolute numbers have declined from around 276 starting in 2006 to 62 starting in 2008. Similarly, the percentage of social workers trained in India declined from 175 in 2006 to 95 in 2008. On the other hand, there was a slight increase in both the percentage (2 to 5%) and absolute numbers (23 to 37) of social workers who had been trained in any of the A8 countries from 2006 to 2008. Figure 1 also

shows an increase in the percentage, but not the absolute numbers, of social workers qualified in Western Europe other than the UK, from 5 percent in 2006 to 8 percent in 2008.

We obtained applications and registrations' data from the GSCC, which provided the total numbers of applications received and registration gained for non-UK qualified social workers by country of training during 2008 and 2009. Table 2 clearly shows a sharp increase of 49 percent in applications from EU trained social workers, which corresponds to a 36 percent rise in registrations gained by EU qualified social workers from 2008 to 2009; this is, of course, relatively small in absolute number (118 more applications) but large as a percentage increase. On the other hand, the same period saw a slight decline in both applications and completed registrations (by 2 and 3.6% respectively) among applicants from outside the EU.

Table 2 Number of applications received and registrations gained by non-UK qualified social workers, by EU or non-EU origin, GSCC 2008-2009

Whether social work training received in the EU	2008	2009
EU		
Application	239	357
Registrations	186	253
Registration rate	77.8	70.9
Rate of increase in applications		49.4
Rate of increase in registration		36.0
Non-EU		
Application	767	752
Registrations	719	693
Registration rate	93.7	92.2
Rate of increase in applications		-2.0
Rate of increase in registration		-3.6

Examining specific numbers of applications from traditional sending countries and new, EU, countries during 2008 and 2009, Table 3 shows that the top three sending countries remain the same: namely the US, Australia and India. However, some interesting changes are observed, particularly in relation to the number of applications. Applications from social workers trained in Ireland, Poland and Romania markedly increased; however, this was not necessarily associated with a similar increase in registrations among the latter two countries. Only 11 out of 51 applicants from Poland achieved registration in 2009. A number of reasons may account for this. For example, qualifications in social pedagogy, which are increasingly common in many parts of the EU, may not map well onto the social work requirements in the UK (Statham *et al.*, 2006) or language proficiency thresholds may not be being achieved.

Table 3 Number of applicants and registrations obtained by non-UK social workers in England by country of training, GSCC 2008-2009

Country of social work qualification		2008	2009
US	Applicants	189	208
	Registrants	181	202
Australia	Applicants	166	165
	Registrants	161	159
India	Applicants	140	128
	Registrants	139	119
Germany	Applicants	51	59
	Registrants	47	44
Canada	Applicants	48	54
	Registrants	45	54
New Zealand	Applicants	41	36
	Registrants	40	36
Poland	Applicants	36	51
	Registrants	23	11
Ireland	Applicants	11	49
	Registrants	9	47
Romania	Applicants	36	48
	Registrants	30	36
South Africa	Applicants	58	42
	Registrants	57	41

Characteristics of international social workers

The analyses show that the majority of social workers (whether UK; 67%, or internationally qualified; 60%) are employed directly by local authority social services (children & families and adult social care) departments in England: this is followed by employment in social care (as opposed to social work roles). However, the percentage of UK qualified social workers employed in other social care settings was higher than that among internationally qualified social workers (21% vs. 13%). On the other hand, slightly higher percentages of internationally qualified social workers were working in local authority social services departments, but working for an agency (temporarily or as a locum), when compared to UK qualified social workers (9% vs. 5%). This is consistent with findings obtained from our interviews with personnel from recruitment agencies, who perceived agency work to be particularly attractive to internationally qualified wokers as an entry point to the UK employment market (Hussein *et al*., 2010b). This finding is also relflected in studies of social workers undertaking agency or temporary work in England (Carey, 2007; Cornes *et al*., 2010).

Interestingly, a larger percentage of internationally qualified social workers were recorded as 'unemployed' when compared to UK qualified workers (12% vs. 4%). This might be due to the timing of their registration, and whether they are likely to register immediately after arriving in the UK (before securing a job)

or later on, as indicated by some of the stakeholders and agency representatives (Hussein *et al.*, 2010b; Manthorpe *et al.*, 2010b).

Most but not all – 78 percent (5,647) – of internationally qualified social workers in England provided information on their ethnicity. Nearly three-fifths (57%) identified themselves as 'White'; this was followed by equal proportions of 18 percent 'Asian' and 'Black'. Similar, smaller proportions identified themselves as of Mixed or 'Other' ethnicities (3 and 4 percent respectively; Chinese ethnicity being included in the 'Other' category). A total of 4,101 internationally qualified social workers provided both their ethnicity and date of first employment. Based on these 4,101 social workers, we can observe that the distribution of internationally qualified social workers by ethnicity has remained almost the same over the past few years, with a slight increase in the proportion of 'White' social workers; again, this is in line with observations obtained from the qualitative interviews but the extent of the missing data should be remembered (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2010b; Hussein *et al.,* 2010b).

The analysis shows significant differences in distribution of gender by world region of training, which is in contrast to the long-standing female dominance of the UK social work profession (Harlow, 2004). Around half (52%) of the social workers who qualified in Eastern (372) or Western Africa (219) are male, as were over half (55%) of those trained in South Central Asia (n= 810; mainly India). On the other hand, 90 percent or more of those trained in Southern Africa (1067), South East Asia (169) and the Caribbean (45) are female. Some variations were also observed in terms of ethnicity and gender, which were broadly in line with the differences in countries of qualification. The proportion of men among those who identified themselves as Asian or Black was higher than average (45% and 36% respectively), while it was lower among those reported as White or Mixed (14% and 16% respectively).

Internationally qualified social workers are significantly younger than most UK qualified social workers. The mean age for internationally qualified social workers was significantly lower than that among UK qualified social workers (36.2 vs. 47.4 years respectively; $\underline{F}$=8478.8; p<0.001). Considering median age, to minimise the effect of extreme cases, internationally qualified social workers in England have a median age of 33.8 years; this was lowest among those identifying themselves as White (32.6 years), followed by Asian (33.2 years), and highest among Black social workers (38.2 years). In terms of country of training, the median age of internationally qualified social workers is lowest (30.9 years) among social workers who gained their qualifications in one of the A8 countries, followed by those trained in Australia & New Zealand, and other Eastern European countries. On the other hand, the median age of social workers was 40 years or higher among those who qualified in Eastern Africa, the Caribbean, South Eastern Asia and South America.

Figure 2 shows the age trend of internationally qualified social workers (among those who provided both age and 'date of first employment in England', n=5,084). It reveals that the median age has declined over the past few years, from 33.2 years among those who started their first jobs in England during or

before 2004, to 30.5 years among those starting in 2007. Again this is consistent with findings obtained from our qualitative interviews with representatives of employment agencies, who observed a recent trend of more 'White' and younger international social care workers (Hussein *et al.,* 2010b).

Figure 2 Median age of internationally qualified social workers by year of first employment in England, GSCC international SW register
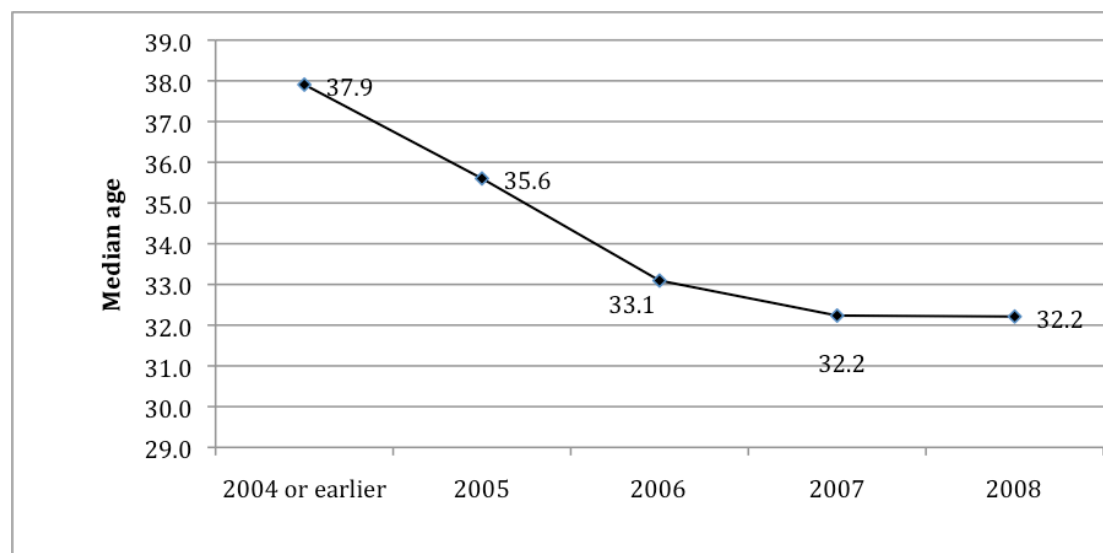
Discussion and Conclusion

The limitations of this study are similar to those found in other secondary data analyses of existing datasets. Despite the coverage and relatively high quality of the data, there is some missing information as noted above. Not all socio-demographic variables are included, and indeed there is a particular problem in that the GSCC data from its inception included people who may have been working in the UK as social workers for many years but gained their qualification overseas. As time progresses, this latter problem will recede in importance and the longitudinal trends will be more reliable, together with data about the length of time that international social workers remain on the GSCC register. The main datasets analysed reflect data on successful registration, and not trends and levels in applications from different countries. This gap was supplemented by the use of more recent data related to applications and successful registration statistics during 2008 and 2009. The findings were also contextualised through the use of qualitative data obtained from the wider research study. This study therefore reveals important trends and information concerning the composition of the social worker profession in England at a time when the profession is under intense scrutiny (Social Work Task Force, 2010), highlighting their younger age and different gender profile compared to UK social workers, their greater likelihood of engagement in agency social work, and some differences in the success of applications to join the GSCC register. English language proficiency is, of course, important in terms of migrant social workers and further scrutiny of the application processes at work in the regulatory bodies may establish whether this is part of the reason for non-acceptance or if other factors are at play. In addition to the possible language barriers, the discourse of social work

differs across the different countries of the EU and globally. Kornbeck (2004) set out some key differences between social work in France, Germany and the UK and Ireland. In Germany, for example, social work and social pedagogy overlap considerably (Kornbeck, 2004: 146), which can give rise to misunderstandings. Similarly, Simpson (2009) described a need for specific training among Romanian social workers to provide knowledge of UK local customs and an understanding of the meanings of the different aspects of social work that might better enable them to be able to work effectively as part of social work teams in a particular area. Our own research (Hussein *et al.,* 2010a), investigating the experiences of international social care workers and social workers in different areas of England, illustrated the need for social work employers to be supportive in this regard.

Moreover, the analyses presented here highlight several important observations in terms of worker profile as well as some possible trends. First, over half (57%) of international social workers have trained in only four countries: Australia, South Africa, the United States and India. Changes are emerging, with a recent decline in social workers qualified in India and slight increase in those from A8 countries, although these trends are not large in magnitude. As Yeates (2009, p.224) observed in relation to migrant care workers and nurses, there is a tendency to neglect historical trends when exploring the dynamics of globalisation in such employment and labour markets. She argued that this runs the risk of overlooking directions of change, or detecting similarities or trends but also discontinuities and changes. Our analysis – while not stretching back two centuries as was possible in her case, with examples of nursing and female religious orders providing care and education – offers the first step towards a historical analysis of international recruitment to the English social work profession.

Increasing proportions of EU qualified social workers in UK social work settings are likely to give rise to new challenges for employers and colleagues, as well as assisting with the filling of vacancies and providing new stimuli. As Kornbeck (2004) observed, social work, more than many other professions, relies on workers' knowledge of cultural practices and understandings, which he identified as 'cultural affinity'. Consequently, an increasing number of international social workers, whose basic understanding and expectations (of, for example, parenting styles or what is expected of a social worker) may differ from their UK colleagues, may provide both advantages and challenges to employers and users. Working with colleagues with different understandings and expectations may create opportunities for UK social workers to expand their perspectives and approaches. Indeed, new approaches were one of the themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews with UK social workers in this study, some of whom commented on the value of working alongside internationally qualified social workers (Hussein *et al.,* 2010a, in press). However, these very differences may also lead to the need for better preparation (Dominelli, 2010) or the kinds of special training reported by Simpson (2009), or at least sensitive and extended approaches to induction as we have advocated (Hussein *et al.,* 2010a). Such differences are also likely to relate to social workers qualifying in non-English speaking and/or non-EU countries, of course, and

indeed those joining the profession from countries with which there appear to be fewer cultural differences.

Slightly larger proportions of internationally qualified social workers than UK-qualified workers were employed in social services departments through employment agencies (9% vs. 5%), confirming others' studies of the role of agency work as a transition (Carey, 2009; Cornes *et al.*, 2010). A larger proportion of internationally qualified social workers were recorded as 'unemployed' when compared to UK qualified ones (12% vs. 4%); this may be due to the timing of their registration. The possible implications of this are that while agency work may be a useful form of preparation and learning for internationally qualified social workers, employers may need to assure themselves that they are not over-estimating UK experience among agency social workers and are able to identify and meet any needs for supervision and assistance. Periods of unemployment may be due to time needed to verify qualification and to become familiar with a new country but employers who are minded to offer employment may wish to set up learning opportunities, such as internships, to enable potential employees to gain some insights into their practices and policies.

The analysis revealed that international social workers who have qualified in different world regions have different profiles from their UK counterparts. The variations in gender patterns suggest an interaction between cultural differences and gender patterns, given the high proportions of women in UK social work (Harlow, 2004). For example, men who qualified in South Central Asia and Western Africa are likely to experience cultural differences in a particular way (as opposed to women) and may require a certain kind of input in order to support them to manage this change. However, the impact of such variances in culture and gender of migrant social workers is deserving of further exploration, in order to identify both how professional practice is experienced and what kinds of support and training are desired, required and cost-effective.

Consistent with findings obtained from interviews with employment agencies and other stakeholders, the age profile of many internationally qualified social workers in England is significantly younger than UK-qualified ones. Moreover, there is an observed trend of younger and more 'White' cohorts entering the English workforce over the recent few years, similar to findings obtained from the qualitative data and reported in this journal (Hussein *et al.,* 2010b). One possible implication of this is that international social workers, who are enjoying the experience of travelling and working in a new culture, may inspire their UK peers to be more mobile. Previously, social workers in the UK have often been older than other students and many more of them have family commitments (Hussein *et al.,* 2008). The expectations of a younger group arising from the new degree cohorts (Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree in England, 2008) have yet to emerge.

An increase in the numbers of social workers qualified in mainland EU is not unique to England and similar trends have been observed in the Republic of Ireland (Walsh *et al.*, 2010). These are potentially a mobile population, who may

not confine themselves to one international experience but who may seek further challenges and opportunities. The UK and other English-speaking states may need to be mindful that some international social workers may be thinking of the UK as a stepping stone to other English-speaking nations such as the US, Canada and Australia. These are commonly reported means of advancement for professionals such as nurses (Yeates, 2009).

Conclusion

This analysis shows the value of the GSCC data and the importance of comparative analyses. Longitudinal analyses of further datasets will be of huge value to the social work profession itself as well as workforce planners and commissioners. It may be that the trend towards EU qualified social workers continues as a proportion of internationally qualified social workers in England and, if so, there will be further room to distinguish trends. For example, will international social workers wish to stay in the UK and how will their career pathways develop? Will they move between authorities and sectors or will they remain in the areas where they have been initially employed? Will male social workers who have qualified internationally seek to move into management? There has been surprisingly little recognition of the contribution of international social workers in filling vacancy rates in English social work services, and of their diversity. This study has contributed to knowledge of the profession at an important moment for social work in England.

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