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A comparative study of Australian social work research

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Abstract

The quality and quantity of social work research is not simply a matter of academic inquiry, it has real-world implications for practitioners, policy makers, and the community. Internationally, research assessment exercises being undertaken in university sectors are shaping notions of research productivity, quality, and impact. This paper advances empirical understandings of the nature of social work research in Australia, through an interdisciplinary and cross-national comparative analysis of performance data reported in the research assessment exercises *Excellence in Research for Australia* 2012 and 2015, and the UK's *Research Excellence Framework* 2014. It found that compared to other social science disciplines, social work in Australia is a mid-level performer in terms of quantity and above-average in terms of quality, but when compared to social work and social policy research in the UK, quality is rated less highly. It argues for more transparent criteria to assess quality within peer-review research assessments and careful consideration of ways to document and evaluate research impact that are relevant to the discipline, capable of capturing the many and varied ways that research can influence policy and practice over time.

Key words: research assessment, research impact, knowledge utilisation

A comparative study of Australian social work research

Research provides an important component of the knowledge foundations of a discipline. Social work research generates and adds to knowledge about social work and human services, highlights the nature of the lived experiences of service users and the ways that inequality and diversity shape experiences, and promotes social justice and social inclusion (Shaw, 2007). The link between social work research and practice means that research quality and quantity is not simply a matter of academic inquiry. The nature of social work research has real implications for practitioners, policy makers, and the community. However, the quality of social work research has received consistent criticism, particularly in light of the growing advocacy of evidence-based practice in the fields of health and social care (e.g. Epstein 2015). In particular, the lack of empirical quantitative research in social work has been lamented (McCambridge et al., 2007; Brough, Wagner & Farrell, 2013; Ryan & Sheehan, 2009). McCambridge et al. (2007) found that quantitative and mixed-methods studies accounted for one quarter of articles published in the *British Journal of Social Work* between 2000 and 2004, and the studies varied considerably with regards sophistication of analysis and conceptualisation. Ryan and Sheehan (2009) found that 45 per cent of articles published in *Australian Social Work* from 1998 to 2007 were based on empirical research (only 8 per cent using quantitative methods), although this increased to 79 per cent of papers by 2014 (Simpson & Lord, 2015). In general, criticism of social work research quality has centred on methodological issues, including a relatively low proportion of empirical studies, the predominance of practitioner voices compared to service user perspectives, a relatively high proportion of qualitative methods and correspondingly low proportion of advanced statistical methods, and few large-scale studies.

Sharland (2013) argued that the lack of quantitative and mixed-methods research was problematic because qualitative research alone cannot answer population-level questions or

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3 facilitate reliable and valid generalisations and comparisons across countries, regions, and service
4 recipients or practitioner groups. On the other hand, critiques of the lack of generalizability of
5 qualitative studies can be contested on two grounds: (1) the value of generalisability to scientific
6 progress has been overstated; and (2) ungeneralisable knowledge that can be obtained from
7 descriptive or phenomenological research also has an important role in the process of knowledge
8 accumulation (Flyvbjerg 2004). There are advantages to qualitative research, for example it
9 explains processes in complex situations and provides grounded theory for empirical testing.
10 Thus, qualitative research is often well suited to the research questions of importance in social
11 work and is also important as the basis of quantitative research (Craig & Bigby, 2015). In an
12 analysis of the highest-cited social work articles in the USA and Europe, Kreisberg and Marsh
13 (2016) noted the influence of conceptual and theoretical papers on practice development and
14 innovation. While a balanced profile comprising both qualitative and quantitative research, and
15 empirical and discursive approaches would be appropriate in most disciplines, assessing quality
16 based solely on methodology is often unhelpful: good research is problem-driven, not method-
17 driven.

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20 The overall quantum of research is also important to consider. Productivity contributes to
21 creating a critical mass of quality research, and increased productivity has been found to be
22 positively correlated with researcher reputation (Rothman, Kirk and Knapp, 2003). In a series of
23 studies, Pardeck and various colleagues (1992; Pardeck, Chung & Murphy, 1995; Pardeck &
24 Meinert, 1999) compiled data regarding publication counts and citations of research papers
25 published by the editors and reviewers of selected social work journals, finding that publication
26 counts were modest and that editorial board members were cited less frequently than their
27 psychology counterparts. Similarly, Thyer and Polk (1997) found that social work researchers in
28 the United States were cited less frequently than their psychology counterparts. Although, in an
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3 updated study, Barner, Holosko and Thyer (2014) found that the average *h*-index (a citation
4 measure) for social work and psychology faculty members for the period 2001 to 2011 was not
5 significantly different, suggesting that social work research productivity and quality may have
6 improved in recent years, at least in the US context.
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12 Why should we be concerned about the state of social work research? In focusing on
13 social work we do not diminish the contributions of other disciplines to social policy and the
14 social care field. Certainly, responding to social problems is an interdisciplinary task, but the
15 social work responsibility is significant due to the practice interface with individuals, families,
16 and communities. Barner et al. (2014) argued that it is vital that social work researchers are held
17 to the same research standards as other disciplines because of its potential translation to policy
18 and practice, and eventually to what gets delivered to service users, many of whom are
19 disadvantaged and marginalized. Another reason to care about the state of social work research is
20 to promote the profession and the discipline within industry and the academy. It is important to
21 the standing of social work to make its contribution to research visible, recognised, and valued.
22 Funders and agencies should have an appreciation of the contributions and needs of the social
23 work research community.
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41 Moreover, the profession itself should have an accurate understanding of its research
42 foundations, and some benchmarks to measure progress against. The productivity and quality of
43 social work research as assessed nationally is likely to be a determining factor in the future of
44 social work in universities, because research universities value and support high-performing
45 disciplines. A better understanding of where social work research stands, relative to other fields
46 of research and internationally, will provide a sound basis for developing strategies to advance
47 social work research and to maximise its capacity to influence policy and practice. The aim of
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3 this paper is to advance empirical understandings of the nature of social work research in
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5 Australia, through an interdisciplinary and cross-national comparative analysis.
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8 *What is social work research?*
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10 In examining the quality and quantity of social work research, the question arises, how
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12 should it be defined? It can be defined according to whether it contributes to social work
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14 knowledge; whether it is done by social workers or published in social work journals; or
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16 according to discipline classification systems used by research funding bodies. Whatever
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18 definitional boundaries are drawn, there will be some anomalies as well as the possibility of over-
19
20 or under-inclusion when counting research as “social work”. The first option is to define social
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22 work research as research directed towards understanding social problems, improving practice in
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24 human services, developing equitable social policy, and empowering service users (Orme &
25
26 Powell, 2008). Such an approach allows for multi-disciplinary contributions to social work
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28 knowledge, picking up research from the cognate disciplines in the social care field.
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32 Alternatively, if social work research is defined as that undertaken by social workers, it would
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34 pick up research that does not mention or consider social work directly (e.g. research that is
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36 relevant for all professions working in a human services field), and it might also include research
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38 that has no “social work identity” (Brough et al., 2013, p.5) or direct bearing on social work (e.g.
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40 a social worker might undertake research about medical professionals that is ostensibly nothing
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42 to do with social work).
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48 Alternatively, social work research can be defined according to a classification system
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50 such as the *Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification* developed by the
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52 Australian Bureau of Statistics. This system is used by funding bodies and government
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54 departments to record, categorise, survey, and report upon research activity in Australia, and was
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56 designed to enable research statistics to be compared internationally (Australian Bureau of
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3 Statistics, 2008). The Australian Field of Research (FoR) code 1607 – social work – includes
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5 clinical social work practice, counselling, welfare and community services, social program
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7 evaluation, and related research. The researcher generally makes the decision about what code
8
9 their research falls under, and researchers can make strategic decisions about coding, so research
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11 outputs can be badged in multiple ways. There are non-social work researchers included under
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13 the 1607 umbrella while, conversely, social work researchers may use other codes (such as policy
14
15 and administration or public health).
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20 *Using national research assessment outcomes to gauge research quality*
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22 The use of discipline classification systems in national research assessment exercises
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24 means that there are publicly available, comparable time-series data about university-based
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26 research activity. Several studies have utilised the published outcomes from national research
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28 assessment exercises to take stock of specific disciplines (e.g. Fisher & Marsh, 2003; Kellow,
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30 2012; Sharman & Weller, 2009; Sharman & Weller, 2013). Fisher and Marsh (2003) compared
31
32 the social work results of the 1996 and 2001 UK Research Assessment Exercise. For each round
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34 they examined the overall ratings of quality as assessed by experts in the area, staff numbers, and
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36 funding. Based on this data they were able to identify that there was an increase in research
37
38 quality, but continuing problems with the lack of a critical mass of social work researchers and no
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40 increased research funding. These observations led them to question the ability of social work
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42 research to generate new knowledge and evidence-based policy and practice in social care.
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48 The quality of political science scholarship in Australia was examined using data from the
49
50 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) national research assessment exercise and funding
51
52 bodies. Sharman and Weller (2013; 2009) used publication counts in quality journals,
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54 supplemented by the number of scholars at each research institution (Sharman & Weller, 2013)
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56 and the number of Australian Research Council Discovery Grants awarded in political science
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3 (Sharman & Weller, 2009) to identify high performing political science research institutions in
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5 Australia. Weller and Cowan (2012) also examined grants awarded, and noted the number of
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7 political science researchers per institution in Australia was significantly less than numbers
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9 overseas. Given this lack of critical mass, they cautioned against unrealistic expectations of the
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11 international contribution of Australian political scientists.
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15 Using data from national research assessments facilitates comparisons of institutions and
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17 disciplines based on readily available data collected or assessed using identical measures, at a
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19 point in time. Additionally, using the data to assess discipline research quality allows a critical
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21 examination of how quality may be measured or understood differently across disciplines.
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24 Kellow (2012) analysed the ERA assessment of quality by comparing the disciplines of political
25
26 science and astronomy. He accepted the validity of using ERA outcomes to rank research within
27
28 a discipline within Australia, but questioned the validity of using it to compare across disciplines
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30 or within disciplines internationally. He compared astronomy (highly rated) to political science
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32 (average rated) and argued that the ERA methodology gave the physical sciences an advantage in
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34 achieving high ratings of quality. In particular, Kellow (2012) referenced the use of the number
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36 of publications for evaluation rather than the quality of selected publications, using research
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38 income (an input) to assess research quality (an output), failing to adjust for the number of full-
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40 time researchers (as opposed to just full-time equivalent staff, who may or may not be teaching),
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42 and favouring internationally-orientated research over nationally-orientated research. For
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44 example, astronomy – in comparison to political science – requires larger budgets to purchase
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46 expensive scientific equipment, and has more obvious opportunities for international
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48 collaboration given the geographic position of Australia in the southern hemisphere, also leading
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50 to more involvement of Australian researchers on international papers.
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3 The present study is based on the published outcomes from research assessment exercises
4 undertaken in Australia and the United Kingdom and describes facets of social work research
5 revealed in this data. As noted, while these are limited representations of social work research
6 they are important because they represent social work research to government funders and the
7 wider public. In both research assessment exercises – Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)
8 and the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) – higher education institutions were required
9 to submit various performance data for evaluation. These national assessments of research quality
10 utilise data collected across a comparable time period and represent a good opportunity to
11 compare social work research in Australia with other social science disciplines and with social
12 work research produced internationally. The comparative analysis draws on the publicly available
13 data submitted by these institutions and granting bodies (e.g. publication counts, research
14 income) as well as the more subjective expert ratings of research quality in order to establish the
15 current status of Australian social work research. The research questions of interest were:

- 16 1. How much social work research is produced in Australia and what is its quality?
- 17 2. How does Australian social work research compare internationally?
- 18 3. How does Australian social work research compare with similar disciplines within Australia?

19 **Method**

20 For this comparative study, raw performance data reported in the ERA 2012, the ERA
21 2015, and the REF 2014 were used. See figure 1 for a description of ERA and REF. These raw
22 performance data were supplemented by the expert ratings of quality from both the ERA and
23 REF. Extrapolations about research quality based on the performance data and ratings are made
24 with appropriate considerations of the limitations discussed above.

25 Figure 1

26 *Interdisciplinary comparison*

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3 Australian social work research was defined according to FoR 1607. It was compared to
4 two other social science disciplines (FoR 1602 criminology and FoR 1605 policy and
5 administration) across two ERA rounds – 2012 and 2015. The comparators – criminology and
6 policy and administration – were selected because, like social work, they are relatively new
7 disciplines and aim to influence social policy. Also, like social work, their overall rating is
8 determined through peer review rather than by citation counts. Two ERA rounds were selected to
9 allow a comparison of the three disciplines across time. The measures compared across the three
10 disciplines were research outputs, esteem count, and overall ratings of quality. Where
11 appropriate, the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff was taken into account as this varied
12 substantially across the three disciplines. As noted by Kellow (2012), a greater number of
13 researchers are generally able to attract greater research funding and generate more research
14 outputs.

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32 Data regarding research outputs were available for the period 2005 to 2010 (ERA 2012)
33 and 2008 to 2013 (ERA 2015): there was an overlap in the reference periods. For both ERA
34 rounds, reported research outputs included journal articles, book chapters, books, conference
35 papers, and original creative works. In ERA 2015 two additional research output types were
36 included, being research report for an external body and portfolio. For the three social science
37 disciplines compared, the esteem measures were comprised of whether eligible researchers were
38 editors of prestigious works of reference, members of a learned academy, or recipients of a
39 nationally competitive research fellowship. Finally, notwithstanding the criticisms of the ERA
40 rating system, overall ratings of research quality for each of the three disciplines were utilised for
41 this comparative study (see Table 1 for the ERA rating system used in both rounds).

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Table 1

Cross-national comparison

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3 The cross-national comparison aimed to compare Australian social work research with
4 UK social work research. The REF 2014 and ERA 2015 were compared; both used the reference
5 period 2008-2013. The relevant Unit of Assessment in the UK REF exercise was UOA 22 social
6 work and social policy. This UOA included “all forms of research in social work, social policy
7 and administration, and criminology” (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012, p.
8 61). Thus, for the purposes of a valid cross-national comparison between the ERA and REF
9 outcomes, the data for the three ERA fields of social work (1607), criminology (1602), and
10 policy and administration (1605) were combined.
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22 The measures compared were type of research outputs and overall quality ratings.
23 Submission requirements for research output varied between the REF and ERA. ERA required all
24 outputs published by each staff member to be included in the submission while REF required
25 four publications for each staff member included in the submission. Therefore the international
26 comparison regarding research output focuses on the types of research output submitted, rather
27 than the quantity of outputs. Research output types were the same for both the ERA and the REF,
28 except that ERA included an option to submit a portfolio.
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39 Finally, overall ratings of research quality were compared between the two rounds of
40 ERA and REF. As noted, the REF and ERA utilized different ratings systems (see Table 1 for a
41 comparison of the scales). The REF system rated submissions on each indicator (research output,
42 research impact, research environment) which contributed to an overall rating (i.e. the research
43 output rating contributed 65% to the overall quality rating, the research impact rating contributed
44 20%, and the research environment contributed 15%). In ERA the relative contribution of each
45 indicator to the overall rating of research quality is less clear, as only one rating is given to the
46 submission as a whole. Similarly, the relative contribution of each performance measure to these
47 four indicators is unclear. Exact definitions for the rating scales used in either ERA or REF were
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3 not located. Particularly for ERA, ratings appeared to be subjectively based upon the assessors'
4 expertise and knowledge of what constituted 'world standard'. However, it was reported in the
5 relevant explanatory documentation that each rating scale was developed with other assessment
6 schemes in mind with the view to make international comparisons possible.
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12 Results

13 *Interdisciplinary comparison: Social work, criminology, and policy and administration research* 14 15 16 17 18 *in Australia*

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20 Table 2 contains initial descriptive information regarding submissions made under the
21 three FoRs of social work, criminology, and policy and administration in ERA 2012 and ERA
22 2015. In both ERA 2012 and ERA 2015, policy and administration researchers produced the
23 greatest number of research outputs, generated the most research income, and received the
24 highest esteem count; however, this discipline also had the most full-time equivalent (FTE) staff.
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Research outputs and research income for both rounds of ERA are examined in greater detail
below in terms of both raw counts and averaged by FTE.

Table 2

To assess productivity, each round of ERA collected data regarding research outputs
generated by researchers in each discipline across six years. Given the overlapping reference
periods between ERA 2012 and ERA 2015, there are data available on all research outputs
generated by researchers in a nine-year period, from 2005 to 2013 (see Figure 2). Each discipline
displays a general upward trend in the number of outputs generated across the time period. Policy
and administration researchers generated the most output by far, approximately 3000 outputs in
the relevant reference periods for each round of ERA. However, criminology and social work
outputs increased more rapidly across the time period. Both disciplines reported approximately

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3 2000 outputs in ERA 2015, jumping from approximately 1400 outputs for criminology
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5 researchers and 1700 outputs for social work researchers in ERA 2012.
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8 When the total research output is averaged across FTE staff, productivity was similar
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10 across criminology and policy and administration, while FTE productivity for social work was
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12 lower, although it was catching up at the end of the reference period for ERA 2015. In ERA
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14 2015, policy and administration produced an average of 10 outputs per FTE (1.7 outputs per FTE
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16 per year); criminology an average of 10.3 outputs per FTE (1.7 outputs per FTE per year), and;
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18 social work an average of 8 outputs per FTE (1.3 outputs per FTE per year).
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22 Figure 2
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24 Figure 3 displays the breakdown of research outputs reported to ERA 2012 and ERA
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26 2015 according to type. Across all three disciplines the greatest proportion of research outputs
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28 were journal articles, particularly for social work where over 70% of outputs took this form.
29
30 Criminology and policy and administration researchers produced a greater number of conference
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32 papers while criminology researchers produced a slightly greater number of book chapters. The
33
34 number of conference papers produced by social work researchers halved from ERA 2012 to
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36 ERA 2015. Note the inclusion of two new research output types in ERA 2015, with both social
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38 work and policy and administration benefiting from this addition.
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43 Figure 3
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45 In addition to generating the most research output, policy and administration researchers
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47 also generated the most gross research income across the two ERA rounds - \$155 million across
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49 2008-2013 compared to \$61 million for social work and \$44 million for criminology. As seen in
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51 Figure 4, policy and administration researchers generated at least double the amount of research
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53 income in each year, except 2012, compared to both social work and criminology.
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57 Figure 4
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3 Research income was broken down according to source in both rounds of ERA – see
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5 Figure 5. Across the time period 2008-2013, social work researchers generated the majority of
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7 their research funding from the public sector and industry. Only about 20 per cent of social work
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9 research income came from Australian competitive grants. In comparison, criminology
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11 researchers generated about 50 per cent of their research income from Australian competitive
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13 grants. Policy and administration generated about 25 per cent of their income from Australian
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15 competitive grants with the majority coming from the public sector (although a smaller
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17 proportion compared to social work).
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22 Figure 5
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24 In terms of overall quality of research, across all three disciplines and the two ERA
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26 rounds, the greatest proportion – between approximately 65 and 95 per cent – of submissions
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28 were rated as either at world standard or below world standard (see Figure 6). Of the three
29
30 disciplines, social work was rated the most favourably (particularly in ERA 2015) whilst policy
31
32 and administration received the least favourable ratings (particularly in ERA 2012). Ratings
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34 improved for all three disciplines from ERA 2012 to ERA 2015.
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39 Figure 6
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41 *Cross-national comparison: Social work and social policy research in Australia and the United*
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43 *Kingdom*
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45 As noted, for the purposes of increasing the validity of the cross-national comparison, the three
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47 ERA disciplines of social work, criminology, and policy and administration were combined. A
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49 comparison of research outputs submitted to ERA 2015 and REF 2014 (see Table 3) shows that a
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51 total of 7377.6 research outputs were submitted to ERA where staff were required to submit all
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53 publications; equivalent to 9.4 outputs per FTE staff. In contrast, a total of 4784 outputs were
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55 submitted to REF where staff were required to select their best publications to a maximum of
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3 four (with reductions available for career interruptions); average number of outputs submitted
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5 was 3.7 for each full-time equivalent staff member. There were far fewer researchers in Australia
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7 compared to the UK; the REF FTE was almost twice that of ERA (although REF included staff
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9 on 0.2 FTE or more whilst ERA included staff on 0.4 FTE or more, so the total FTE figures are
10
11 not directly comparable).
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14 15 Table 3

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17 Examination of the publication counts in Table 3 gives some indication as to how
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19 research outputs were evaluated by UK researchers (or their institutions) for the purposes of
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21 submitting to the REF assessment exercise. The most common publications submitted by UK
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23 researchers by far were journal articles (an average of 2.8 per FTE) indicating that, as would be
24
25 expected, journal articles were judged to be the highest quality publications to submit. Books and
26
27 book chapters were the next most common outputs submitted to the REF by UK researchers, but
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29 with an average of less than 1 per FTE. This may reflect perceptions with regards the REF that
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31 books and book chapters had less chance of being assessed as world-leading than journal articles,
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33 on the grounds that they consolidate existing knowledge rather than report new findings. This is
34
35 not an uncommon academic opinion, depending upon the discipline. Interestingly, the number of
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37 books submitted to REF 2014 (n=474) was far more than the number of books submitted to ERA
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39 2015 (n=246). The number of research reports submitted to each assessment exercise was
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41 roughly equivalent. However, only 5 conference papers were submitted to the REF by UK
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43 researchers, suggesting that this type of output was also not highly regarded as a quality academic
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45 output for the purposes of the REF assessment.
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53 Finally, ratings of research quality in the ERA and the REF were compared (see Figure
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55 7). According to the ratings, and noting the qualifications in the methods section, UK social work
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57 and social policy research achieved a greater proportion of the top ratings compared to Australian
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3 social work and social policy research. As seen in Figure 8, a greater proportion of UK
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5 submissions – almost 70 per cent – received the two highest possible REF ratings, indicating that
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7 these submissions (n= 69) were evaluated as either world leading or internationally excellent. In
8
9 comparison, just 27 per cent of Australian submissions (n=12) received the two highest possible
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11 ERA 2015 ratings, indicating that these submissions were evaluated as either well above world
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13 standard or above world standard. While the proportion of submissions receiving these top two
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15 ratings increased between ERA 2012 and ERA 2015, it was not on par with the REF 2014
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17 ratings. The majority of Australian social work and social policy research in both ERA rounds
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19 was rated as either at world standard or below world standard – the middle two ERA ratings.
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25 Figure 7

26 27 **Discussion**

28
29 The limitations of the methodology must be noted. Research is often hard to classify and
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31 strategic decision-making influences which classification research was submitted under. It is
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33 impossible to know exactly what research constitutes each classification, thus it is hard to come
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35 to a definitive conclusion regarding the full comparability of REF and ERA. ERA incorporates
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37 almost double the number of research fields, which can provide more opportunity to delineate
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39 disciplines but also more opportunity to either hide outputs in unassessed fields or to submit them
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41 in sacrificial fields which a university might not value. Also, REF does not include a specific
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43 criminology UOA and while the definition of UOA 22 includes social work, social policy, and
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45 criminology, criminology research would also have been submitted under UOA 23 sociology.
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47 Similarly, ERA 1605 policy and administration is very broad, encompassing urban and rural
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49 policy issues as well as social policy research – all areas which may not be directly comparable to
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51 UOA 22 social work and social policy. Furthermore, submission requirements vary between ERA
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53 and REF and each use different systems for rating research quality and different expert raters.
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3 Nonetheless, the classification systems represent the research disciplines and are designed to
4 enable comparison. Even with the methodological issues identified, a comparison between these
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8 two national research evaluation exercises is valid and useful. Each of these assessment exercises
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11 represent the predominantly accepted method of assessing research quality and comprise the most
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13 complete, publicly available data regarding research undertaken at the majority of universities
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15 within each country.
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18 In absolute terms it could be said that social work as a research discipline in Australia is a
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20 mid-level performer across the various ERA evaluation metrics compared to other similar social
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22 science disciplines. Policy and administration researchers were consistently high performers
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24 across the various metrics, including FTE, research output count, research income, and esteem
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26 measures. Policy and administration also exhibited a steady increase across all these metrics from
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28 ERA 2012 to 2015. Criminology researchers, in contrast, performed very well on some metrics
29
30 (FTE, research outputs) and less well on others (research income, esteem count). Social work
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32 research appeared to vacillate between criminology and policy and administration on most
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34 metrics, except for esteem count where it evidenced the most substantial decrease and FTE where
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36 it exhibited the smallest increase (although the number of submissions decreased across the time
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38 period for social work so this figure is perhaps not surprising).
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44 When taking FTE into account, although research output per social work FTE increased
45
46 slightly from ERA 2012 to ERA 2015, the average output per FTE is just one per year. In
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48 contrast, criminology and policy and administration researchers produce an average of 2 outputs
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50 per FTE per year. Even with fewer FTE staff compared to both social work and policy and
51
52 administration, criminology researchers were more productive. However, as previously noted,
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54 FTE does not differentiate between research-only staff and teaching staff. It may be that the
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56 social work FTE includes more teaching staff than the criminology FTE. Combining social work,
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3 criminology, and social policy for the cross-national comparison bolstered the figures for
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5 Australian social work and social policy research, but it was not possible to compare productivity
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7 in terms of research outputs due to the different requirements for REF and ERA.
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10 Turning to quality assessments, Australian social work research quality was rated highly
11 compared to criminology and policy and administration. Ratings improved across all three
12 disciplines from ERA 2012 to ERA 2015; however, in ERA 2015 approximately 40 per cent of
13 social work submissions were rated as above or well above world standard, compared to 30 per
14 cent for criminology and 20 per cent for policy and administration. But internationally,
15 Australian combined social work and social policy research was rated less highly. Approximately
16 70 per cent of UK social work and social policy submissions were rated as internationally
17 excellent or world leading, compared to 30 per cent of Australian social work and social policy
18 research rated as above or well above world standard. Australia is smaller and more isolated than
19 the UK, so there is a smaller population from which to recruit researchers, which means a smaller
20 number of potential collaborators with whom to produce outputs and generate funding. The
21 distance of Australia from other countries makes international collaboration and networking
22 challenging. However, even if there is less social work (and social policy) research produced in
23 Australia, it should still be able to achieve a similar quality to that of social work research
24 produced in the UK.
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45 A common criticism of the ERA process is that it equates, to a certain extent, quantity
46 with quality (Kellow, 2012). Large amounts of funding do not necessarily lead to the production
47 of quality research. Research costs more to undertake in some disciplines, but this does not mean
48 that the research produced is automatically of a better quality than research produced with a
49 smaller budget. “No measure of inputs can replace the qualitative judgment made after the final
50 work is actually read” (Weller & Cowan, 2012, p. 304). When it comes to assessing research
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3 output, the ERA requirement to submit all publications has also been criticized, particularly in
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5 view of other national assessment exercises in the UK and New Zealand where researchers select
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7 their best publications for assessment.
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10 The lower assessment of quality may be accurate, but it could also be an artefact of REF
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12 selectivity versus assessing all publications as required by ERA, or related to how Australian-
13
14 focused research was rated compared to research that was internationally-oriented. While
15
16 commonly used publication metrics (such as publication rates, citation counts, or even peer
17
18 review) fail to take into account the nature of a significant portion of social science research –
19
20 including social work – that is “action based, context bound, specialized in its focus and local or
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22 national rather than international in orientation” (Watson, 2008 p. 125), expert assessment of
23
24 research quality is subjective to some extent. Shaw and Norton (2008) argued that research
25
26 quality is too complex and multidimensional to be assessed solely based on publications.
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28 Publications often fail to take into account the temporal nature of quality (e.g. where the quality
29
30 of a particular piece of research is not realized until several years later), the connection between
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32 research and improved professional practice as a standard of quality, the ever-evolving
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34 understanding of quality, and the influence of personal discipline and practice background on
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36 judgments of quality.
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43 These criticisms are particularly pertinent to the ERA process where a peer review system
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45 was implemented for disciplines for which citation analysis was deemed inappropriate, including
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47 social work. Unfortunately this peer review system still fails to take into account the context of
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49 the publications (e.g. the broader project, the collaborative research group). In the REF, for
50
51 instance, submissions included contextual information such as descriptions of research groupings,
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53 the research environment, higher degree research students, and impact case studies. While the
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55 REF system has attracted its own criticism (Fisher & Marsh, 2010) it is a more transparent
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3 exercise that includes multiple benchmarks of quality. The shortcomings of the ERA peer review
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5 system in the absence of supporting information is reflected in the large numbers of 1 and 2
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7 ratings (indicating research that is below or well below world standard) in the peer review
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9 disciplines compared to the citation analysis disciplines. The fact that most of the Research
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11 Evaluation Committees were comprised almost entirely of Australian assessors may also suggest
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13 that local evaluators are too critical of local research, particularly in the absence of limited
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15 contextual or qualitative information.
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20 Peer review may disadvantage some social science disciplines if it fails to consider how
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22 research quality can differ across disciplines. Previous reviews of social work research have
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24 shown a preponderance of discursive commentary and non-empirical research, which may
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26 adversely affect quality assessments, even if these types of outputs may be influential and highly
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28 cited (Kreisberg and Marsh 2016). Such questions are deliberated in relation to grey literature
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30 such as evaluation reports, conference papers, abstracts, dissertations, clearinghouses, discussion
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32 papers, briefings, submissions, working papers, blogs and social media. Such output is not
33
34 considered “quality” and indeed often dismissed in academia. But should such material be
35
36 marked down, if it is important to policy and practice? The value of grey literature has been
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38 advanced on the grounds that it makes a substantial contribution to public policy, education,
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40 commercial innovation, and social development (Banks 2016; Lawrence, Houghton, Thomas &
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42 Weldon 2014). Future research on the nature of social work non-empirical research is warranted,
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44 including its value in academia and its contribution to policy and practice innovation. ERA now
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46 includes research reports for an external body, but it is not clear how their quality and impact will
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48 be assessed.
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55 More broadly, social work research is distinct in its applied nature. Good research in this
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57 discipline can have a great impact on the quality of life for many people in society, which is an
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3 aspect of quality often not realized through examining publications and, thus, not taken into
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5 account in the ERA assessment in contrast to REF. The Australian Government recently
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7 announced that ERA from 2018 will include an evaluation of research impact and industry
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9 engagement (ARC 2016), which is potentially a tool for social work to demonstrate its social
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11 value. However, the best method by which to demonstrate this impact needs consideration. The
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13 UK REF includes impact case studies and most universities have invested considerable resources
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15 in systems to document research impact. However, Brewer (2013) argued that the impact agenda
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17 as taken up in the audit culture by research funding bodies does not adequately measure the value
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19 of social science research because it tends to focus on its utility. Research value is not necessarily
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21 direct or observable in the here and now. In fact, Brewer argues that one of the public values of
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23 social science research is that it can compress time and space, so that we can see the global
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25 implications of local issues, and view the current moment in the context of history - it takes us
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27 away from the here and now. It is important to promote a broad understanding of research
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29 impact in the field, appreciating the value of ideas in changing discourse, as well as evidence of
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31 intervention effectiveness. Adding impact measures to ERA should benefit social work, because
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33 we need to go further than the metrics and esteem measures to demonstrate our social value.
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35 However, to work for the discipline, quality measures must be transparent, more comprehensive
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37 on all the criteria (productivity, quality, peer review, esteem, impact), and take context into
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39 account.
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49 There are benefits to the social work discipline and to the human services field of
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51 quantifying and assessing the impact of social work research, *specifically*. This is not about
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53 disciplinary territorialism, but about disciplinary awareness of the part within the whole. It is both
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55 necessary and worthwhile to strengthen research as one strand of social work's advancement,
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57 because social work professionals are highly important in the provision of human services. We
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3 need to develop as clear a picture as possible of the discipline's research foundations, and to
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5 develop strategies to improve it. National assessment exercises, such as ERA and the REF, are
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7 vital tools to assist in this, although there are clear limitations in their current iterations. As the
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9 results of this study demonstrate, such national assessment exercises help to develop – not the
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11 whole picture – but an important part of the picture of a discipline.
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Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)

The ERA collects data about the quantity and quality of research undertaken at Australian higher education research institutions. Staff members eligible for inclusion in ERA are those on a contract of 0.4 full-time equivalent (FTE) or more. Institutions are required to submit all published work for each staff member included, plus other performance data. Submissions are assessed by a Research Evaluation Committee that assigns an overall rating of research quality for each submission, based on four indicators: 1) research quality, including publishing profile, citation analysis or peer review (depending on discipline), and research income; 2) research volume and activity, based on outputs, income, and other measures of research; 3) research application, based on research commercialisation income and other applied measures; and 4) research recognition, based on esteem measures.

The UK Research Excellence Framework exercise (REF)

The REF is a process to assess research quality in UK higher education institutions. Staff members eligible for inclusion in REF are those on a contract of 0.2 FTE or more. Institutions submit four selected published research outputs for each full-time staff member (reductions are available for early career researchers or researchers who experience career interruptions) as well as various performance data. Unlike ERA, REF is not a census of research, but represents the research identified by each institution as beneficial to submit for assessment. Each submission is assessed by an expert sub-panel based on three criteria: 1) research output quality; 2) the social, economic, and cultural impact of research; and 3) the research environment. The expert sub-panels assign ratings for each of the three components and for the quality of research overall.

Figure 1 ERA and REF

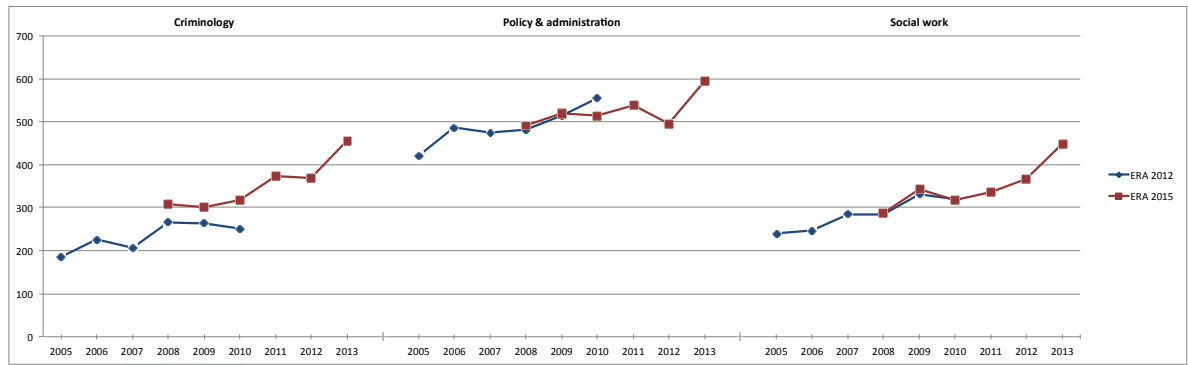


Figure 2 Total number of research outputs for criminology, policy and administration, and social work, 2005-2013, based on ERA 2012 and ERA 2015. Note the overlapping reference period of 2008-2010. ERA 2015 notes that data collected for ERA 2012 is re-used in ERA 2015, with differences being due to factors such as staff entering and leaving the system and changes in eligible research outputs.

Table 1 Comparability of research quality rating systems used in the ERA and REF

ERA	REF
5 Well above world standard	4* World leading
4 Above world standard	3* Internationally excellent
3 At world standard	2* Recognised internationally
2 Below world standard	1* Recognised nationally
1 Well below world standard	u/c Below standard of nationally recognised research or does not meet definition of research

Table 2 ERA 2012 & 2015 submissions for social work, criminology, and policy and administration

	Social Work	Criminology	Policy & Administration
<i>Number of submissions</i>			
ERA 2012	16	12	16
ERA 2015	14	13	17
<i>Full-time equivalent staff</i>			
ERA 2012	260.1	161.4	303.7
ERA 2015	262.5	206.1	314.9
<i>Total apportioned research outputs submitted</i>			
ERA 2012 (2005-2010)	1706.9	1400.9	2931.5
ERA 2015 (2008-2013)	2097.4	2131.6	3156.5
<i>Total research income generated</i>			
ERA 2012 (2008-2010)	\$27,400,147	\$21,224,672	\$71,727,342
ERA 2015 (2011-2013)	\$33,776,902	\$22,399,866	\$82,878,935
<i>Esteem count</i>			
ERA 2012 (2008-2010)	7.2	13.2	28.4
ERA 2015 (2011-2013)	1.7	11.6	30.1

Table 3 Social work and social policy research outputs submitted to ERA and REF, 2008-2013

Research output type	ERA 2015 ^a	REF 2014 ^b
Book	245.9	474
Book chapter	1721.6	435
Journal article	4711.0	3703
Conference paper	467.9	5
Original creative work	11.5	2
Research report for external body	219.7	153
Total	7377.6	4784
FTE	783.5	1,302
Per FTE	9.4	3.7

^a. All outputs submitted for each staff member included in submission.

^b. Maximum of four outputs submitted for each staff member included in submission.

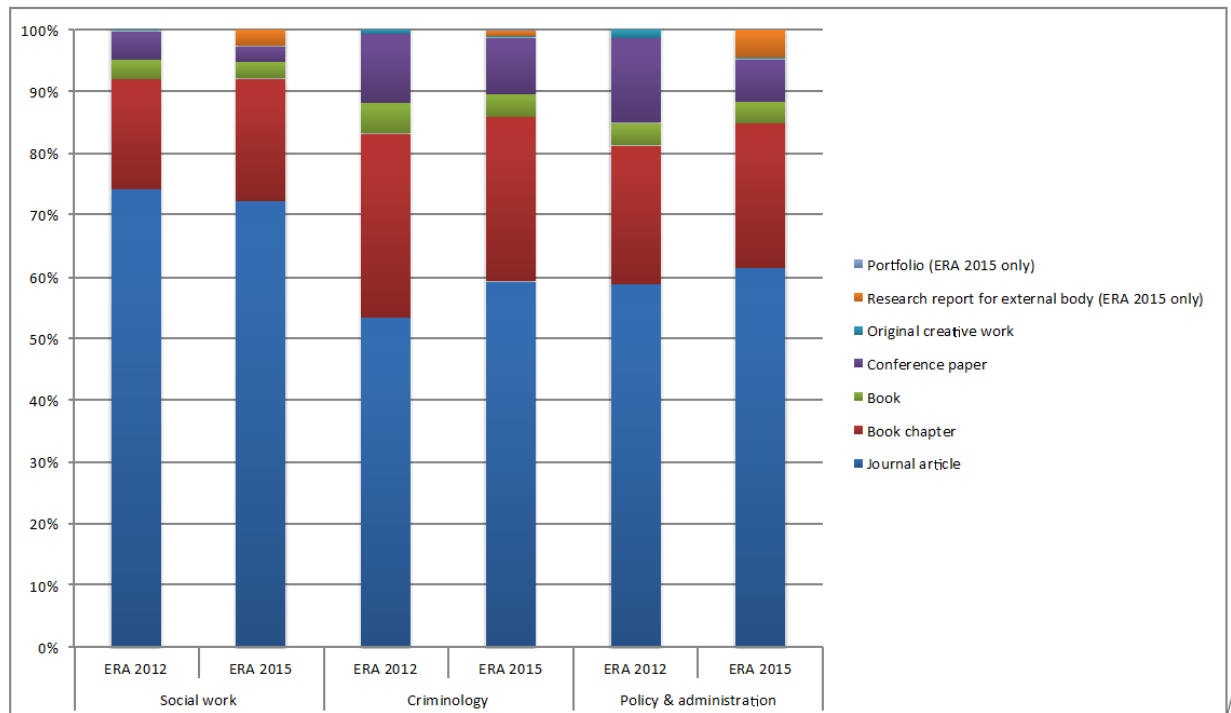


Figure 3 Comparison of types of research outputs produced by social work, criminology, and policy and administration researchers in Australia, 2005-2013, based on ERA 2012 and ERA 2015. Note that ERA 2015 includes two additional types of research output: research report for external body; and portfolio.

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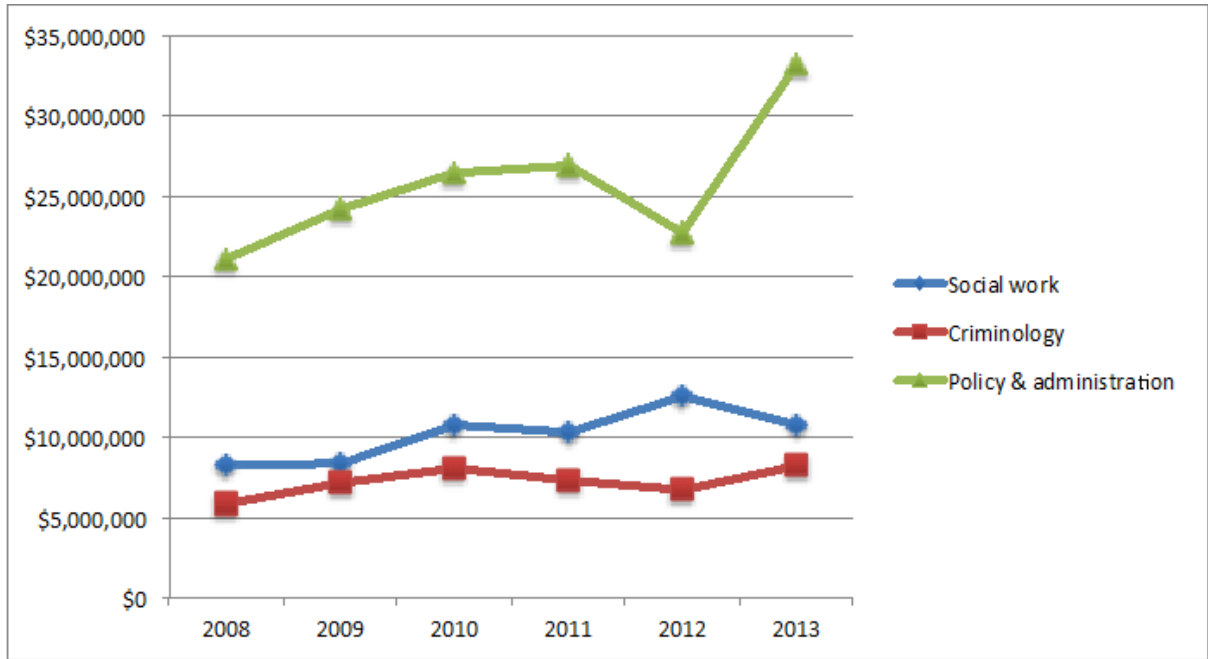


Figure 4 Total research income generated by social work, criminology, and policy and administration researchers, 2008-2013.

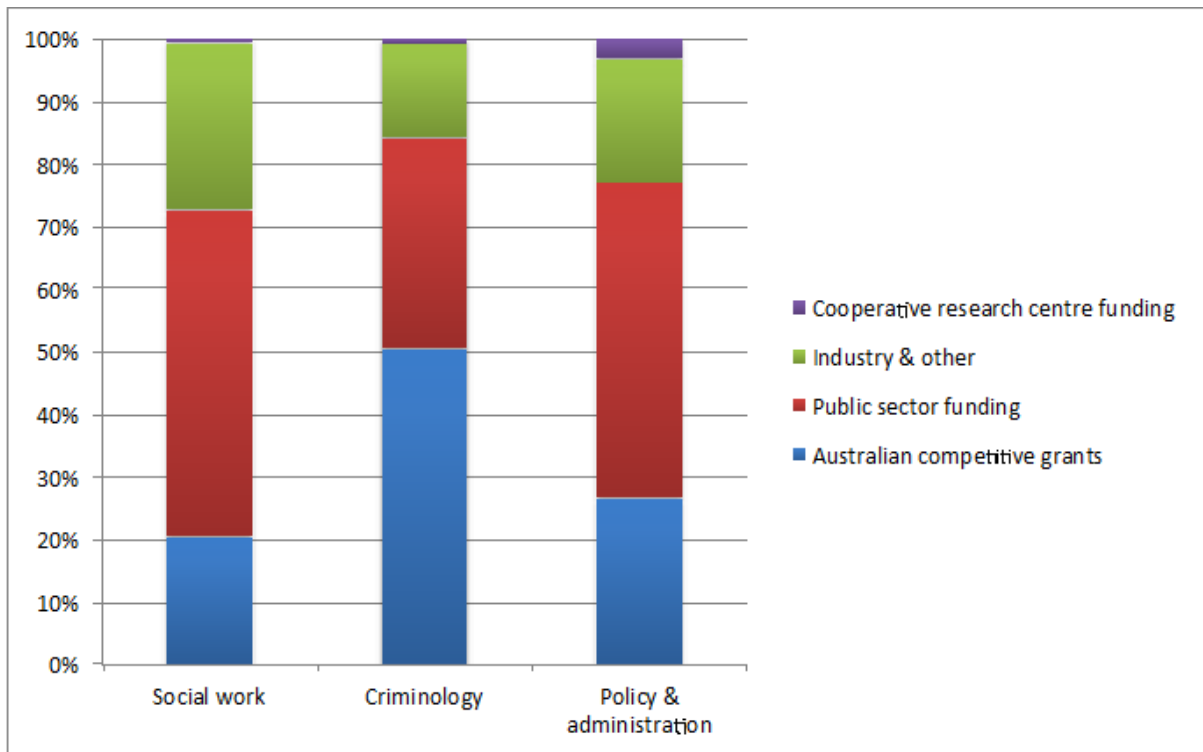


Figure 5 Source of funding for social work, criminology, and policy and administration research in Australia, 2008-2013.

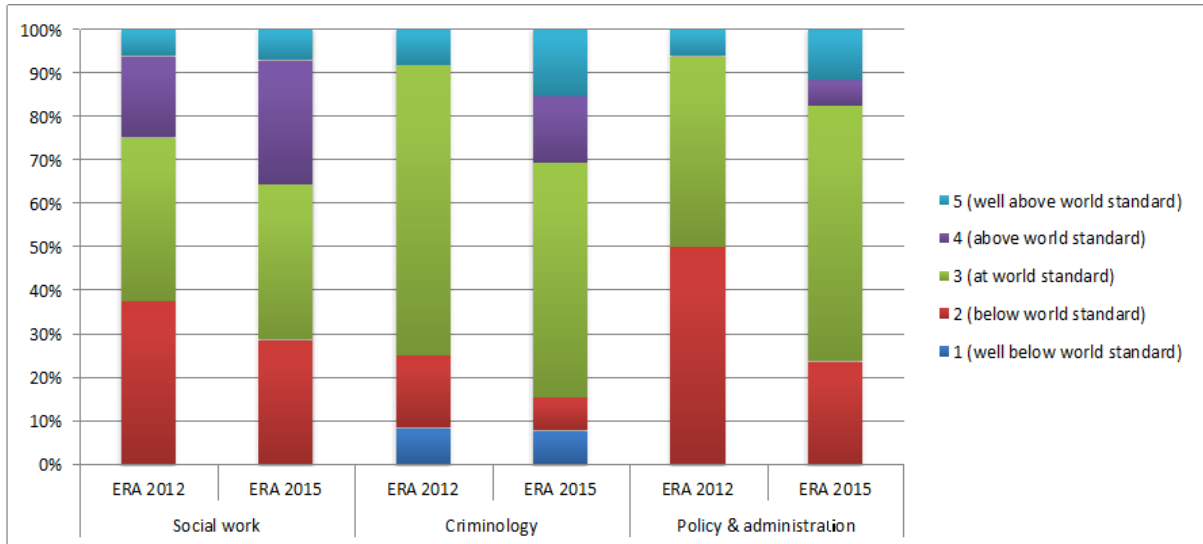


Figure 6 Comparison of ratings of the three disciplines of social work, criminology, and policy and administration in Australia, ERA 2012 and ERA 2015.

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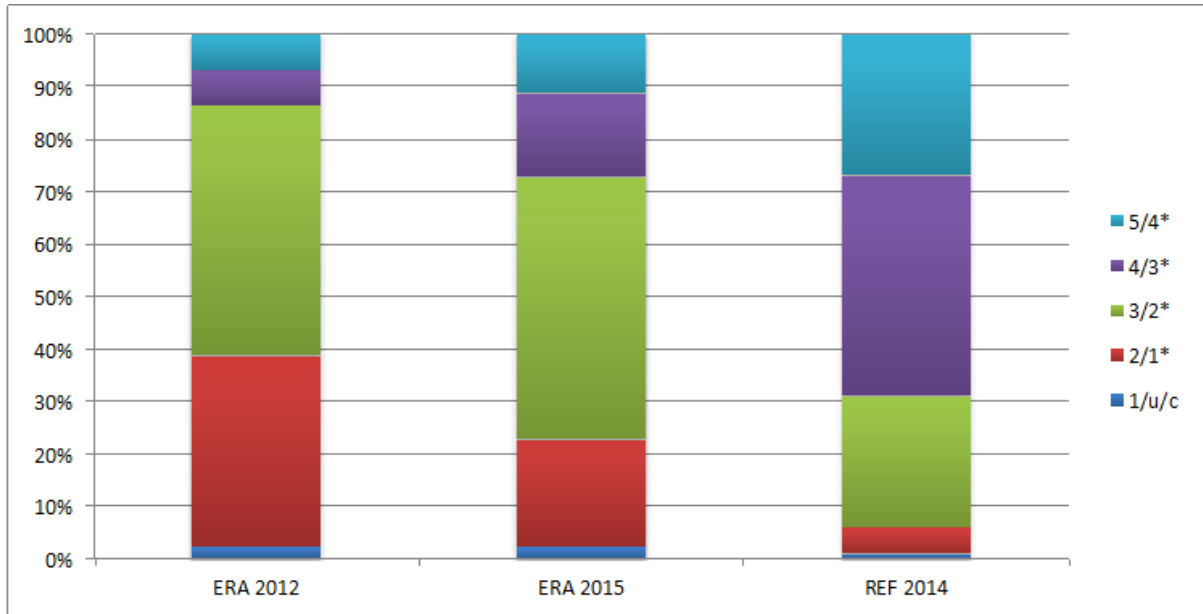


Figure 7 Comparison of overall ratings of social work and social policy research in Australia and the United Kingdom; ERA 2012, ERA 2015, and REF 2014. Note that higher ratings equate to ratings of higher quality where the * system relates to REF ratings (see Table 1 for a comparison of the two rating systems).