



A Social Work Research Strategy in Higher Education 2006 – 2020

Summary

Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, 2006

Full Report available at:
<http://www.swap.ac.uk/research/strategy.asp>

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Purpose

JUC SWEC is seeking to work collaboratively with others (governments, employers, service users, practitioners and funders) to promote a step change in the quantity and quality of social work research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs).

The aim is to

- maximise the HEI contribution to social work and social care service improvement
- develop a strong evidence base for social work and social care services
- build a workforce capable of using evidence critically and effectively.

This is because of the difference that good research evidence can make to the lives of the millions of people who come into contact with social workers and social care services.

Social work and social care services make a major contribution to the wider economy, with a workforce of around 1.5 million people in England alone, in a £12 billion industry. For social and for economic reasons, and because of the values which social care services represent, research has a vital contribution to make to the well-being of citizens and communities.

The Basic Case

Social work academics have had considerable success in raising the profile of social work research, for example, securing recognition from the Economic and Social Research Council. However, much remains to be done. There are two main reasons for this.

First, by comparison with the UK Government's target for research and innovation, social work research receives around one eighth of the necessary resources⁽²⁾. Funding for health research is more than 100 times greater than for social care, on some measures⁽³⁾.

Second, the social work academic workforce faces particular challenges over the next few years. Because of prior practice as social workers, the average age on entry to academic jobs makes the development of research careers particularly difficult, in common with other 'practice' based disciplines⁽⁴⁾. 47% of social work academics are aged 50 or over and there is an urgent need for developing new staff with good research skills.

Key Arguments

- The impact and reach of social work research extend more widely than the practice of social workers alone. Social work research is relevant to the entire range of services sometimes described as social care and to other public and independent sector services, professions and disciplines.
- In time, all social work academics in HEIs should be actively involved in both promoting research utilisation and the production of research and scholarship in order to model and advance evidence-informed practice and develop social work as an academic discipline.
- We support *both* a general levelling up of research activity in all HEIs *and* the development of networks of specialisation and excellence.

- Research priorities should be established by dialogue between service users, service providers, the wider public, government and researchers. Social work academics in HEIs are committed to such a partnership approach.
- Social work academics must collaborate with each other and with colleagues from other disciplines as well as with other stakeholders to develop and spread research knowledge, understanding, expertise and experience across the sector.
- Social work research should be developed on a UK-wide basis (taking account of and working with the circumstances of each of the four countries) and internationally.

Aims

The Strategy proposes action across 4 dimensions.

Dimensions	Aims
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to increase the spend on social work and social care R&D to 2.5% of the total social services budget by 2014 in line with the Science and Investment Innovation Framework
Capacity and Capability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to secure the position of UK HEIs as world leaders in social work research and the contribution of social work research to methodological development in the social sciences • to increase the proportion of social work educators in HEIs with post-graduate research qualifications to a minimum of 80% by 2020 • to establish a minimum of 300 social work practice posts across the four countries of the UK with some responsibility for undertaking research included in contractual duties by 2012
Visibility and Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to ensure that social work research has a high positive public profile reflected in exposure through a variety of media • to ensure that all social work research builds in effective approaches to knowledge transfer
Recognition and Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to secure for social work full institutional recognition as a research discipline from national funding and quality assurance bodies and individual HEIs • to establish robust, appropriate and accountable systems of social work/social care research governance that are agreed and accepted by all stakeholders

Detailed actions are identified in the full document to progress each of these aims.

Future Action

This Strategy has been unanimously supported by JUC SWEC and will form the basis for national and local action to raise the quality and quantity of social work and social care research. Implementation is being managed by the JUC SWEC Research Sub-Committee.

Contact

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Notes

1. The JUC was founded in 1918 to promote the interests of universities in the fields of Public Administration and Social Policy. In the 1970s, Social Work Education was added to its brief. Today, the JUC represents the vast majority of British higher education institutions teaching and researching in these three fields.
2. The Government's Science and Innovation Investment Framework sets the target for research funding of 2.5% of GDP by 2014. The current level of social work research funding is estimated at 0.31%.
3. See Marsh, P. and Fisher, M. (2005) *Developing the Evidence Base for Social Work and Social Care Practice*. London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.
4. See Mills, D. et al (2006) *Demographic Review of the UK Social Sciences*. Swindon: ESRC.