



## **RSWE 1: Selection - Executive Summary**

1. This report sets out the methods, findings, discussion and conclusions related to the RSWE Area of inquiry 1: How can universities best select the right people for social work programmes?
2. Teams from the Universities of Edinburgh and Dundee worked together on what was a mixed method study. Methods included: a targeted literature review, interviews with key stakeholders (HEI representatives, practice teachers and managers), an online survey of current students and feedback from service users and carers. A preliminary analysis of Annual Monitoring Returns (AMR's) from 2008 to 2014 was also undertaken.
3. The review of literature identified that selection has been a preoccupation of social work programmes since their very beginnings; it also noted that selection is something of a political issue – it receives attention from government and others at particular moments, often, for example, when there are concerns about recruitment and retention in the profession. The review uncovered very many ways of doing selection, but little reassurance that one method provides a better outcome than another. This was also the case across different professional groups.
4. Three main points emerged in the interviews with representatives from HEI's. Firstly, across the board, HEI's still attract many more applicants than they have places; we are in a situation of largely selection, not recruitment. Secondly, processes for recruitment and selection of social work students have evolved differently across the Scottish HEI's, although the broad parameters in which all are working are the same. Thirdly, variation across HEI's has enabled recruitment and selection procedures to meet the needs of individual institutions, take account of local contexts and accommodate the large numbers of individuals who apply to social work education programmes.
5. Practice teachers commented on the variability in the quality of students but noted that this has always been the case. All participants considered there to be a greater number of younger social work students than had been in the past. They felt that students were, on the whole, ready to come on placement. They also enjoy working with universities and would like opportunities to do more of this. All said they felt that interviews were a good idea in selecting social work students.
6. Managers remain highly committed to working with universities in some way. They are aware that the landscape of practice has changed, putting pressure on the social work role and identity, and they feel that universities need to do more to reflect this change, while appreciating that this is not necessarily an issue for the selection of students. The managers all said that it was more

important to get 'the right people' into social work, that is, people with passion, enthusiasm, the right value base, conceptual ability, compassion and resilience. They also acknowledged that in coming off courses, they did not expect graduates to be 'the finished article'. A preference for interviewing candidates was expressed by two of the three managers, though they acknowledged that the research evidence was not conclusive on this achieving better results.

7. Service user and carers told us that they value being involved in the selection process and believe that their experiential knowledge can usefully contribute to the decision making on the selection process as well as the actual selection of candidates.
8. Responses to an online survey by social work students (n=278) has generated substantial quantitative and qualitative data that will be analysed by the researchers in further detail. To date the main points to emerge from the data include, students identifying personal qualities and values as the most important factor to be taken into consideration in the selection process. Their experience of interviews and additional written tasks is varied, with group interviews/exercises being preferred over individual interviews. A caveat was raised for HEI's over their expectations of applicants to complete long written tasks (that are different for each HEI) when the applicants have a high workload at school. In relation to factors that influenced students' choice of university, location emerged as the key factor. It appears that students are choosing their university based on existing links to the location of the university and the university.
9. The AMR data deserves further analysis. At this stage, our main finding is that the changes in selection procedures over the years have had no demonstrable impact on the retention and success rates of students on social work programmes in Scotland. In fact, there is a high success rate on social work programmes across the board, and selection systems seem to be giving us what we need in terms of what is a largely robust and resilient student body.
10. The study concludes that there is a high degree of variability in arrangements for selection across and within the universities that offer social work programmes, including differences between undergraduate and postgraduate systems. There is, however, no evidence that this variability is a problem, as long as HEI's are clear and transparent about their processes. The study suggests that improvements might be made in the future, in terms of the transparency of decision-making systems; the involvement of stakeholders (including users and carers) in admissions systems; and a strengthening of the connection between the academy and practice overall.

With thanks to all those who participated in this study, and to SSSC for funding it.

29<sup>th</sup> February 2016.



## **RSWE 1: Selection – Full Report**

### **1. Outline**

This report sets out the methods, findings, discussion and conclusions related to the RSWE Area of inquiry 1: How can universities best select the right people for social work programmes?, detailed in the SSSC tender as follows:

'We need to know more about the different ways in which universities in Scotland currently select students for entry to social work programmes. We also think that it's important that we learn from best practice used in selection in other countries and other professions. We would like to explore the potential to introduce a national approach to selection. We also need to ensure that we maximise the 'widening access' agenda while ensuring that students have the appropriate values and the capacity to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding to be effective social workers. Having this information will help us make recommendations about selection.'

### **2. Lead partner and team members**

The research was conducted by a team of academics from the Universities of Edinburgh and Dundee, made up of Professor Vivienne Cree, Dr Gary Clapton and Dr Mark Smith (The University of Edinburgh) and Dr Susan Levy and Dr Richard Ingram (the University of Dundee). Dr Fiona Morrison (The University of Edinburgh) worked as a part-time researcher.

### **3. Methods**

A mixed method approach to data collection was used, involving a targeted review of relevant literature; telephone interviews with a range of stakeholders (representatives from all 8 HEIs in Scotland offering social work programmes; 3 practice teachers with extensive experience of working with different social work programmes over many years and 3 local authority social work managers); feedback from service users and carers (key questions were put to each HEI to discuss within their networks); an online survey of current students (n=278); and provisional analysis of 8 years of SSSC's Annual Monitoring Returns (AMRs) from 2008 to 2015.

Four initial questions and a further six supplementary questions were identified in the course of the study. These were as follows:

1. How do universities in Scotland currently select UG and PG students? Why? For how long? Have there been any significant changes in recent years and why?
2. What evidence is there about the outcomes of our selection procedures in Scotland? Is selection to UG and PG social work programmes working?

3. What is the broader research evidence about selection methods, in social work, nursing and medical education?
4. What does this suggest about how we should proceed in selection?
5. What are we looking for in the selection process - academic, values, experience?
6. How do we address widening access?
7. What about international recruitment and processes?
8. How do programmes deal with criminal convictions?
9. What about the Maths and English requirements?
10. Is a national approach to selecting social work students necessary or desirable?

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Literature review**

An initial search was undertaken using the online database search tool DiscoverEd, with the search terms "social work programmes", "social work education", "selection" and "selection process". The search elicited a considerable number of results, which were then followed up in order to explore further literature. A similar approach was taken to identify relevant studies from nursing, teaching and medicine training. While we began with more recent studies (publications in the last 10 years), this was then extended back, as it became apparent that the selection of social work students has been a matter of concern since the very beginning of social work education programmes in the UK and US. While there is not space in this report to do justice to the full body of literature, we will, however, now draw attention to some key findings.

Firstly, as stated above, how we select the best students for social work training is not a new issue; on the contrary, evidence from as far back as the 1950s and 1960s demonstrates that questions were being asked about selection (Towle, 1954; Olander, 1964). For example, in a PhD from the US, Olander argued that there are three aspects vital to the selection process:

- the identification of qualities and attributes deemed essential for learning social work practice and theory;
- the selection of measuring devices or kinds of instruments to ascertain that these qualities exist in the applicant; and
- the appraisal of this evidence for its reliability and validity in selecting those educable for social work (p1).

It is the third aspect that she felt received least attention in the social work literature, even though it was, in her view, the most important question. Not only this, Olander points out that 'There is an assumption, implicit in all schools of social work, that successful performance as a social work student is associated with successful performance in the field as a practitioner. Almost no investigation has been made of the truth of that assumption' (1964: 5).

There is much that remains relevant in this 50-year old US study! What is different in the UK, however, and is the second point of interest, is the degree to which the state is involved in social work education, including in admissions and selection processes. Taylor and Balen assert that selection is 'a contested terrain' (1995: 86). Taking this further, Holmström and Taylor (2008) point out that

interest in selection to social work training is almost always political. They identify that the introduction of the DipSW in 1990 (with revisions in 1995) demonstrated widespread concern for the need for greater rigour in selection processes, and that the introduction of the new Honours degree as a basic qualification in 2003 in England and 2004 in the rest of the UK also brought 'a further iteration of such anxiety' (p520). Holmström and Taylor locate some of the pressures on social work programmes today in wider changes at Higher Education level including competing demands for widening participation and at the same time, a huge increase in student numbers across the board. Social work programmes, in the US and UK, traditionally have low levels of non-completion, and the additional work that this brings may be invisible in the HE system. We are clearly experiencing another peak of government interest in social work education today; this review of social work education reflects this reality.

Thirdly, the research that has been conducted on social work selection is, for the most part, small-scale, often based on reporting one university's experience of recruitment and admissions or focused on one issue in selection, such as equality and inclusion (Beaumont and Cemlyn, 2005), user and carer involvement (Baldwin and Saad, 2006; Matka *et al.*, 2010), mental health needs of students (Collins, 2006), personal statements (Ferguson *et al.*, 2000), fees and bursaries (Hatt, 2006), widening participation (Jones, 2006; Dillon, 2007), moral character (Holmström, 2014), personality testing (Manktelow and Lewis, 2005) and interviews (Bridges, 1996; Watson, 2002). A smaller number of papers attempt to review the field as a whole and draw conclusions from wider evidence (e.g. Taylor and Balen, 1995; Pelech *et al.* 1999; Holmström and Taylor, 2008a and b; Moriarty and Murray 2007). Tentative findings are as follows:

- Pelech *et al.* (1999) suggest that first degree marks positively correlate with academic success, mirroring earlier work in the UK by Munro (1995), which argued that previous academic qualification were more reliable indicators of future attainment than previous experience.
- Taylor and Balen (1995) note that written tests are no predictor of successful writing on a social work programme.
- Lafrance *et al.* (2004) identify desirable personal qualities of social work students, including maturity, integrity and openness, self-awareness, but are less sure as to how we might assess for these.
- Both Bridges (1986) and Watson (2002) argue that interviews are inevitably subjective and discriminatory – we choose people like ourselves – and that the performance in interview may give little indication of what kind of a student social worker (and indeed social worker) a person will be. Taylor and Small (2002) identify that structured interviews focused around 'what if' questions are more valid than unstructured ones.

- A number of studies including Pelech *et al.* (1999) and Dunlap *et al.* (1998) have suggested that the absence of previous experience is not a factor in the background of students having difficulties; extensive experience (including life experience) may even be seen as a drawback for some students.
- Miller and Koerin (1998) have argued that insisting that students demonstrate a commitment to social work values at the point of application may be discriminatory; that such values should be taught on the programme.
- Holmström and Taylor (2008b) conclude that 'the lack of ability to predict, with any certainty, the likelihood of future success or struggle [...] leads us to argue for a new focus.' The focus, they argue, should be on how we best support students at different stages of the social work student 'life-cycle', including fitness for practice and termination of training decisions. This mirrors Weinstein's (2000) writing on the importance of retention, not just selection.

A brief review of literature from nursing, teaching and medicine training threw up similar issues. Much of the literature (as already cited for social work) simply described what individual programmes and professions were doing, and within this, there was clearly a high level of difference in practice on the ground and insufficient rigour in selection, although broad agreement about principles (Iucu *et al.*, 2014). The literature also demonstrated the impact of external factors on admissions processes, for example, the pressures of high staff-turn-over, burn-out and the need for congruence between the pressures of the field, the content of training programmes and the importance of determining suitability of applicants to the profession. More specifically:

- Macduff *et al.* (2015) speak to a shift towards the development of tools that would support values-selection in nursing selection, that is, a strategy for recruitment of students based on assessment of how much their individual values and beliefs align with that of the (nursing) profession. But they note that 'universities should seek to better explain to students the purposes and processes involved in these on-site selection events' (p.7).
- Donaldson *et al.* (2010) consider that age is the most important variable for success in nursing, with older students doing better on courses; in contrast, Baguley *et al.* (2012) found that there was no difference between school leavers and non-school leavers in terms of success on one nursing programme in Scotland.
- Donaldson *et al.* (2010) suggest abolishing the one-to-one interview for nursing because of its unreliability and lack of predictive value.
- Bowles *et al.* (2014), in reviewing teacher training in Australia, advance a systematic framework for the application process, and note that personal or professional references have not been shown to be useful.

- White et al (2012) demonstrate that applicants for medicine training 'second guess' what is wanted of them in written tests; they give the selectors what they think is 'the right answer'. They argue that there is a 'hidden curriculum in admissions' that has a strong influence on applicant response.

## **4.2 HEIs' views and current practice**

Telephone interviews were conducted with representatives from all eight HEIs that offer social work programmes in Scotland. Three points emerge from the outset. Firstly, across the board, HEIs still attract many more applicants than they have places; we are in a situation of largely selection, not recruitment. Secondly, processes for recruitment and selection of social work students have evolved differently across the Scottish HEIs, although the broad parameters in which all are working are the same: that is, the Scottish Government's *Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (2003); the *Framework for Higher Education in Scotland* (revised 2003); the QAA's *Benchmark Statements for Social Work* (revised 2008); the QAA's *Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (2014); and the Equality Act (2010). Thirdly, variation across HEIs has enabled recruitment and selection procedures to meet the needs of individual institutions, take account of local contexts and accommodate the large numbers of individuals who apply to social work education programmes. In a few institutions, selection systems were different for undergraduate and postgraduate applicants. For instance, one HEI uses one-to-one interviews as part of its assessment for the undergraduate programme and group interviews for its postgraduate programme.

### **4.2.1 Assessing applicants**

All HEIs use processes designed to assess applicants' capacity across three broad domains: academic ability, relevant work or personal experience and understanding of, and commitment to, social work values. Mechanisms for doing so are summarised below:

#### **Academic ability**

Applicants' qualifications and personal statements are used to assess academic ability; most HEIs insist on an academic reference. Some institutions also require applicants to provide written responses to a series of set questions about social work. These responses are used, in part, to assess applicants' written skills.

#### **Work or personal experience**

Work or personal experience connected to the social work role is a requirement of all HEIs. Our interviews revealed that HEIs place greater value on what applicants demonstrate they have learned from their experience rather than the length or amount of experience that applicants have. Experience is assessed by HEIs via applicants' personal statements and references. Some institutions also explore applicants' work and experience during interview.

## **Understanding and commitment to social work values**

Personal statements are used by HEIs to assess applicants' understanding of, and commitment to, social work values. Some institutions also require applicants to provide written answers to set questions about social work. These responses are used to assess applicants' understanding of the social work role and of social work values, and may also be explored during selection interviews where these are organised.

### **4.2.2 Additional issues**

Three additional issues were explored with HEIs: stakeholder involvement; use of interviews; and other criteria used in selection.

#### **Stakeholder involvement**

HEIs involve a range of stakeholders (managers, practitioners, service users and carers) in their recruitment and selection processes, and these arrangements have changed over time. For example, when all HEIs in Scotland held interviews, it was common practice for practitioners and managers to give time to selection days. While all HEIs seek to involve service users and carers, this involvement varies across HEIs, from contributing to the design and development of processes (setting the questions for written exercises and in some cases scoring applicants' responses), to participation in interviews of candidates. Likewise, some institutions involve employers and practice teachers in the scoring of applications.

#### **The use of interviews**

At the time of research, four of the eight institutions were using interviews (either group or one-to-one) as part of their recruitment and selection process; some had gone back to interviewing after a number of years of not conducting interviews. Our research revealed that there had been a wholesale shift away from interviews in recruitment and selection ten years ago when the new degrees had come in. This had been driven by a number of factors: firstly, research evidence that indicates that interviewing does not positively correlate with success or failure on social work programmes; secondly, the realisation that interviewing favours local candidates, at a time when HEIs are striving for internationalisation of programmes; thirdly, the potential interviewing has for unconscious bias in recruitment and selection; and finally, the amount of time and resource that needs to be spent on interviewing, especially with stakeholder involvement. However, some participants argued that there were clear benefits of using interviews as part of recruitment and selection, for example, as a means of assessing emotional maturity and the interpersonal skills of applicants. Some participants also perceived the interview and relationships to be such crucial devices in social work, that it was important to model this through interviewing applicants at the outset of SWE programmes.

#### **Other criteria used in selection**

Just as there was variation across HEIs in the ways that they managed the main requirements for selection, so there were different approaches to additional



criteria such as qualifications in English, Maths and Computing. Sometimes there was even difference within HEIs, with one HEI insisting on qualifications in Maths and English for its undergraduate applicants, but not for its postgraduate students. On a wider note, there are questions to be raised about the continuing relevance of current Maths and Computing requirements. At a pragmatic level, current requirements still refer to Standard Grades, which have been overtaken by Curriculum for Excellence. Moreover, a general increase over time in computer literacy calls into question the continuing relevance of specific computing requirements.

#### **4.2.3 Summary**

Our research has shown that HEIs recruitment and selection processes for SWE programmes have evolved and developed to meet their own particular needs and contexts. Does this variation matter? To what extent do the processes deliver what individual HEIs need from recruitment and selection? Our tentative answer is that HEIs are selecting a reasonably robust cohort, although more work may need to be done in ensuring that we get a sufficiently diverse social work student body. Given the high levels of variation across and within HEIs, there is, also, we would argue, a need for greater transparency from HEIs about the basis of their selection decision-making.

#### **4.3 Practice teachers' views**

Interviews were conducted with three practitioners from different parts of Scotland who have responsibility for practice teaching. Two of the practitioners are currently involved in HEIs recruitment and selection processes; the third used to be until the arrangements changed a number of years ago. All three practitioners are directly or indirectly supervising social work students while on practice placements. These interviews were designed to give insight into the process of recruitment and selection from those who are involved with practice teaching.

When asked to reflect on the students they worked with, all practitioners commented on the variability in the quality of students, but noted that this has always been the case. All participants considered there to be a greater number of younger social work students than had been in the past. This was interpreted both positively and negatively. For instance, one participant said that younger students were often more 'open to learn' having been closer to full-time education (i.e. school). He described younger students as being in the 'learning mind set' and as a result, were more likely to question practice. However, the same participant also felt that that younger students tended to have less social work experience, which was an important gap. Another participant commented that from a student's perspective, the 'more experience of practice they can get the better'.

Participants were asked how ready students from SWE programmes were for practice placements. One participant commented that students' readiness for

placement was an area that had really improved in recent years. He described how HEIs had actively developed strategies for addressing readiness for placement. This was achieved by one HEI by building in observational placements and another introducing two weeks of intensive preparation before practice placements began. All three participants commented that readiness for placement varied amongst students. One participant commented that while some students may cope well with the academic demands of SWE programmes, they may struggle with the emotional demands that come with practice placements. Another participant commented that while a lack of social work experience may make placements more difficult for some students, students can be 'fast learners and make up for their lack of experience quickly.'

We asked participants for their views on the shift in many HEIs away from interviewing as part of recruitment and selection processes. All expressed a preference for interviewing applicants. One participant felt that interviews allowed selectors to probe particular issues that it was not possible to do with a paper-based application process. Another commented that while he appreciated that interviews were time and resource intensive, he regretted that interviews were not used by all HEIs. This was 'because so much of social work is about relationship building and communication'. The final participant believed that interviews enabled an assessment of interpersonal skills, values and to 'tease out' what applicants had learned from their experience. Despite a preference for interviews, none of the three participants said that they had noticed a change in the quality of the students when HEIs stopped interviewing applicants. They further remarked that HEIs would be in a better place to make a judgement about whether the absence of interviews had affected the quality of students undertaking SWE programmes.

Participants had mixed views about how well HEIs were doing at recruiting a diverse student body. Two felt that there had been an increase in BME students, while a third said that recruiting BME students was still an area that HEIs needed to do better. One participant said that there had been an increase in students coming from working-class backgrounds but the other two said that this was still an area that was problematic. These contradictory views suggest that further empirical work is necessary to fully understand the profile of the student body for SWE programmes in Scotland.

In terms of stakeholder involvement, all participants were eager and expressed a commitment to strengthen the connections between practice and academia. However, there was no strong evidence that interviewing candidates was the only, or even best, way to achieve this.

#### **4.4 Managers' views**

Interviews were conducted with three social work managers from different parts of Scotland, only one of whom still has some connection with social work

selection and practice teaching. The interviews were not intended to be representative of managers' views, but rather were a high level scoping exercise, designed to give us some insight into the process of selection for social work education from the perspective of those who are in different management positions.

It was evident from our discussions that the managers we spoke to remain highly committed to working with universities in some way. The importance of 'partnership', 'knowledge exchange' and 'strengthening relationships' were expressed by each of the informants. The managers are also acutely aware that the landscape of practice has changed, putting pressure on the social work role and identity. They felt that universities need to do more to reflect this change, but agreed that is not necessarily an issue for the selection of students. On the contrary, the managers all said that it was more important to get 'the right people' into social work, that is, people with passion, enthusiasm, the right value base, conceptual ability, compassion and resilience. They also acknowledged that in coming off courses, they did not expect graduates to be 'the finished article', as one manager said. What was important was that they were keen to apply their learning; knowledge and skill development could then happen in practice. And one manager said that students do 'hit the ground running reasonably well and so they then learn rapidly on the job'.

Interestingly, one senior manager was able to reflect that her managers often say that they want graduates who are better prepared for practice, and she understands why this is so, given the volume of legislation and policy and change in recent years. But her view is that what is more important is who people are, not what they know. Another manager said something similar: 'what you want to recruit is the competent and confident workforce of the future, so there needs to be a judgement made about somebody's capacity to reflect and grow and develop, both during the training programme and on the job'.

The managers expressed different opinions about how we might best select students who will become the competent and confident workforce of the future. Two expressed a preference for interviews, although one said she knew the research evidence on interviews was not promising. This manager recommended the use of Organisational Development (OD) diagnostic tools in interviews, to help people think about who they are bringing to social work training. The second manager said: 'I think that every contact counts re social work learning and it is a really helpful way of establishing how the person engages with other people'. The manager who said that interviews were not essential reached this view on pragmatic grounds; he asked if we are getting a good enough cohort without interviews, then why have them?

Managers were also asked about their priorities in selection. All agreed that being fair and inclusive is vitally important; 'equity and access is important, but so too is quality'. One manager said she felt that sometimes someone with a lot of experience of social work (e.g. as a former service user) was not necessarily the best person to train in social work; prior experience may be less important that how someone makes sense of that experience. She argued that we need a much more diverse workforce; she felt that too many students today are white, young women. Two informants talked about the risks of tokenistic stakeholder

involvement, and argued that we must be clear about the basis of our decision-making, whatever it is. One manager talked about the pressure his agency is under at the present time; he thought it was unlikely that social workers would have time to be involved in student selection, even if they wanted to. His view was that, if relationships with the university are good enough, 'the university just has to decide, are we talking to somebody who has the capacity to learn, grow, develop, reflect, and have the right values? and I'm satisfied with that judgement'. Another manager had a different view of this. She said she thought that social workers would want to make time for this, because selection offers an opportunity for universities and agencies to work together and so build those all-important relationships.

#### **4.5 Service users and carers' views**

The views of service users and carers were gathered from the HEIs on their experience of being involved in the selection process and whether they thought they should be involved in the selection process. Responses to the latter ranged from service users and carers should be actively involved, to service users and carers should not be involved in the selection process.

Involvement can be separated into two stages, with some HEIs involving their service users and carers in both of these stages. First, there is involvement in the decision making around the process of selection. Examples in relation to this included, the production of scenarios and questions for use at stage two of the selection process.

*'We do feel that our views are taken on board by the staff team implementing the procedures and we are happy with the arrangements in place for admissions and with our involvement in the process.'*

Second, service users and carers are involved in the selection process through working in collaboration with practitioners and academics in assessing and providing feedback on applicants' responses to a written task and/or scenario. For the service users and carers who are involved in the selection process, their responses articulated a positive message, with groups feeling that they had a voice and they were being listened to. These emerging narratives highlight that service users and carers think that they should be involved and have a valuable contribution to make to the selection of the social workers of the future.

*'We are the ones who have the experience of dealing with social workers, so we feel we know what qualities people need and what knowledge people need to be able to be a competent and effective social worker.'*

*'Including service users and carers in the admission process allows for important person centered skills identified as important or essential by carers and service users which may be overlooked by academic staff. These can be little things which may appear irrelevant to someone who has never been in a position to require assistance but can be a great comfort or provide reassurance to a carer or service user.'*

However, in contrast to the above, an alternative perspective suggested that service users and carers shouldn't be involved in the selection process. Instead

there was a call for a more objective approach to selection that drew on psychology and personality testing for selecting applicants to study social work.

## 4.6 Students' views

Many social work students will have applied to five HEIs and therefore have valuable experiential knowledge of the varied selection procedures to social work currently in place across Scotland. An online survey was circulated to all students on qualifying social work programmes at the eight HEIs across Scotland, undergraduates (including distance learning students) and postgraduates. There was a 14% response rate to the survey with 278 students completing the online survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data have been generated by the survey and whilst this report only allows for a brief overview of the findings, the project team will carry out further analysis of the data and publish their findings. The following section highlights findings on selection criteria, the selection process and the factors that influenced students' choice of HEI.

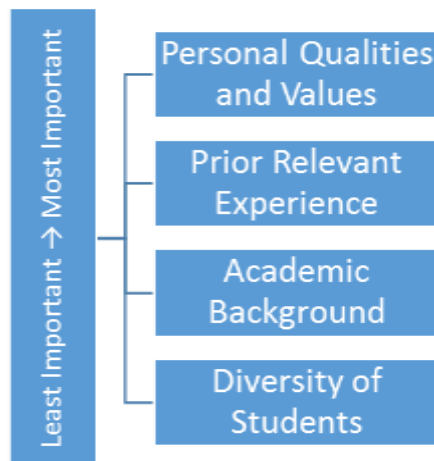
Table 1 summarises the demographic data of the students who completed the survey, useful to note is the diversity of the students, 15% have a disability, 12% are BME and 47% are aged over 30 years.

**Table 1 Demographic Profiles of Students**

Undergraduate	70%	Female	83%	Under 20 yrs	8%
Postgraduate	30%	Male	17%	20 - 24 yrs	25%
UK	95%	Disabled	15%	25 - 29 yrs	20%
International	5%	Non-disabled	85%	30 - 34 yrs	14%
		BME	12%	35 - 39 yrs	10%
		White	88%	Over 40 yrs	23%

Students were asked about relevant work/voluntary experience that they had prior to applying to study social work. Ninety-four per cent had previous experience with 73% having more than a year (or full time equivalent) of experience. When asked if they thought previous experience should be part of the entry requirements to social work, 78% agreed that it should be. When considering previous relevant experience alongside other criteria in the selection process, personal qualities and values was seen by students as the most important criteria (78%) (Figure 1). Only 6% of students thought that academic background should be the most important factor in the selection process, and 30% felt it was the least important factor. These findings will be explored further to develop greater understanding of these responses in relation to other variables (including, age, gender and programme of study).

**Figure 1 Importance of Selection Criteria to Social Work**



Students' experiences of the selection process varied with 41% having been interviewed (many of these were group interviews/exercises) and 88% having completed an additional written exercise. The qualitative data on students' experiences of the selection process highlight that group interviews are perceived to be beneficial in enabling applicants to demonstrate their personal skills and values, are an opportunity to meet other applicants and academic staff, and they remove some of the anxiety that can be associated with individual interviews. With regard to completing a written task, responses ranged from some students spending time researching topics and reflecting on why they were choosing social work, to others being quite daunted by the 'academic' nature of what they were being asked to do and/or felt they lacked experience and knowledge of the social work role to complete the task. There was a call for HEIs to reflect on the additional work that they were asking students to complete, with a suggestion to standardise their written tasks to reduce applicants' workload at a busy time of year:

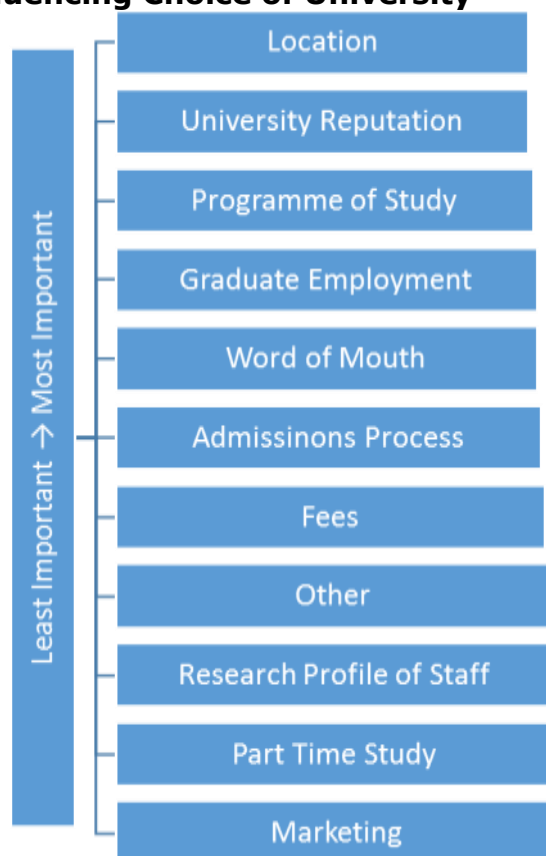
*'I was in my final year of school and I received three different universities written exercises around the time of my school higher prelims. This put a large amount of pressure on me as I knew that I had to submit my best work to the university but if I did not get good enough grades on my prelims then I wouldn't have been able to sit my exams'.*

When asked why students choose their programme of study 'location' emerged as the key factor (see Figure 2). This provides a useful insight into the current selection process, suggesting that the applicants are to an extent driving the selection process through frequently choosing their 'local' university. The comments of the students appear to confirm this through a narrative associating students' choice of university with a personal connection to the location of the university or the university itself, through family, study and/or employment.

*'I have responsibilities here, a child, a flat etc I couldn't uproot them.'*

*'I completed my undergraduate here.'*

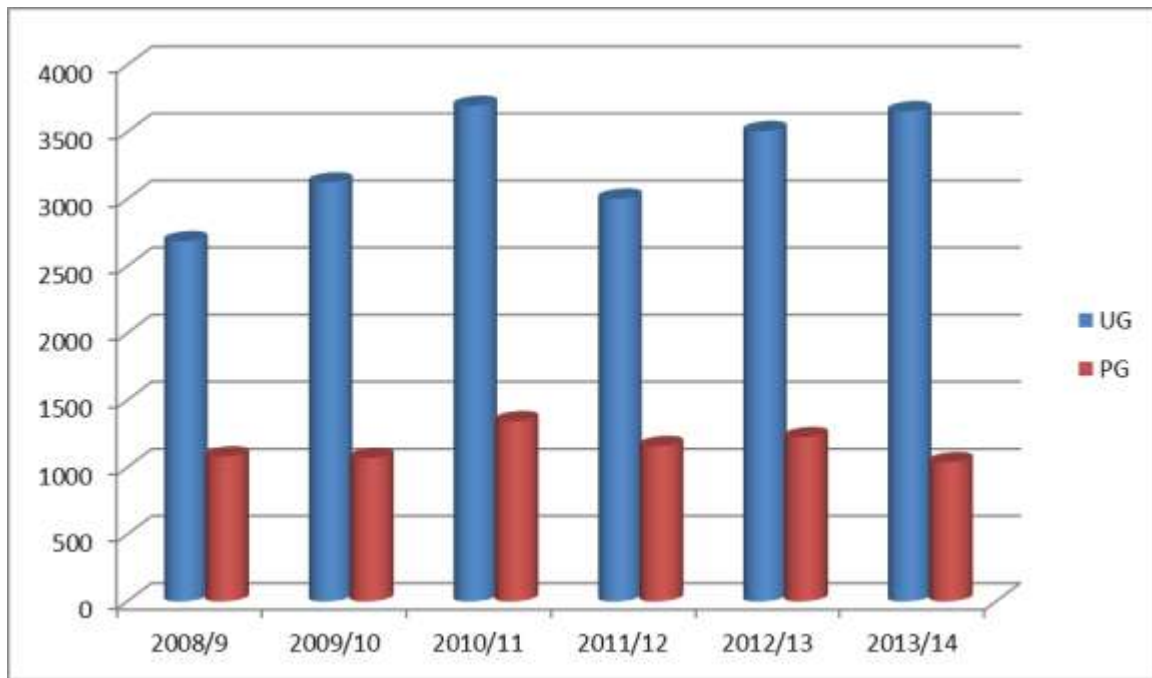
**Figure 2 Factors Influencing Choice of University**



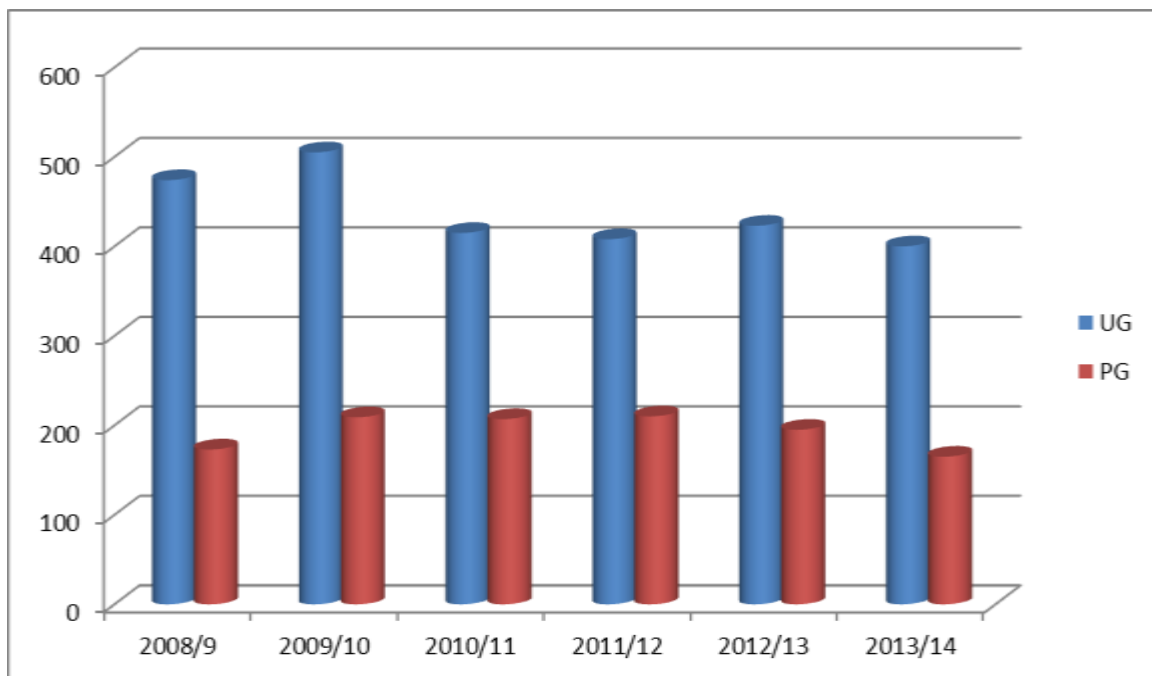
## **4.7 Provisional analysis of AMRs**

### **4.8**

There is a wealth of data regarding the profile and performance of social work programmes across Scotland contained within the Annual Monitoring Reports (AMR) gathered by the SSSC. The individual AMRs and the SSSC summary reports were interrogated to highlight the national picture over the period 2008-2014. The interest in admissions and selection is of course directly connected with a desire to better understand how to recruit students who are able to contribute positively to, and gain significantly from, undertaking a social work degree. The following visualisations of the data focus on the whole 'student journey' from application through to completion. The time period covered saw HEIs adopt and develop a range of approaches to the recruitment of social work students and as such can give us some broad messages about the overall impact on the national although clearly there will be significant nuance and variables behind this data.



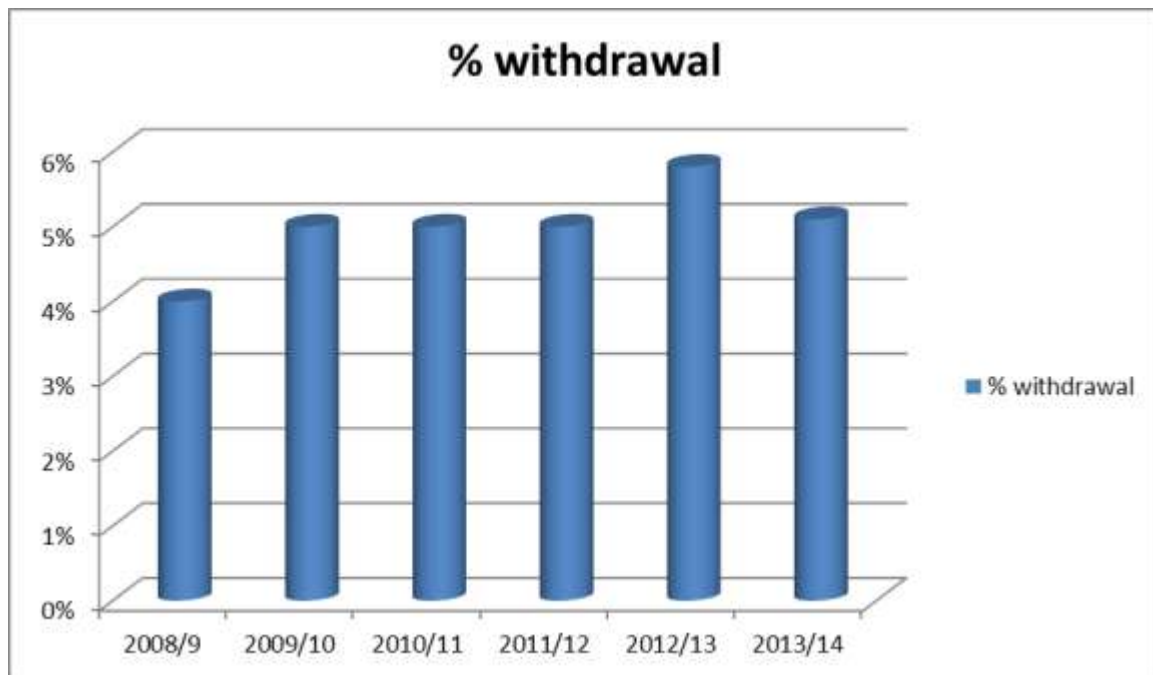
**Figure 1 – Number of Applications made to Social Work Degree courses 2008/9 to 2013/14 (Undergraduate and Postgraduate)**



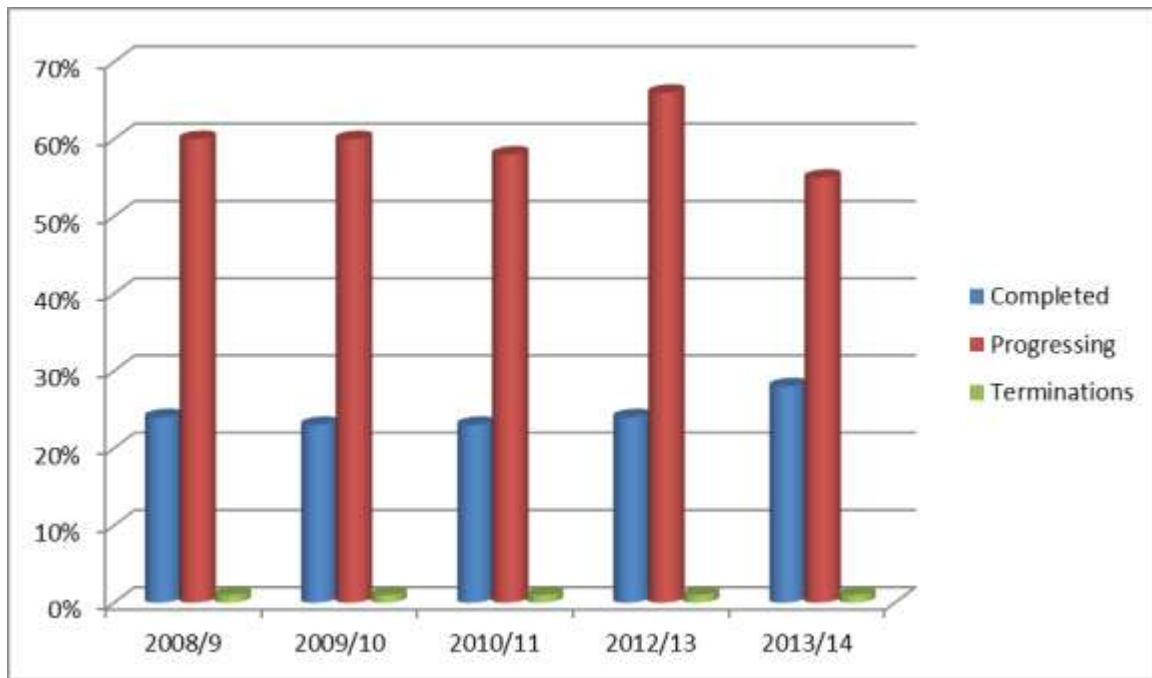
**Figure 2 – Number of Admissions to Social Work Degree courses 2008/9 to 2013/14 (Undergraduate and Postgraduate)**



Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the trends relating to application numbers and actual admissions to programmes. It is clear that there is a consistent pattern over the time period in terms of application levels which reflects a buoyant picture. It is worth noting that the students often apply to more than one HEI and those candidates will be counted for each application. The admissions figures have also maintained a steady profile with the numbers of students influenced by such factors as institutional admission targets or bursary availability.



**Figure 3 – Comparison of % of students withdrawing from Social Work Programmes.**



**Figure 4 – Comparison of selected progression numbers in Social Work Degrees**

Figures 3 and 4 highlight the national retention and progression data over the period and allow us to track the possible impact that changing recruitment approaches may have on the performance of students over the course of their studies. Again, the key message from this nationally aggregated data is that there have not been substantial changes in terms of the level of student withdrawals and/or progression and completion. The data would appear to suggest that despite changing practices, the impact on the overall national picture of the student journey has not been substantial. A further analysis of the data may identify issues at an individual programme and institutional level, but when taken together there would appear to a significant degree of consistency from the point of application to the point of completion on Scotland's qualifying social work programmes.

## **5. Conclusions**

The picture that emerged, across the board, was that broadly speaking, selection is working: we get a reasonably good cohort of students, whatever the local practice is in selection; moreover, identifying the students at selection who will ultimately pass or fail on the programme is far from straightforward. It was evident that how we go about selection may have less impact on the eventual student cohort than we think, because students select us, just as we select them, and the student survey demonstrated that geographical and financial concerns loom large in applicants' minds.

We learned that there is a high degree of variability in how selection is managed across programmes, from some universities using online-selection only, others running group and individual interviews, and others using written exercises. It was clear that selection takes up a large amount of time, however it is managed; we are fortunate enough to have more applicants than there are places, and this makes for a selection, rather than recruitment process, at most universities.

It was evident that many people (from managers through to service users and everyone in between) expressed a preference for conducting interviews, although at the same time, most also acknowledged that the research evidence gives little confidence in this as a 'better' way of selecting students. Not only this, a minority of informants (and the majority of research evidence) argued that interviews may be discriminatory. Interviews may also disadvantage those who are unable to travel for interview, including international applicants and those from outwith the local community.

The research literature reminds us that there is a high degree of subjectivity in selection, whichever systems we use to select candidates. Moreover, it was clear that there are no quick fixes - no obvious right answers in selection. It is therefore important that whatever systems we use, our decision-making is both fair and transparent. Currently, few universities provide public information about the basis of their decision-making. It was also evident that once admitted, students need to be supported through the journey of their learning, and it is here that selection decisions need to continue to be made, by teaching staff, practice teachers and students about suitability for the profession. Hence selection is not a one-off event that happens prior to admission to a university. Applicants cannot be 'ready for practice' at the beginning of training. Instead, this process is ongoing throughout the programme and beyond.

The evidence from interviews was that all the stakeholders want opportunities to work together more and that good relationships are crucial. Selection offers one place where this should (and does) happen, but it is not the only place. On the contrary, building and sustaining good relationships between the academy and the field is vital for the future of social work education across the board.

The students' experience of selection was found, unexpectedly, to be highly variable. Meanwhile the AMR's confirmed that there is no hard evidence that we are either not selecting the 'right people' for social work training or that the changes in selection systems over the years have affected the outcomes of social work education in any substantial way. This is not, however, a call for complacency. On the contrary, there are clearly improvements that can be made in terms of greater transparency about the decision-making process in selection. Similarly, more attention needs to be paid to both stakeholder involvement (including the participation of users and carers) and in strengthening the links between the academy and practice worlds in the future.

If we were to make recommendations based on our study we would suggest that current arrangements, in which HEIs recruit in ways that reflect their own particular needs and requirements, should be allowed to continue; there is no

evidence that one method is better than another. We would also question the continued utility of current Maths and Computing Requirements.

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