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A profile of UK doctoral candidates in social work and social care

Abstract

One important indication of the strength of a discipline is the state of its doctoral research. An important milestone for the official recognition of social work in the UK has been its inclusion in Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) doctoral funding schemes. The current study assesses the longer term impact of these schemes, via a 2013 survey, following up a previous one in 2008. A web-based survey of social work doctoral candidates in the UK (n=216) was conducted, to profile student demographics, research topics, methods, challenges of and supports for doctoral work. Most doctoral candidates (70%) were using a primarily qualitative research strategy and only 4% were using a primarily quantitative approach. Social work doctoral candidates were slightly less satisfied with their research degree programme than the general population of doctoral students. Key areas of similarity with the 2008 survey included the demographical profile (gender, age, ethnicity) and the percentage who were qualified social workers; key differences included increased percentages of candidates who were registered full-time, funded by the ESRC and doing a PhD, as opposed to a professional doctorate. The findings highlight a need for capacity-building in quantitative research methods and improved support for this academic community.

Keywords: Social work research, research capacity, academic workforce, PhDs, doctorates

A profile of UK doctoral candidates in social work and social care

The future relevance and potential contribution of the academic discipline and profession of social work to the amelioration of social ills and the promotion of social justice depends upon the vibrancy of a number of key factors. One of these key factors is the strength of doctoral education. In a recent article, Fong's (2014) arguments for the importance of doctoral education are encapsulated in the judicious title of her article, "Framing doctoral education for a science of social work: Positioning students for the scientific career, promoting scholars for the academy, propagating scientists of the profession, and preparing stewards of the discipline". Without doctoral candidates who will become educators, discipline leaders and researchers that develop new knowledge and test rigorously practice developments, the future integrity of the discipline and profession will be compromised. Hence, the extent and quality of doctoral programmes provide one proxy for the health of a discipline. Differentially established around the globe, in some countries, social work doctoral education has been well embedded and in others it is barely established, if at all. Orme and Powell (2008, p. 995) commented that in some countries there is evidence of a strategic approach to the development of social work doctoral study (e.g. US) and in others there is a more 'ad hoc' approach (e.g. UK). Lyons conducted the first known analysis of the UK social work doctoral population (Lyons, 2002). From a study of social work education (Lyons, 1999), analysis of the Index of Theses (2000), and a research-council-funded national seminar series ('Theorising Social Work Research'), Lyons concluded that UK doctoral students had experienced both a lack of a cohesive identity as *social work* doctoral candidates and also a lack of recognition in the academy for social work as a domain of doctoral study. Together these two factors, lack of identity and recognition, contributed to the perceived absence among doctoral candidates of belonging to a cohesive occupational group. This was not a promising

outcome, if the vibrancy of the doctoral programme is taken as a proxy for discipline health. Lyons's work opened a discussion about the nature of UK social work doctoral education and the extent of similarity to doctoral education elsewhere.

In 2005, in response to lobbying from social work academics, the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) recognised a dedicated pathway for social work PhD candidates. This recognition was both economically important because it released financial awards to fund social work doctoral students, via a national competition and also symbolically important as official recognition of social work as a distinct discipline. These awards were only tenable in prior approved universities, which included both pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, the latter having emerged from former polytechnics with relatively little historical research base. In 2008, the ESRC introduced a system of Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs), based exclusively in pre-1992 universities. Although the projected number of social work studentships in the first phase of DTCs was slightly higher than the number of studentships previously awarded through the dedicated social work pathway, the independent evaluation of the DTC network (ESRC, 2015) concluded that social work, along with education and anthropology, was failing to meet target student numbers. The evaluation report concluded that these disciplines 'do not attract enough applicants of sufficient quality, or are losing out in the processes of studentship allocations' (ESRC, 2015: 25).

This article reports on a cross-sectional 2013 study conducted of UK social work and social care doctoral candidates, which explored the strength of doctoral education. The aims of the study were to:

- 1) Map the demographic, educational and occupational profile of UK doctoral candidates

- 2) Explore the range of thesis topics and research approaches adopted by doctoral candidates, to provide an indicator of the kinds of research favoured in social work departments.
- 3) Explore the nature of challenges experienced by doctoral students in the pursuit of their studies and the nature and extent of support they receive.

The literature review, research findings and discussion have been structured around these three aims. This 2013 study replicated key elements of the research design from a 2008 UK study (Scourfield and Maxwell, 2010), which has allowed for trend analysis. Specifically, it allowed for comparison of UK doctoral education in social work and social care before and after the establishment of ESRC Doctoral Training Centres and for consideration of the longer-term impact of ESRC PhD funding. Findings of the 2008 study are thematically presented in the next section.

Literature review

A brief summary review of key literature - structured by the three research aims is presented; incorporating comparison between the UK and other countries, with most evidence coming from the US.

The demographic, educational and occupational profile of doctoral candidates

Lietchy *et al.* (2009), reported that there were 69 US doctoral programmes, enrolling 1,637 full time candidates and 917 part-time students. Of these, 54% were white, suggesting a diverse doctoral community, and three quarters were women. Social work academics in the UK are less likely to hold a doctorate than their US counterparts (Moriarty *et al.*, 2015); similarly

they are less likely to have a doctorate than those in Germany, though more likely than those in Denmark (Kornbeck 2007).

Drawing on some aspects of Lyons's method (2003), Scourfield and Maxwell (2010) conducted a study in 2008, that comprised a web-based survey of doctoral candidates in the UK (n=136) and search of the Index to Theses. This is the 2008 survey with which the current 2013 study is being compared. Sixty-eight percent of respondents were women and 60% were studying part-time, while working full-time. One third were undertaking professional doctorates, as opposed to PhDs. One third of respondents were social work educators, suggesting recognition of the need to become research-active. Many UK social work doctoral candidates commence their studies later in life whilst working, often in academia, rather than the other way round (Moriarty *et al.* 2015). Social work academics would traditionally arrive with a relatively limited research background, as doctoral qualifications have not been required in their practice career (Orme & Powell, 2008).

Although routine comparative analysis is lacking, commentators tend to agree that numbers of social work doctorate students in the UK have traditionally been low, relative to those in other academic fields. Lyons (2000) found that only one-fifth of social work academics had a doctorate in the mid-1990s. Orme and Powell (2008) note Bourner *et al.*'s (2001) research which found only a single social work professional doctorate (PD) programme out of 128 social science PDs in 1999. More recently, social work may have caught up with at least some other disciplines; Moriarty *et al.*'s survey found 43% of social work academics had a doctorate in 2008, very close to the UK average of 45.7% for all disciplines in 2010-11 HESA data (Grove, 2012).

Topics and research approaches

Horton and Hawkins (2010) found that few US social work dissertations (13.49%) focused on social work intervention and these authors identified a schism between practice and research. Similarly, Harrison and Thyer (2013) noted the need for US social work doctoral dissertations to have a practice application accompanied by an improvement agenda. Maynard *et al.*'s (2014) study of US doctoral dissertation abstracts found quantitative analysis present at twice the rate of qualitative analysis.

Lyons' (2003) study found that the majority of social work doctoral theses in the UK addressed adult social work. Scourfield and Maxwell (2010) in 2008 then found that doctoral topics about children and families were much more numerous than topics about social work with adults - an apparent reversal of the previous trend. Most respondents (57%) felt that they were undertaking research that was evaluating practice or policy. Lyons (2003) noted that choice of topic and approach was likely to be informed by previous practice experience. Primarily qualitative doctoral projects greatly outnumbered primarily quantitative ones in the UK in 2008 (Scourfield and Maxwell, 2010), indicating a need for capacity building, to develop quantitative research skills and create well-rounded scientists of the profession (Fong 2014).

Challenges and support

Barsky *et al.* (2014), from a US perspective, note the need for social work academic staff to have extensive practice experience. The transition of role from established, expert practitioner to that of novice researcher can require high levels of support (Mendenhall 2007). Liechty *et al.* (2009) found that up to 50% of candidates in the US fail to complete doctorates and these authors stress the importance of supporting students to reduce attrition. Khinduka's (2002) study

into completed US social work doctorates found that those schools which had a supportive institutional culture were more likely to achieve ‘excellence in doctoral education’ (2002, p. 685). McRoy *et al.* (2012) have further noted the need in the US for a strong infrastructure in order to build and support social work research capacity.

Scourfield and Maxwell (2010) attribute the lack of UK doctoral candidates in part to the relatively weak research base in social work and they further contend that this dearth of research expertise has been as a result of the low priority given to research by social work employers. Thus, there has been little capacity for providing doctoral supervision and this has created something of a vicious circle. Scourfield and Maxwell (2010) identified that because of the older age of doctoral candidates there is only a limited window of opportunity for the dissemination of their work. There is also a strong need for succession planning for academic staff (Shardlow *et al.* 2013). The role of teaching often takes precedence over that of researcher for social work academic staff in England, particularly in comparison to those in Germany (Kornbeck 2007). Moriarty *et al.* (2015) note the heavy administrative burden placed on UK social work academics, who are responsible for liaising with local authority partners, which further contributes to the stress of an already demanding academic role (Shaw 2014), and to the pressures of completing their doctoral studies whilst in employment.

The current study

In 2013, Jonathan Scourfield was asked by the research sub-committee of the body representing academic social work in the UK, the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC), to repeat the 2008 survey. As noted earlier, this request came in the context of ongoing concerns about social work research capacity in the UK and

uncertainty about the impact on social work of recent developments in doctoral infrastructure training.

Method

A cross-sectional survey of UK doctoral candidate in social work and social care in 2013 replicated aspects of a previous study conducted in 2008, allowing for discussion of trends over the five-year interval. The survey was billed as for completion by doctoral candidates in social work and/or social care. The term 'social care' was used in recognition that this term is increasingly widely referenced in the UK (although nowhere else in the world), to encompass the full range of care and support, and not just the work of qualified social workers.

Sampling procedure

An email containing an embedded link to a web-based survey was sent to individuals who were likely to be leading or connected with UK social work doctoral programmes. The email contained a request to forward the invitation to complete the survey to participants on those doctoral programmes. Seven email lists were used: JUC SWEC (77 universities) the Higher Education Academy social work education list; The Association of Professors of Social Work; The School for Social Care Research; an email list for academics running professional doctorates; named contacts for each of the ESRC Doctoral Training Centres with a pathway including social work and/or social care; and named contacts for every UK social work or social care professional doctorate, identified through a Google search. The survey was open for five weeks, in July-August 2013. An incentive for completion of the questionnaire was inclusion in a prize draw for an iPad 2.

Inclusion and exclusion

An inclusive approach was taken to determining which topics could be classed as social work or social care. However, we took the view that the topic had to be connected either to social work / social care services or to people who are clearly social care service users. Therefore, eight studies were not included as they concerned populations who may possibly use social work / social care services but these studies were specifically about contact with public services *other than* social care, such as education or health care or police, and there was no way of knowing if the population studied were social care users or not. An example of this category type was ‘children’s participation in the transformation of schools’. If, however, studies were about the lived experience of people with some kind of social need which would very likely result in social care services (e.g. seeking asylum, having a serious mental health problem), they were included in the sample. Any study of people who are necessarily social care service users, such as children in out-of-home care, was included in the final sample, even if the research topics did not directly relate to social care services. A small number of responses were from doctoral candidates whose topics were very clearly not related to social work (e.g. banking regulation, police leadership).

Participant characteristics

The intended sample was to obtain as many study participants as possible from the population of social work doctoral candidates (total number unknown) in the UK. This population included full- and part-time candidates for PhD or professional doctorate. The number of UK universities that offered a social work PhD and/or professional doctorate in social work (or of which social work forms a part) was not known. The sample was self-selected on the basis of doctoral candidates that chose to respond to a web-based questionnaire. It is not known

what proportion of the population of doctoral candidates in the UK received the invitation to participate in the study. A total of 266 responses were received. Of these respondents, 35 partially completed the survey and were excluded from the sample. Therefore, the usable sample comprised 231 completed questionnaires. Of these a further fifteen were excluded because doctoral topics were judged not to fall into the domain of social work or social care. This left a final sample of 216.

Measures

A survey instrument, a self-completion web-based questionnaire, was created using Qualtrics.com. The questionnaire employed for the 2013 survey was based on the instrument used 2008, in both cases non-standardised and designed specifically for the survey. In 2008 and 2013 there were questions about student demographics (including participants' social work practice background); experience of doctoral study; participants' research topics; research approaches and methods used. The 2008 questionnaire was amended somewhat for use in 2013. An additional question was included to gather information on whether doctoral candidates were categorised as 'domestic' or 'overseas'. Four questions were modified for the 2013 questionnaire. First, a question about enrolment status was modified to include the option 'staff candidate' (not included in 2008). Second, the 2008 question about student satisfaction was altered to match the categories of response in the UK Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (Bennett and Turner, 2013), for the purposes of comparison. Third, one of the three categories of research approach offered to respondents to categorise their research (based on a reading of Shaw & Norton [2007]) was modified. In 2008, the first of these categories was worded 'primarily a contribution to academic theorising about social work' while in 2013 'understanding' was used instead of 'theorising'. Fourth, an additional list of specified research

methods was used in 2013, based on a scheme adapted from Shaw, Ramatowski, & Ruckdeschel (2013). Additionally, some minor changes were made to the wording of some questions to enhance clarity.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were produced and chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were used to indicate whether the 2013 distribution of responses differed significantly from that in 2008. The same tests were applied to cross-tabulations of some of the variables, to explore potential patterns in the 2013 data. A conventional probability level of 0.05 was used to signal a significant result.

Results

Doctoral Candidate Characteristics

The sample comprised 74 men (34.3%) and 142 women (65.7%). Of the 231 respondents, 82.8% self-defined as being of white ethnic origin. The age group containing most doctoral candidates was 40-49 and the under-30s were a small minority, albeit this group made up a larger percentage of the sample in 2013. One in ten were overseas students. Three-quarters (74.1%) were based in pre-1992 universities. A higher percentage of doctoral candidates were studying at pre-92 universities in 2013. However, there were no significant differences in any of these demographics between 2008 and 2013. Full details are in table 1.

Table 2 presents results on type of registration, employment and social work qualification. There were increased percentages of people studying for PhDs (as opposed to professional doctorates), studying full-time and funded by the ESRC. In addition to the results in

Table 2, there was a significant association between funding source and type of doctorate (Fisher's exact test $p < 0.001$), since ESRC doctoral funding is restricted to PhDs. There was also a significant association (Fisher's exact test $p = 0.001$) between category of university and type of doctorate; PhDs by research were a larger percentage of all doctorates in pre-1992 universities (81%) than in post-1992 (57%). There was also an increased percentage of candidates whose highest previous qualification was a Masters degree in research methods.

The percentage of candidates who were qualified social workers was similar in 2013 to 2008. A cross-tabulation of funding source and social work qualification found that 61% (27/44) of ESRC-funded students are qualified social workers compared with over 70% of those who are funded by any other source.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Research Topics and Methodological Approaches

Table 3 presents findings on research approaches and topics. The most popular topic area was children, young people and families, as in 2008. However, overall there was a significant difference between 2008 and 2013 surveys, with an increase in the percentage studying 'knowledge, theories, skills and/or values'.

The dominance of qualitative research as the preferred methodological approach can again be seen in 2013, with only 4.2% of respondents doing primarily quantitative research, compared with 69.9% using primarily qualitative methods. The list of possible research methods is more revealing still. It was possible for respondents to select more than one method as appropriate. The methodological imbalance is revealed when we see that 81.5% of doctorates

include one-to-one interviews, whereas only 2.8% are using experimental or quasi-experimental methods. In keeping with this finding, only seven respondents (3.2%) used the word ‘outcome’ when describing their doctoral topic. Slightly more optimistically in terms of quantitative methods, 9.7% of candidates were using measurement scales. Also, close to a quarter of respondents were using records or other administrative documents, which could include some quantification.

Cross-tabulations were conducted of methodology against type of university and funding source. These bivariate analyses did not find any significant associations, however.

Insert Table 3 about here

Satisfaction with doctoral study

As noted earlier, the satisfaction question changed in wording for 2013 so it would not be valid to compare with 2008. A more valid comparison, however, is with the UK-wide and cross-discipline Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2013 (Bennett and Turner, 2013). The statement ‘overall I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme’ was offered to respondents in both surveys, using a five-point Likert scale for response, which ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In 2008 the social work survey responses were interpreted as being more positive about student satisfaction than the general doctoral student population in the 2007 PRES. (We note the proviso that this was only an interpretation in 2008, with the questionnaire wording being different from PRES). However, unfortunately the opposite is true in 2013 – social work doctoral candidates appear to be less satisfied than the general PGR population. In 2013, 13.4% (n=29) of social work /social care doctoral candidates disagreed that they were satisfied overall, whereas for the general population of doctoral candidates in PRES

(n=47,623) only 8.7% disagreed. In PRES, 9.6% were neutral about their doctoral study, compared with 7.4% in the social work / social care survey. In PRES, 81.7% agreed they were satisfied overall, compared with 79.2% in the social work / social care survey. The percentage difference is very small, but statistically significant. Raw numbers were not published in the Bennett and Turner (2013) summary report on PRES 2013, but working these out from the percentages reported and overall sample size, we find the chi-square test result is 6.755 (2 df, $p=0.03$). The figure on p.19 of Bennett and Turner (2013) confirms the finding. When PRES respondents are grouped by Research Excellence Framework (REF) panel, those coming under the social work and social policy panel were ranked 31st out of 36 REF disciplines for satisfaction.

The challenges of doctoral study

Respondents were asked an open question about which aspects of doctoral study were particularly challenging. Their responses were inductively coded into one of seven categories: time; academia (i.e. unease with the academic environment); isolation; methodology; money; ethics and access; and 'other' (various). These results were cross-tabulated against the responses on satisfaction. Not counting a diverse 'other' category, the highest levels of dissatisfaction were in those respondents whose main challenges were time, academia or money; all of these having around 15% dissatisfaction. Further cross-tabulations were conducted with the satisfaction data. There was no significant association with age, type of university or full-time/part-time status, although it should be noted that the statistical power for this analysis was weak as the table had a large number of cells. There was indication of a possible pattern in relation to full-time/part-time status that might be significant in a larger sample. This analysis showed that 85% (22/26) of those reporting isolation were full-time candidates, even though only 39% of the whole sample

were full-time. The challenge most often reported by part-time (n=52) and staff candidates (n=28) was time.

Discussion

Several important limitations of this research should be noted. First, the study did not triangulate with any other source of data, such as thesis abstracts, so relies on doctoral candidate self-report only. Second, standardised measures were not used, which limits the scope for comparison with other studies. Third, opinions may differ about the categorisation of research projects, for example according to orientation towards practice or methodology (see Table 3). Fourth, the study sample was self-selecting and differences between respondents and non-respondents are unknown, so selection bias is possible. Fifth, satisfaction surveys can be positively inflated because most people who commit time to any endeavour will wish to justify their efforts and gains.

However, although the actual size of the doctoral candidate population is not known, it is worth noting that the 216 valid responses constitute 72% of the 301 students identified by Shardlow *et al.* (2013) in their audit, which is a reasonably high response rate. Shardlow and colleagues received responses from only 38% of the universities they contacted, but it is reasonable to assume that most of the non-respondents did not have a doctoral programme in social work, since many of the universities which teach social work do not appear to have a research tradition or staff able to supervise doctoral research.

The increased sample in 2013 of 216, compared with 136 in 2008, may have been mostly due to the lure of the iPad and the widening of the survey title to include social care as well as social work. However, the large increase in the absolute number of ESRC-funded doctoral

candidates, making them a significantly larger proportion of the student body in 2008 than in 2013, may also go some way to explain the increase in the number of responses. It is plausible that there would be an absolute increase in ESRC-funded social work doctorates between 2008 and 2013 because of the cumulative effect of recruitment to an ESRC pathway which was only first named as such in 2005 and did not by 2008 have a full quota of students across all three (or four) years of doctoral study. Such an increase is a good news story for social work as more critical mass should strengthen the intellectual and human capital of the field. The DTC evaluation (ESRC 2015) shows, however, that the picture is not in fact rosy for ESRC doctoral funding in social work compared with other disciplines. Failure to achieve recruitment targets to doctoral programmes may compromise future funding. Learned societies and interest groups need to keep a careful eye on how things proceed in the next phase of Doctoral Training Partnerships. As JUC SWEC noted in contributing to the DTC evaluation, ‘there is an ongoing need for the ESRC to insist on DTCs with social work pathways achieving their target proportions of social care students’ (ESRC, 2015: 26).

Changes in the Doctoral Population

There was no significant change between 2008 and 2013 in the demographics of the doctoral population. As in 2008, most candidates were women, although it is important to note that they constitute a much lower percentage of the doctoral population than they do of the social care workforce or social work student population. The apparent rise in the overseas student population is probably an artefact of survey design, since there was no specific question about overseas status in 2008. The percentage of doctoral candidates at pre-92 universities was 11% higher in 2013, perhaps reflecting the DTC policy. As in 2008, the student population is much older than the general PGR population in the UK. There was almost a doubling of the percentage

of candidates under 30 years of age. This might suggest that younger people are commencing social work doctorates at a greater rate, though the raw numbers are very small.

It is perhaps good news for those with a strong social work professional identity that the percentage of doctoral candidates who are qualified social workers has not significantly decreased, although there is a slight downward trend. A large majority of those studying social work and social care at doctoral level still seem to be qualified social workers, despite the concern expressed by some in the social work academic community that ESRC funding often attracts doctoral candidates without a practitioner background. There is a wealth of practice experience evident in the doctoral community; the majority of those who are qualified to this level have worked as social workers for more than ten years post-qualification. More pessimistically, another possible conclusion to draw is that we are not yet succeeding in attracting a large amount of interest from outside social work to conduct doctoral research on social care, this being one of the strategies outlined in Sharland's (2009) Strategic Advisor report for the ESRC.

As in 2008, a high percentage of social work / social care doctoral candidates are registered part-time. The percentage of doctoral candidates registered full-time has risen from 25.4% in 2008 to 41.1% in 2013. There is significant change in type of doctorate – proportionally more PhDs and less professional doctorates – and source of funding, with the percentage of those with ESRC-funding more than doubling. This would seem to be explained by the cumulative effect year on year of ESRC funding, which although available for part-time study more commonly supports full-time students. In keeping with the trend for a higher percentage of ESRC-funding, there is an increase in the percentage of candidates with a Masters

in research methods as their highest previous qualification (as historically required by the ESRC).

Research Topics and practice orientation

The dominance of primarily qualitative research remains in 2013. This is in line with other evidence on the dearth of quantitative methods in UK social work research (e.g. McCambridge *et al.*, 2007; Sheppard, 2015). The results on choice of methods largely reinforce this picture and provide more detail than was available in the 2008 survey. Whatever one's view of the feasibility or desirability of randomised controlled trials in social work, it is very surprising that only 2.8% or less are using *quasi*-experimental methods, which are much easier to use than experimental methods, because randomization is not required. The very small proportion of candidates studying apparently studying outcomes for service users is cause for concern. It should be noted that by far the most popular qualitative method was the one-to-one interview, which may suggest the field also has a rather limited repertoire of approaches to generating qualitative data.

More respondents selected the option of 'primarily a contribution to academic understanding' in 2013 than selected 'primarily a contribution to academic theorising' in 2008, but the word 'theorising', with its more highbrow connotations than 'understanding', may well have put off some doctoral candidates who were nonetheless making a primarily academic contribution from selecting that option. The finding of apparent changes in the spread of topics – once again taken from the categories used by Lyons (2002) – may not be wholly accurate, as there was no consistency of coding personnel or detailed criteria from 2008 to 2013. It can be noted, however, that child and family topics are still more popular than adult social care topics.

Satisfaction with study

Doctoral candidates in social work and social care were slightly less satisfied than the general population of doctoral candidates responding to the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The difference was very small and statistically significant at the 0.05 level because the PRES had a large sample size of over 40,000, however this finding is nonetheless cause for concern and warrants further research. When challenges experienced were cross-tabulated against satisfaction, full-time doctoral candidates were more isolated than those registered part-time. One possible explanation for this might be that whereas part-time candidates who are also employed might garner support and company from their work colleagues, full-time candidates in some universities – perhaps those without a sizeable body of doctoral students – might lack a network and infrastructure to help sustain them. DTCs are intended to provide critical mass of social science doctoral candidates and networking opportunities which should reduce isolation, so it would be interesting to inquire further into social work candidates' experience of these centres.

Conclusion

The study set out to map the profile of UK doctoral candidates; explore the range of thesis topics and research approaches adopted by doctoral candidates and explore the nature of challenges experienced by doctoral students in the pursuit of their studies and the nature and extent of support they receive. Some useful insights were gained, although the findings suggest the need for further research in future, including a more qualitative dimension which could drill down to capture more of the lived experience of the doctoral candidate. It would also be important in future studies of the doctoral student population to triangulate survey findings with other sources of data such as thesis abstracts.

The fact that social work / social care doctoral candidates are significantly less satisfied overall with their doctoral experience than the general population of doctoral candidates is of course cause for concern. This finding could suggest the need for a better infrastructure (Mc Roy *et al.*, 2012) and greater institutional support (Khinduka, 2002). It would also perhaps argue for Shardlow *et al.*'s (2013) position that there is a need for a national professional support network to more fully embrace doctoral candidates, so that they may feel more part of a valued, thriving academic community. The survey findings further emphasize the serious need in the UK for building capacity in quantitative social work research.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for both surveys was obtained from (*name removed*) University Social Sciences School Ethics Review Committee.

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Table 1: Demographics of doctoral candidates and university type

Category	Response	2008 (n)	2013 (n)	2008 (%)	2013 (%)
Gender	Male	43	74	31.6%	34.3%
	Female	93	142	68.4%	65.7%
	Total	136	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=0.262, df=1, p=0.61$					
Ethnicity	White	121	178	92.4%	82.8%
	Mixed, Chinese & Other	9	15	6.9%	7.0%
	Asian	5	8	3.8%	3.7%
	Black	2	14	1.5%	6.5%
	Total	131	215	100%	100%
$\chi^2=5.021, df=3, p=0.17$					
Overseas student ¹	UK	124	193	94.7%	89.8%
	Overseas, of which:	7	22	5.3%	10.2%
	EU	-	8	-	3.7%
	Non-EU	-	14	-	6.5%
	Total	131	215	100%	100%
$\chi^2=2.534, df=1, p=0.11$					
Age	< 30	9	27	6.6%	12.5%
	30-39	42	56	30.9%	25.9%
	40-49	43	76	31.6%	35.2%
	50-59	32	48	23.5%	22.2%
	> 59	10	9	7.4%	4.2%
	Total	136	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=5.507, df = 4, p = 0.24$					
University type	Pre-1992	81	160	62.8%	74.1%
	Post-1992	43	51	33.3%	23.6%
	Other/missing	5	5	3.9%	2.3%
	Total	129	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=4.953, df=2, p=0.08$					

¹ This question was not asked in 2008 but overseas student status was crudely inferred from doctoral topics. Chi-square relates to only UK and overseas (not EU/non-EU)

Table 2: Doctoral registration, employment and social work qualification

Category	Response	2008 (n)	2013 (n)	2008 (%)	2013 (%)
Student status ¹	Full time	37	85	27.0%	39.4%
	Part-time	100	93	73.0%	43.1%
	Staff candidate	-	38	-	17.6%
	Total	137	216	100%	100%
Type of doctorate ^{2*}	PhD	82	159	61.2%	73.6%
	Professional doctorate	49	54	36.6%	25.0%
	PhD by publication	3	3	2.2%	1.4%
	Total	134	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=5.617$, df=1, p=0.02					
Source of funding*	University (as employer)	27	44	20.1%	20.4%
	Other employer	20	22	14.9%	10.2%
	ESRC	11	44	8.2%	20.4%
	Self	40	77	29.9%	35.6%
	Another source	36	29	26.9%	13.4%
	Total	134	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=18.208$, df=4, p<0.01					
Type of employment	Social work educator	44	77	33.1%	35.6%
	Social work manager	14	20	10.5%	9.3%
	Social work practitioner	11	26	8.3%	12.0%
	Other	43	44	32.3%	20.4%
	Not employed	21	49	15.8%	22.7%
	Total	133	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=8.068$, df=4, p=0.09					
Stage of doctoral study	Masters in res. methods	3	8	2.3%	3.7%
	Year 1	27	44	20.3%	20.4%
	Year 2	25	45	18.8%	20.8%
	Year 3	25	45	18.8%	20.8%
	Year 4	17	19	12.8%	8.8%
	Year 5	9	21	6.8%	9.7%
	Year 6 or later	9	8	6.8%	3.7%
	Doctorate award in last 2y	18	26	13.5%	12.0%
	Total	133	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=4.724$, df=7, p=0.69					
What is or was your student and employment status*	FT work PT student	81	106	62.3%	49.1%
	PT work FT student	12	36	9.2%	16.7%
	PT work PT student	13	22	10.0%	10.2%
	FT student not employed	21	52	16.2%	24.1%
	Total	130	216	100%	100%
$\chi^2=8.285$, df=3, p=0.04					
Qualified social worker	Yes	106	164	79.7%	75.9%
	No	27	52	20.3%	24.1%
	Total	133	216		
$\chi^2=0.669$, df=1, p=0.41					
Tenure as social worker	0-5 yrs (inc. just qualified)	27	41	20.4%	19.0%
	6 to 10 yrs	23	29	17.4%	13.4%
	11 to 15 yrs	18	35	13.6%	16.2%
	Over 15 yrs	41	58	31.1%	26.9%
	N/A	23	68	17.4%	31.5%
	Total	132	216		
$\chi^2=7.778$, df=4, p=0.10					

¹ Staff candidate response not offered in 2008; ² Chi square test excluded 'PhD by publication';

* Significant at the 0.05 level

Table 3: Research approaches and topics

Category	Response	2008 (n)	2013 (n)	2008 (%)	2013 (%)
Methodology ¹ ($\chi^2=2.849$, df=2, $p=0.24$)	Primarily qualitative	76	151	58.5%	69.9%
	Mixed	41	55	31.5%	25.5%
	Primarily quantitative	7	9	5.4%	4.2%
	Not empirical research	6	1	4.6%	0.5%
	Total	130	216	100%	100%
Orientation towards social work practice* ($\chi^2=9.788$, df=2, $p<0.01$)	Primarily a contribution to academic theorising / understanding	30	87	23.8%	40.3%
	Evaluation of policy or practice	77	102	61.1%	47.2%
	Action research	19	26	15.1%	12.0%
	Total	126	216	100%	100%
Topic* ($\chi^2=11.79$, df=5, $p=0.04$)	Children, young people, families	58	75	45.7	35.1%
	Knowledge, theories, skills and/or values	9	43	7.1	20.1%
	Adult service users	27	40	21.3	18.7%
	Organisation, management of personal social services	17	31	13.4	14.5%
	Methods or settings	9	16	7.1	7.5%
	Education, training and professional development	7	9	5.5	4.2%
	Total	127	214	100%	100%
Specific methods used ²	One-to-one Interviews, including telephone, couples interviews and co-interviews	-	176	-	81.5%
	Narratives, life history, (auto-) biography, naturally occurring talk.	-	63	-	29.2%
	Focus groups and group interviews	-	74	-	34.3%
	Observation/ethnography	-	67	-	31.0%
	Action research and participatory cycles of research	-	26	-	12.0%
	Visual data, photography, drawing, film	-	23	-	10.6%
	Personal records and documents – diaries, journals, letters	-	27	-	12.5%
	Historical archival research	-	5	-	2.3%
	Records and organizational or administrative documents	-	51	-	23.6%
	Internet research	-	21	-	9.7%
	Case studies: of organizations, individuals, events, communities or social groups	-	53	-	24.5%
	Cross-sectional survey	-	15	-	6.9%
	Repeat and longitudinal surveys	-	10	-	4.6%
	Experiment or quasi-experiment	-	6	-	2.8%
	Measurement scales	-	21	-	9.7%

¹ Chi square excludes 'Non-empirical'² Not asked in 2008

* Significant at the 0.05 level