

**Title: Learning to become evidence based social workers: Student views on research education and implementation in practice.**

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**Abstract**

Professional guidelines for social workers in relation to research use in practice, present social workers as consumers, rather than producers of research evidence. This approach aligns with a growing emphasis on the use of evidence-based practice within social work. This paper reports on a small mixed methods study with a cohort of BA social work students (N = 38) with two aims; 1) to understand the experiences of students learning research at undergraduate level and 2) to explore how their learning and placement experiences interact and influence their development as ‘research-minded’ practitioners of the future. Descriptive statistics of the quantitative data and thematic analysis of focus groups are presented. Our findings support the existing literature relating to social work students attitudes to research, including feelings of anxiety and perceptions of difficulty, while also viewing it as important to their careers. We also found that within placement settings, students encounter negative, often dismissive views of research and experience little in the way of role-modelling of evidence-based practice. We consider these findings in light of the promotion of EBP in UK social work, and how this may influence our teaching of research and evidence use to future student cohorts.

**Keywords:** Research education; evidence-based practice; social work curriculum; social work research; attitudes to research

**Word count (including references): 8190**

## **Introduction**

In December 2019, Social Work England became the regulator for educational and professional standards for registered (and pre-registered) social workers in England. This was the latest in a series of changes to social work regulation, education and practice frameworks that have been ongoing for almost two decades. As educators of social work undergraduate and postgraduate students we need to ensure that our teaching adapts to new guidelines where necessary, but also to understand how any alterations affect the learning and future practice of our students. In this paper we consider the emphasis on evidence based practice (EBP) in social work research teaching and practice as outlined in the most recent Social Work England guidance and how this may affect student views of social work research as future practitioners.

While it is unlikely the new standards framework will substantially change the delivery of teaching on research methods programmes, it does suggest a move towards educating future consumers, rather than creators, of research for social work practice (SWE, 2019). This is also reflected, at the university the authors teach in, in a move towards literature review based dissertations for final year students where previously they had an option to undertake primary research. This will, inevitably, further exclude the voices of service users, and qualified social workers, from the evidence base intended to be used to inform decision making within practice in the future.

The promotion of Evidence-Based Practice (EBP), which was first applied to fields of medicine, has increased over recent decades within social work practice (Gilgun, 2015). The literature suggests there are different interpretations of EBP in the context of social work practice depending on the country it is being practised. For example, in the US, there is greater emphasis on professional experience and service user views as acceptable 'evidence'

to consider in determining interventions that should be implemented (Parrish & Oxhandler, 2015). While in Sweden, it has been argued that the focus on evidence that stems from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and newly formed government oversight bodies that view the use of named, and 'proven', interventions as best practice has removed practitioner expertise from the equation of 'what works' (Jacobsson & Meeuwisse (2020). Until recently there has not been a similar organising body to promote EBP in social care. However, there are currently two funded organisations looking at promoting EBP in child and family social care (What Works for Children's Social Care, funded by the Department for Education) and for adult social care (Improving Adult Care Together; IMPACT, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Health Foundation). As relatively new organisations, what influence they will have on policy and/or practice in regards to EBP in social work in the UK is yet to be determined.

Despite EBP being promoted across social work professional accreditation bodies and policy makers for some time now, it appears to be an under-used approach within everyday practice, for a variety of reasons. Previous research has shown that social work practitioners face a number of barriers to introducing EBP within their day to day practice including; lack of confidence in searching and evaluating evidence; insufficient support from management to implement EBP and; little time to spend reading, conducting or reviewing research (Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens & Hussein, 2015). Many of these studies have suggested that these barriers could potentially be addressed if clearer and more substantive links were made between the education of research or research methods and social work practice. However, there is also evidence to suggest that social work practitioners are reluctant to use an EBP approach due to concerns that it would reduce the validity of their experience and knowledge of the families that they work with (Jacobsson & Meeuwisse (2020). How this particular barrier could be overcome, is yet to be addressed within the research, or practice, literature.

In this paper we present findings from a single cohort study conducted with undergraduate social work students at a London university taking a research methods module, during a time of transition to SWE regulation. We wanted to better understand student views of research as they were learning on the module, how they understood the links between research and practice and whether taking the module encouraged an intention to be more ‘evidence-based’, or research minded, in their future practice. We first outline some of the background literature that influenced our thinking on these issues before presenting the views of the student group.

### **Teaching research in social work education**

The requirement for social workers to hold a degree to qualify for practice was introduced in 2003 in England and 2004 in the rest of the UK. Prior to this, qualification was acquired through a DipSW which did not include compulsory education in research or research methods (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013). The New Public Management approach championed by New Labour gave greater emphasis to accountability and risk measurement within social work practice and with this the importance of Evidence Based Practice (EBP) to accommodate standard setting. Since then, research methods have become a core element of social work qualifying education in the UK and forms the basis of the capacity to be able to implement evidence based, or evidence informed, practice.

In England between 2012 and 2019, social work education was guided by professional standards set out by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC; 2017). These stated that one of the expected standards of proficiency for social workers is: “to be able to gather, analyse, critically evaluate and use information and knowledge to make recommendations or modify their practice” (14.1), to “be aware of a range of research methodologies” (14.5), to “recognise the value of research and analysis and be able to evaluate such evidence to inform

their own practice” (14.6) and to “be able to use research, reasoning and problem solving skills to determine appropriate actions” (14.7) (). This led to a greater emphasis on teaching research methods within universities and social work academia and to research that explores the most effective ways of teaching these core skills.

Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2019, professional standards are maintained by Social Work England which has just two brief references to research in practice. Standard 4.2 states that a social worker will “Use supervision and feedback to critically reflect on, and identify my learning needs, including how I use research and evidence to inform my practice” while standard 4.3 states a social worker will “Keep my practice up to date and record how I use research, theories and frameworks to inform my practice and professional judgement” (SWE, nd). This seeming downgrading of the prominence of research within professional social work practice may affect how research is taught at undergraduate level and could lead to a re-focus on the content of these programmes. Within the guidance document that accompanies the standards framework there is not a single reference to research use, understanding or implementation for qualified social workers .

The education and training guidance published at the same time, however, does state the need for programmes to ensure students learn how to “...gather, use, analyse and evaluate evidence to inform their decision making...Evidence may come from research, audit and evaluation or feedback from people with lived experience of social work...” (Education and training standards guidance, 4.8). There is also explicit reference to delivering courses that “...support and develop evidence based practice” and that they “...encourage students to develop analytical skills and research appreciation that is relevant to the profession”. What is clear from these statements is that the primary concern in teaching research to social work students should focus on their skills in using, as opposed to generating, research and evidence that is relevant to practice.

An audit of research methods teaching to social work undergraduate and postgraduate students in the UK, undertaken by MacIntyre and Paul (2013), reported that students had difficulties seeing the relevance of research to their developing identities as social work professionals. The audit also found particular challenges for teachers of research methods within this professional focused, and busy curriculum, to find the optimum balance between relevant content and time available for teaching these modules. Across the four countries of the UK there was also considerable variation in the stated purpose of teaching research, the curriculum space given to this module, and the level of confidence and expertise of those teaching it.

For the most part, MacIntyre and Paul (2013) found that the emphasis within social work programmes was to create research consumers, rather than producers. Most programmes included a module to teach research methods, but these tended to be centred on research methodologies and rarely made direct connections between research and social work practice. There was also some evidence to suggest that students conducting dissertations were being advised to avoid primary research projects and to instead complete literature reviews that required lower levels of resources and had fewer ethical considerations to be applied. It is unlikely that new guidance set out by Social Work England will encourage significant change to these approaches to teaching research to undergraduate (or postgraduate) social work students.

Differences in the focus of research methods modules can also be seen at an international level. For example, it has been noted that research teaching in US universities tends to have a stronger quantitative element when compared to those in the UK (Sharland & Teater, 2016). In their extensive review of published literature on the teaching of research methods within social work programmes, Sharland and Teater (2016) also report that, outside of the US,

research modules are frequently offered only in the final semester of undergraduate degrees making it more difficult to integrate 'research mindedness' across qualifying programmes.

### **Social work student attitudes to research**

As a cohort, social work students are thought to possess largely negative attitudes towards research and of being reluctant to engage in their own research (Morgenshtern, et al., 2015; Bell & Clancy, 2013). This has been challenged however, by reports that this negativity has been overstated in the literature (Secret, Lewis-Rompf & Ford, 2003) and by studies showing the positive impact of changing teaching approaches within research methods courses (Kranke, Brown, Atia & Knotts, 2015). Research instructors themselves appear to make assumptions about the levels of anxiety and expectations of social work students when coming to research modules (Maschi, et al., 2013) which could inadvertently impact on student engagement with the course.

Research over the past three decades suggests that social work students find learning research and evaluation skills particularly challenging (Wike, et al., 2019) and can be ambivalent in their attitudes towards research (and subsequent evidence produced from research) more generally (Negrea, et al., 2018; Secret, et al., 2003;). Elliott, Choi and Friedline (2013) describe an 'environment of reluctance' (p.81) surrounding the learning of research methods and statistics in social work programmes. They identify three main factors that contribute to this environment; limited time allocated to teaching research methods in social work schools; low expectations of student's ability and interest in statistics from faculty and; low expectations of students regarding their own abilities. Student attitudes to course modules can impact on their learning behaviour, expectations of what they will achieve and their willingness to engage in additional or self-directed learning.



Internationally, the literature reports high levels of research anxiety amongst social sciences, including social work, students (Maschi, et al., 2013; Negrea, et al., 2018). Anxiety appears to be the most significant factor affecting student attitudes to research methods when measured, explaining more than 45% of variance in one study (Papanastasiou & Zembylas, 2008), suggesting a need to address student anxiety in the first instance to improve attitudes to research overall. Much of the existing literature on student anxieties focuses almost exclusively on statistics anxiety rather than the broad programme of research methods that are often taught at undergraduate level (Papanastasiou & Zembylas, 2008). This means that while we know that many students express fear and anxiety about tackling what they see as maths based research methods, how these emotions affect attitudes to the practice of understanding and applying research evidence, or designing research relevant to their careers, is less clear. Nonetheless, prior research has established that anxiety related to statistical research has a negative impact on learning outcomes and assessment performance for students within these broader research based modules (Onwuegbuzie & Wilson, 2003).

Graduate social work students have also been reported to show negative attitudes towards research, have low self-efficacy in conducting research and express anxiety related to quantitative research methods, while also viewing research as being important to their careers (Morgenshtern, et al., 2015). Again, however, this research does not offer clear indications of the attitudes of social work students, with other studies finding attitudes to research to be more nuanced and influenced by factors such as empowerment in professional identities and existing competencies in statistics (Secret, et al., 2003). Across varied cohorts, studies tend to find increased confidence and positivity towards research over the duration of research methods modules (Sharland & Teater, 2016). Better integration of research across programmes is additionally found to support understanding and self-efficacy relating to conducting research amongst professional programme student cohorts (e.g. Unrau & Beck,

2004; Unrau & Grinnell, 2005). This was especially pronounced for those social work students who reported low self-efficacy in research skills at the start of a module in one study by Unrau and Grinnell (2005).

A number of studies have reported on discrepancies between teacher views of student attitudes towards research and self-reported attitudes among students themselves, with students tending to be more favourable towards research than assumed by educators (e.g. Secret, et al., 2003; Unrau & Grinnell, 2005). This, in turn is thought to influence the teaching strategies employed by research educators that may not be appropriate if based on erroneous opinions of student beliefs. It has also been argued that perceived teacher attitudes towards student interest in research have an impact on how students feel about research courses (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005). For example, a study by Williams et al (2008), indicated that sociology students view statistics and quantitative research as an important part of their research training but felt that a lack of interest or enthusiasm from research teachers led to the perception that it was less important than other aspects of their studies.

### **Creating ‘research minded’ social work practitioners**

Within social work practice and education, evidence-based practice (EBP) is a debated term and lacks clear definition (Gibbs & Sterling, 2013). Generally, the execution of EBP is considered to include an understanding of research evidence, an ability to critically appraise existing evidence, consideration of the views and experiences of service users and knowledge drawn from professional experience (Back, von Thiele Schwarz, Hasson & Richter, 2019). However, the approach has been criticised as a means of excluding the voices of service users and the experiential knowledge of social workers by elevating the importance of certain types of evidence, primarily outcome measures and an emphasis on accountability (Newman & McNamara, 2016; Pearce & Raman, 2014).

It has been argued for some time that an increased focus on evidence based practice will serve to undermine professional practice and expertise and would contribute to increasing levels of managerialism and performance culture (Jacobsson & Meeuwisse, 2020; Webb, 2001). Higgins and colleagues (Higgins, Popple & Crichton, 2016) argued that the professional capabilities framework placed practice experience as more important than education, creating challenges for social work educators in motivating students to engage with some aspects of the degree programme, in particular those elements seen as less 'essential' to everyday practice such as research methods. While Trevillion (2008) argued that from the initiation of the move towards educating social workers to be 'research-minded' and use practice that is evidence based, a disconnect between value informed theory and empirical research has emerged. This is an important factor to consider in designing research courses for undergraduate and post graduate social work students as it creates a false binary that will ultimately make it more difficult for qualified social workers to incorporate research and theory with practice.

There are differences in how social workers view their own role in using research and/or evidence while in practice and this may link to reported low levels of confidence in research skills or perceived ability in implementing evidence based interventions (IRSS, 2018). Yet, an evidence based approach to practice is supported by social workers as a means of systematically documenting good practice and can be used to increase collaboration across organisations (Back, et al., 2019). Few published studies have reported on efforts to increase this expertise amongst social work organisations and it appears from the literature that training is rarely offered to those already in practice.

One study reported the results of dedicated training workshops in conducting practice based research which were shown to increase interest and confidence in conducting research amongst social workers. However, many participants reported that they still found it difficult

to access the necessary time within normal workloads to conduct research (Powell & Orme, 2011). Low levels of research funding, and few options for social workers to undertake doctoral studies, have also been argued to contribute to an image of social workers as resistant to research in practice (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). Additional studies report that social workers feel they are not sufficiently prepared to incorporate research into everyday practice through their social work education programmes, and that once in practice social workers have difficulty accessing relevant academic research that could be used (e.g. Wike, et al., 2019).

While our emphasis throughout the module described here was on understanding research and research methodologies, students were also introduced to the concept of EBP with a focus on the use of research evidence in decision making in practice. The existing literature on social work education and practice related to research appears to show a disconnect between student learning experiences of research methods and experiences of social workers once in practice. The aim of this study therefore, was to explore student attitudes towards research while participating in an undergraduate research methods programme and how they viewed the importance, and use of, research and evidence in practice through their placement experiences.

### **Research methods module description**

This module is run each year with second year BA social work students and is compulsory. This is the only dedicated research focused module that occurs over the three year programme and runs over two semesters consisting of a two and half hour lecture every week. Sessions covered in lectures include, literature reviewing, qualitative and quantitative research methods, using research in social work practice and writing research proposals. In addition students also have sessions with subject librarians on searching for literature and

workshops in developing academic writing skills. Assessments for the module consist of two formative assignments (reviewing a research article, and a presentation on a topic of their choice) and one summative assignment of writing a research proposal on a topic relevant to social work practice or policy. The module was delivered by two academic staff, one a lecturer and one a research fellow, neither of whom were qualified social workers.

## **Methods**

In the first stage a baseline measure of student attitudes relating to research was collected using the Attitudes Towards Research (ATR) Scale (Papanastasiou, 2005) at the start of their research methods module and again during the final class of the module. The scale includes 32 items that measure five aspects of attitudes towards research; if research is thought to be important for the individual's career; the perceived difficulty of research; anxiety associated with studying research; whether research is thought important to life more generally and; positive attitudes towards research. Responses are recorded on a 7 point Likert scale with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes (both the anxiety and difficulty sub-scales are reversed scored). Initial testing of the scale reported coefficient alpha reliability scores between .71 and .95 across sub-scales (Papanastasiou, 2005).

Questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS v24.

These data were supplemented by two focus groups, the first towards the end of teaching on the module and the second shortly after students had received their assignment grades. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed comparatively using a thematic analysis approach. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. Results from both sets of data collection were analysed separately, and then combined, and are considered together in the discussion section at the end of this paper.

Two of the authors (who taught on the module) facilitated and observed the focus groups. The first focus group was attended by nine participants and the second focus group was attended by six of the participants from the first focus group. Participants were offered lunch and a £10 shopping voucher to compensate for their time in attending the focus groups, there were no additional incentives offered to complete the questionnaire.

Broad discussion topics were devised to allow participants to direct the discussion. Topics included: the pros and cons of research, student perceptions of the research methods module, feelings generated from the module, experiences relating to research during placement and changes in attitudes towards research over time. Three key themes were identified: research within the curriculum; student anxiety and self-efficacy; and experiences of research in practice.

The study was approved by Middlesex University, Social Work and Mental Health research ethics committee and followed all established ethical protocols, approval number 4097.

Standard ethical principles, including informed consent, right to withdraw and data protection were followed throughout. The project was funded through an internal departmental small grants scheme.

### **Questionnaire analysis and results**

It was intended to use the questionnaire to compare scores across the total research attitudes scale and each of the five sub-scales at the early stages of the module and in the final session. However, not all students (full cohort N=38) completed both sets of questionnaires and some students did not include their anonymous identifier on the post questionnaire so it was not possible to match all responses as pre and post totals. We could only match 12 participants on pre/post responses when performing paired samples t-tests, from a total of 37 pre questionnaires and 25 post questionnaires.

In light of this we present the findings from this statistical analysis as an indicator only of changes in attitudes towards research of this cohort and not as a comprehensive description of the whole group and their attitudes.

Just over 90% of participants identified as female (90.2%), and ages ranged between 19 and 55 years. We asked students to indicate their previous experience with research prior to taking this module and 70% indicated that they had no prior experience. For the remaining students, their experience included undergraduate theory or dissertation and postgraduate study.

As can be seen from Table 1 only the positive sub-scale showed a significant difference at the two time points, with the difficulty and the life sub-scales showing high rates of similarity pre and post. These findings indicate that while results were moving in a positive direction (in terms of improving attitudes), statistically, student's attitudes had changed little throughout the course of the module.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### **Focus group findings**

Both focus group sessions were audio-taped and then transcribed. Following the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis, data were examined by searching for frequently observed patterns of views, experiences and underpinning concepts.

This is a theoretical framework whereby codes are formed by interpreting the data to categorise key themes of interest, and iteratively refining them for internal coherence and mutual exclusivity, to the greatest possible degree. One research assistant who did not participate in the focus groups, as well as the two facilitators subsequently collaborated through an iterative process to reach consensus. We use the qualitative data analysis below to better understand the findings from the survey and to explore student attitudes toward

research from different perspectives (i.e. as students, future social workers and, consumers of research).

### ***Theme 1: Research within the curriculum***

Much of the discussion about experiences on the research methods module in the first focus group centred around peer interactions and specific experiences of conflict within the group.

An uncomfortable atmosphere that had been noted within lectures and seminars had unfortunately been carried into the smaller group work that students undertook for their formative assignments. This meant that intended learning from these exercises was not as successful as had been hoped for and for some students it also affected their ability, or willingness, to engage with the classroom teaching;

*“...not everyone was participating or pull their weight. And you can't say it to them, because then you're going to have conflicts with them, we couldn't tell anyone.”*

The size of the class was also noted as creating a barrier to more engaged discussion about research, and how it can be used in social work practice, that these students stated they would have liked. Suggestions for how this could be achieved included increased use of smaller group seminar based sessions and more opportunities for peer learning through dedicated time for discussion of the learning in lectures and experiences of writing the research proposal;

*“we have such a big class that something as dense and struggling to understand research, it would be really beneficial if we had split the class in half.”*

*“everyone comes from different backgrounds, they've studied different things before they came to university, so there are loads of different pieces of knowledge that you could utilise.”*

In the second focus group, students reflected that the module felt overcrowded with information at times. It was noted that much of the content was novel to them and they needed to spend a considerable amount of time in independent study to grasp new concepts



and the language of research. Many students had addressed this challenge themselves by creating study groups of their own and it was suggested that more of this approach could be incorporated into the core module curriculum in future.

At this point students were also starting to think about their third year dissertations and how the research methods module had prepared them for this. A common issue for these students was a sense that there was no clear link between the module and the requirements of the dissertation that they would undertake in their third year. The dissertation is restricted to a literature review study only and they do not have an option to conduct primary research. The research methods module, meanwhile, was largely focused on learning about ways to design and conduct primary research. There was a sense from students that they would have preferred greater emphasis on learning how to review and critique the literature while they also acknowledged the benefits of understanding the processes involved in carrying out primary research studies.

Nonetheless, there was a sense of achievement reported by students in the second focus group and all stated that they had gained useful knowledge about research, how it is carried out and how they could use research in their future careers. However, this module is still subject to the difficulties found by MacIntyre and Paul (2013) in their audit of research modules in social work. A substantial amount of information needs to be covered in a short space of time within an intensive curriculum alongside work placement requirements. In the case of this particular cohort, the added experience of conflict within the class and needing to manage this, may have reduced their attention within class and time available to conduct necessary independent learning.

### ***Theme 2: Student anxiety and self-efficacy***

In the first focus group students spoke about their initial attitude to research when they started the module. Phrases such as ‘intimidating’, ‘overwhelming’, ‘fearful’ and ‘scared of failing’ were used by students to describe their early thoughts of research and research methods. In the second focus group students explained that for other modules moving to their second year usually involved expansion and deeper analysis of what had been learned in the first year, so that most of the material encountered was not entirely new to them. In contrast, as this was the first research methods module they had taken at university, there was a sense of anxiety partly because students did not come to class already knowing some of the course content.

The comments below illustrate initial concerns students reported at the start of their module;

*“...What is that? What is it about? And I knew there was also a lot of reading, which scared me a little.”*

*“I struggle with maths to begin with [. . .] that makes me feel like I can never do it.”*

*“you’re going to pass or fail this module, and you’re not feeling confident about that, it can create anxiety, which means it’s difficult to think...”*

*“I felt like you required a certain level of expertise or be in a certain position to carry out research.”*

All students in the second focus group reported that their attitude toward research had improved by the end of the course, and that initial anxiety was reduced. This was seen across the cohort in the quantitative data although these changes were not significant. For focus group participants the change occurred due to an improved understanding of what research is and how it can be applied to social work practice. There was also a greater understanding of why and how research could be of benefit to effective and meaningful social work practice. However, one student pointed out that there is often little available research that is social work focused in some areas and described this as frustrating and disappointing.

Comparing what students reported in the first focus group with the second, it appears there was some increase in their research self-efficacy. From being fearful and intimidated by research at the start of the module, almost all of those who took part in the focus groups stated that they were more confident in their understanding of research concepts and processes by the end of the second semester. For some this was expressed as an intention to use research in their future practice as social workers and for others they noted that developing their critical thinking skills was an important and useful transferrable skill that they would use as practitioners more generally.

There is still a need for our module to be tailored more to the practice of social work and to highlight those areas where research is both informative and advantageous to good practice. The frustration felt by some students in being unable to find relevant social work research to help them better understand certain topics was familiar to us as teachers attempting to introduce students to examples of social work research and its impacts.

### ***Theme 3: Experiences of research in practice***

Throughout their second year, students undertake placement practice for the majority of the academic term (approximately 60%). In our focus groups we discussed with students their experiences of, and exposure to, research while in placement. Although participants recognised the value of reviewing and sharing ideas, there was a marked sense that they experienced a disconnect between what they had been taught in their research module and social work practice. Comments emphasised participants had not observed the application of research within their practice placements: *“we don’t really see a lot of research in practice.”* Some participants reported that it was notable in their placements that value was placed on clinical judgement, experience and professional interaction with their colleagues over the application of research *“I don’t really feel like research does really make a big difference, I think it’s more with experience and the supervision.”*

Additionally, participants encountered negative attitudes towards research from social workers they met during placement. It was indicated that professionals, including their supervisors, questioned the utility of the research module *“I told them about this module, and this is what we are studying, honest to god, they were like, what?”* Some students also reported that when they worked with professionals who had been in practice for a significant period of time there appeared to be limited awareness of research;

*“So if you maybe get like 10 people who have been in practice for 20, 30 years and you ask them about research [...] they know nothing about it.”*

Participants indicated they had internalised some views of professionals: *“If they’re not using it in practice at all, and they don’t know what research is, what was the point of us having time dedicated to it at university? Time could be better off elsewhere.”*

There were, however, indications that participant’s outlooks had begun to change having completed the module and having time to reflect on their learning. Generally, discovering how research is applied to different settings, changed participants’ attitudes towards the research module positively;

*“you don’t realise how much research goes into everyday life.”*

*“...having gone into the seminars and lectures and doing my own research, with the combination of my placement [. . .] has enhanced my knowledge and allowed me to develop and understand the relationship between research methods and social work practice.”*

Some participants appeared increasingly motivated to engage with research by expressing a desire for future professional development;

*“now I’m understanding the purpose of research and how I can potentially in the future have an impact and carry out research.”*

It is notable from this comment that the student refers to conducting their own research, rather than knowing where to find and using other's research, and overall, none of the participants used the phrase 'evidence-based' throughout either focus group.

Similar barriers to conducting research in practice noted in the literature were acknowledged by participants, including a lack of time to dedicate to research and not having institutional support from social work practice settings. The experiences reported by participants of social workers attitudes to research while in practice suggest a need for post-qualification education on how research can be conducted and used to improve practice for those who may not have received it previously.

## **Discussion**

Teaching of research methods in social work programmes in the UK has been influenced by the changing priority given to it by various regulatory social work bodies over the course of the past two decades. While research methods has become a widespread, and usually compulsory, module in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, it is by no means standardised in terms of content or quality across the country (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013).

Most recent guidelines from Social Work England appear to be encouraging a move towards social workers as consumers, as opposed to creators, of research which could impact on the way that research methods is taught in future courses. The aim of this study was twofold; 1) to understand the experiences of students learning research at undergraduate level and 2) to explore how their learning and placement experiences interact and influence their development as 'research-minded' practitioners of the future.

Our survey findings suggest that although attitudes generally became more positive over time, changes did not reach statistical significance for most sub-scales (relevance to life being the only scale to reach significance). This implies that students still felt research was difficult, created feelings of anxiety and, did not see how it would impact on their future

careers. Comparable findings have been reported internationally (e.g. Negrea, et al., 2018) and for students across social sciences disciplines and not just in professional focused courses such as social work. It appears, from the literature, that research methods as a core subject in the social sciences has a poor reputation but, as argued by Earley (2014), where these negative attitudes originate from, especially amongst students with no prior learning in research, has not been fully investigated. Our focus group discussions with this cohort suggest anxiety related to research education stem from both a lack of exposure to research in previous years and a negative, sometimes dismissive, view of research expressed by practitioners encountered in work placements. It seems clear from our study that research methods could be seen as a 'stand-alone' module with little integration of research approaches, impacts or understanding across the programme as a whole. This is likely to have some influence on how students view research, and by extension EBP, once in practice and may impact on the likelihood of using the knowledge gained from this module to affect their day to day practice.

The discussion that follows gives a broad overview of the implications of our findings in relation to both education of research methods and use of research in practice. However, the primary limitation of this study is our small sample size that was drawn from a single cohort. Findings are not intended to be generalizable to social work students as a whole, future research is recommended to further investigate the themes presented here and to develop more robust recommendations for research education for social workers.

We found that exposure to research over the course of the module, and growing familiarity with the language of research, did appear to relieve some of the anxiety expressed by students at the start of the semester. Previous studies have reported similar findings attributing reduced anxiety to prolonged exposure to research methods teaching which increased confidence and research self-efficacy (e.g. Maschi, et al., 2013).

Students reported that while on placement research was neither discussed in relation to practice decisions nor evident in how practice was approached by experienced social workers. This was a concern raised in earlier research (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013) and appears to have changed little in the intervening years. In contrast students in Gibbs and Stirling's (2013) research exploring student perceptions of social work research highlighted the ways that research reflects core social work values and ethics. Students in our focus groups did not make these explicit connections, but this offers scope for educators to emphasise such links to better engage students in research methods modules.

Particular aspects of the group dynamics within this cohort, the reported tensions within the class, may have had a negative impact on student engagement with the module. It may be that conflict emerged to a greater extent in this class because there was a pre-existing reluctance, or anxiety, surrounding research methods from the student group. This is necessarily speculative, but it is notable that relationships within student cohorts is rarely considered in understanding the engagement and/or participation of students in modules they see as less relevant to their final qualification and warrants future research to better address such issues.

Much of the literature reporting on ways to better engage social work students in research modules has used a social learning framework as a basis for improving attitudes and capabilities (e.g. Kranke, et al., 2015). However, a key component in social learning theory is the availability of positive models of behaviour. From our focus groups it appears that such models are not always available to students, or newly qualified social workers, making the continuation of any positive views of research, or of conducting research in practice an unlikely scenario post qualification for this group.

There were clear indications that currently research is not promoted in practice by qualified social workers, as experienced by our students while on placement, however, many indicated

that they would push to include more understanding of research in their own practice in future. These placement experiences reflect arguments made by other authors that a heavy burden of administration and a neoliberally informed focus on managerialism and accountability within current social work practice has led to a downgrading of research informed by the voices of service users and participatory methods (Jacobsson & Meeuwisse, 2020; Newman & McNamara, 2016). In addition, there is a presumption within the EBP literature that the ‘best’ evidence comes from positivistic studies, usually based on randomised controlled trials (RCTs) (Pearce & Raman, 2014; Rubin & Parrish, 2007). The preference for qualitative research within UK social work research is a reflection of the desire to forefront the voices of service users and practitioners and to incorporate social work values into this research. Misunderstandings of what EBP looks like and how it can be used has the potential to obscure the useful findings and recommendations from this body of research and how practitioners engage as ‘research minded’ social workers. This in turn may feed into a lack of motivation for UK based social workers to conduct more service user involved research, which could be one explanation for why our students found little engagement with primary research in their placement experiences. Thereby creating a cycle of cynicism relating to the relevance of research in both practice and education that may be difficult to improve at either level simultaneously.

This leaves social work with the question; If social workers are increasingly expected to seek out and make use of the best available evidence to inform their practice on a daily basis, but are not being competently trained to generate that evidence themselves, then who is producing the evidence that will influence the services received by the public? Within the fields of policy analysis, political sciences and higher education, Raman coined the term epistemic governance to describe the need for those producing evidence for use in these areas to themselves be governed. This concern stems from government promotion of RCTs as



being more robust, more reliable and of higher quality compared to other types of research evidence, leaving practice experience and the voice of service users on the margins of decisions that are made about their own lives. Similar concerns could be raised for social work and its move towards becoming more evidence-based. Commenting on the current drive to make social work evidence-based in Sweden Jacobsson and Meeuwisse (2020) argued: *'The efforts to implement evidence-based social work are also characterised by a certain improvement rhetoric that justifies the project and denigrates present day social work and social work research'* (p.286). In Sweden, social workers experience and subjective judgement is problematized and as in need of correcting through the use of EBP that has strict boundaries as to what can and should be implemented in practice. How the approach in the UK will be implemented, for example through the new evidence based promotion organisations in adult and child social care, will need to be monitored to ensure similar pathways are not taken.

Social work is not comparable to medicine in terms of understanding what does or does not work as a treatment approach. Super-imposing what makes sense when medical treatments or drugs are being used and need to be clinically tested for safety but less so when considered in the context of what is primarily a relationships based profession, with all of the complexity that comes with the varied families and their particular situations served by social workers. A key factor reported in previous literature to explain low rates of research within social work practice has been a lack of confidence amongst social workers (Moriarty, et al., 2015; Wike, et al., 2019). Our small study suggests that there is scope to ensure that future social work practitioners feel more empowered to engage in their own research and to have confidence in sourcing, reading and critically evaluating the research literature. How this might be impacted in the future, if they are discouraged from doing so in the interests of adhering to EBP principles as primarily consumers of research is something that we as

educators of future social workers need to take into consideration in designing modules to teach these skills. For example, showcasing real world implications of social work research throughout these modules and highlighting how and where research can help to improve practice, and service user experiences, can encourage greater appreciation of the relevance of research to future social workers.

### **Acknowledgements**

None

### **Declaration of interest**

None

### **References**

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