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Evaluating Fast Track Social Work-Qualifying Programmes: Have We Learnt Anything?

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Abstract

This article reflects on the cumulative outputs of evaluations of the various fast track qualifying programmes introduced into social work education in England over the past decade or so, in order to draw out some of the wider lessons available to us. The fast track programmes were introduced in response to a range of concerns about recruitment and retention within social work as well as the quality of provision within existing educational programmes. Subsequent evaluations have thus tended to focus on these aspects of fast track programmes in attempting to assess their merits and achievements. However, it is argued here that the substantial findings generated are capable of further analysis and reconsideration in order to generate messages of significance about the systemic and structural implications of this kind of initiative. Although evaluations of these programmes have been the subject of a number of criticisms because of their funding sources and association with programme providers, the aim is to show that their findings nonetheless offer us extensive opportunities to draw more rounded conclusions, which in turn contribute to ongoing debates about the value, contributions and impact of fast track programmes themselves, within and beyond the broader social work domain.

Keywords: diversity, evaluation, quality, retention, social work education, system impact

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Historical context and recurrent questions

Since 1962, when social work education was formally recognised under the Health Visiting and Social Work Training Act, there have been many attempts to review, revise and reform the programmes in place to prepare practitioners for this particular field of endeavour. Whilst it is not my intention here to revisit this recent history in its entirety, reflecting on it does help to provide an important sense of perspective in certain respects. First, it acts as a reminder that formalised qualifying frameworks for practice in social work in the UK have only been in place for a relatively brief period of time. This, no doubt, reflects a sense of late arrival and continuing uncertainty about the 'place' of social work in the world of human services and ensures that its underlying values, purposes and scope remain the subject of continuing and lively debate. And secondly, associated with this wider sense of uncertainty, social work education has itself been the subject of regular contestation about its underlying purposes, objectives, curriculum content and outcome criteria. Concerns about the quality and outcomes of social work education have been a persistent feature of the field (see Dominelli, 2005, for example). Arguably, these can be contextualised against a series of tensions and ambiguities permeating the wider domain of social work as 'discipline and profession' (Lovelock *et al.*, 1999):

1. Fundamentally, the nature and functions of social work remain contested, highlighted by alternative conceptualisations of its core purposes, in broad terms: either as the vehicle for administering a variety of statutory and regulatory functions (such as carrying out assessments of risk and need for vulnerable groups, or organising the delivery of formally defined 'packages of care'); or, as a means whereby disadvantaged sectors of the population are given a voice and enabled to achieve better lives.
2. Following this, rather different (albeit overlapping) knowledge and skill sets may be viewed as central to the social work 'toolkit'. If practice is viewed as essentially a matter of carrying out specialised but essentially technical tasks, then preparation for practice necessitates a clear and detailed understanding of the nature of these tasks and close instruction and oversight in developing the skills to carry them out. If, on the other hand, social work is viewed as an activity which necessarily involves an engaged and responsive orientation to tackling people's problems in context, then a rather different curricular framework suggests itself, including an informed appreciation of the social and structural dynamics within which service users find themselves, as well as techniques and skills to address factors and forces contributing to inequality or oppression.

3. In consequence, there is an implicit (sometimes explicit—see, Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014) dispute over the extent and nature of the skills and attributes to be fostered in intending social work practitioners; how these should be taught and assessed; and, of course, how the provision of such education should be organised, and against what criteria it should be evaluated.

In the light of this, grand claims about having developed innovative models of social work education, which are an improvement on 'inadequate' alternatives (McAlister *et al.*, 2012), must be subject to close scrutiny. With the emergence from 2010 onwards of 'fast track' social work education programmes, there are clearly good grounds for seeking to understand what they have been able to achieve and whether this sheds new light on the question of what social work education should look like in order to be fit for purpose (however that may be defined).

Many flowers...

There has been a proliferation of qualifying programmes in social work, starting with Step Up to Social Work, prompted initially by concerns over high-profile child deaths (Victoria Climbie and Peter Connelly in particular; Laming, 2009). Laming (2009: p. 43) identified substantial problems with the recruitment and retention of social workers in the field of child protection, albeit acknowledging high caseloads, inadequate supervision and stress as contributory factors. This report indicated that social workers did not feel prepared for specialist child protection tasks on qualifying (Laming, 2009: p. 51), and proposed a specialist pre-qualification pathway in children's social work. In July 2009, Step Up to Social Work was announced by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (Smith *et al.*, 2013), as a 'fast track' qualifying route leading to a master's degree, supported by the payment of a £15,000 bursary, and intended to attract 'high quality graduates' into social work. The programme was initially designed to be completed over an 18-month period, with academic and practice learning closely integrated. The programme has subsequently been reduced in length to fourteen months, with a postgraduate diploma awarded on successful completion, suggesting a reduction in the level and intensity of the academic element.

The Frontline programme was developed slightly later (McAlister *et al.*, 2012), and was launched in 2013, comprising a short (five weeks) intensive teaching bloc (the 'Summer Institute'), followed by a period of employer-based practice learning for the remainder of an initial twelve-month period leading to qualification as a social worker. The programme also incorporated a master's element, to be completed during the second year after qualifying (subsequently, the programme was extended to

three years to allow for this). Frontline students receive a bursary in the pre-qualifying phase and are then expected to take up a qualified social worker post.

Whilst SUSW and Frontline prepare participants for employment in statutory children's social work, Think Ahead was launched in 2016, looking to attract applicants interested in careers in mental health social work. The Think Ahead model closely followed the Frontline format (Summer Institute→bursaried employer-based practice learning→post-qualifying masters).

Most recently, the range of qualifying routes in social work has been extended with the addition of the social work degree apprenticeship, with candidates working towards qualification whilst employed as unqualified practitioners. Although apprenticeships are typically designed as three-year programmes, they are 'fast track' as compared to a conventional qualifying degree in that formal learning elements are part-time, taking place alongside the apprentice's day-to-day work.

Longer established 'mainstream' university and college-based social work-qualifying routes remain in place, notwithstanding criticisms of the quality of preparation for employment they might offer (e.g. Laming, 2009; Narey, 2014). These courses are usually full-time, combining substantial practice-based and academic elements. Financial support for students has been increasingly limited, consisting of a government-provided bursary, which, in many cases, does not cover course fees, not being uprated between 2014 and 2023.

Evaluating fast track programmes: purposes and strategies

There have been a number of investigations into fast track social work-qualifying programmes (see Table 1). The majority have been commissioned by government (Department for Education) and other public bodies (the former Children's Workforce Development Council). Think Ahead commissioned an independent study of its own programme, and the Queen's Trust funded a study of Frontline. The DfE also commissioned a comparative analysis of the costs of different social work-qualifying routes (Cutmore and Rodgers, 2016), and a subsequent inquiry into the post-qualifying experiences of social workers (Johnson *et al.*, 2022).

Aside from 'official' investigations, there have been a range of critical commentaries of one or more elements of the fast track portfolio (see Anon, 2022 for example).

Interest in the impact and achievements of these programmes has predominantly centred on recruitment, retention and quality, unsurprisingly, given that these underpinned the rationale for their development. Understandably, government has an interest in whether fast track

Table 1. Fast track social work-qualifying programme studies

Date	Title	Authors
2013	*Step Up to Social Work Programme Evaluation 2012: The Regional Partnerships and Employers' Perspectives*	Smith *et al.*
2013	*Speaking from experience: the views of the first cohort of trainees of Step Up to Social Work*	Baginsky, M. and Teague, C.
2014	*The Views of Step Up to Social Work Trainees—Cohort 1 and Cohort 2*	Baginsky, M. and Manthorpe, J.
2016	*Independent evaluation of the Frontline pilot*	Maxwell *et al.*
2016	*Comparing the costs of social work qualification routes*	Cutmore, M. and Rodgers, J.
2017	*Front line Social Work Training: an evaluation*	Bullock, R. and Baker, V.
2018	*Evaluation of Step Up to Social Work, Cohorts 1 and 2: three years and five years on*	Smith *et al.*
2019	*Independent evaluation of the Think Ahead programme*	Smith *et al.*
2021	*Social work fast track programmes: retention and progression*	Scourfield *et al.*
2022	*'It's my time now': the experiences of social work apprentices*	Stone and Worsley
2022	*Longitudinal study of local authority child and family social workers (Wave 4)*	Johnson *et al.*

programmes have a positive impact on the size and calibre of the workforce. On the other hand, these are not the only questions which could be asked about the programmes, as is evident from those who have offered critical observations on their likely impact on social work education in general (e.g. Jones, 2018; Hanley, 2022), and ultimately the capacity and effectiveness of social work practice, statutory or otherwise.

This raises further questions about the nature and objectives of inquiries which fall under the heading of 'evaluations'. These are typically commissioned to answer questions to do with the efficacy of implementation and effectiveness of discrete programmes (Norris, 2015); that is, was the programme delivered as specified, and did it do what was intended? Such investigations may not address wider questions to do with 'system' effects and unintended consequences, or the relative benefit of committing funds in one area rather than another.

Everitt and Hardiker (1996), though, have made the case for an 'end to end' approach, and 'evaluating practice in context' (Everitt and Hardiker, 1996: p. 89). They make the point that those who are 'interested parties', such as social work students, practitioners or service users may have very different questions in mind than commissioners of evaluations.

Whilst acknowledging alternative perspectives, we will firstly consider 'fast track' evaluations in light of the key programme objectives specified by various government departments and ministers; in particular, what were their achievements in terms of improving recruitment, retention and quality of social work practitioners?

Recruiting the best?

Step Up to Social Work was initiated in response to concerns about the quality of social work-qualifying programmes, and the unpreparedness of newly qualified child and family social workers for demanding practice settings, at least in the opinion of some employers (Smith *et al.*, 2013: p. 34). There was an emphasis on academic achievement (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2014) and other qualities seen as prerequisites for effective practitioners, including 'resilience', effective self-management, a sound value-base and good communication skills (Smith *et al.*, 2013: p. 69). The proponents of Frontline, too, placed an emphasis on 'high academic achievements' and personal qualities such as 'empathy' believed to be important in social workers (McAlister *et al.*, 2012: p. 24).

Early indications were that the fast track 'offer' did have an effect in terms of the profile of those recruited to the various programmes (Smith *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). In the cases of Step Up to Social Work and Frontline, students were different to those on conventional social work courses (Baginsky and Teague, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). They did appear to meet the intended criteria in terms of attracting academically high-achieving entrants, certainly (Smith *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016), although in other respects this may have been problematic in terms of diversity. Step Up to Social Work had very limited success in recruiting candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds initially, for example (Smith *et al.*, 2013). Front line recruits largely reflected the demographic profile of the programme's target group (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). They tended to be younger, whiter and more middle class than the general population of social work students. These patterns may well have derived from the intention to target high achieving graduates from 'prestigious' universities—themselves already skewed in terms of the class and ethnic backgrounds of their student populations (Hanley, 2022). Neither made much of an inroad into the persistent gender imbalance amongst social work students, whilst appearing to be indirectly discriminatory in offering access to advantageous terms and conditions (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016).

A relevant question, given the underlying intention of attracting students from new sources—'career changers' and graduates for whom social work had not been a career option—is the extent to which this was the case for those joining fast track programmes, rather than just taking

advantage of a rather more favourable path towards their already chosen career. Baginsky and Teague (2013: p. 30) found that only 12 per cent of respondents from the first two Step Up to Social Work cohorts had not previously considered social work as a career, although they suggest that most would probably not have pursued this interest. For many, financial constraints, such as outstanding student loans, or family-related costs, were an inhibiting factor.

Maxwell *et al.* (2016: p. 51) identified that 23 per cent of Frontline students surveyed had not previously considered social work as a career. The extensive publicity for the programme raised awareness or solidified prior interest. On the other hand, despite the relative youth of the Frontline participants, more than half of those responding said that they had been considering social work for over a year before joining the programme. There is thus a likely degree of overlap between those taking a place on a fast track programme and those who would have pursued a social work career in any case, although its extent is uncertain.

An interesting contrast is provided by an early small-scale study of social work 'apprenticeships' (Stone and Worsley, 2022). Programme recruits were similar to other fast track students in that they were predominantly female and educated to degree level, although they appeared to have much more extensive prior experience in social care work. Like those on the other programmes, they appeared to have been motivated by the enhanced financial offer, compared to mainstream programmes. It is suggested that their prior practice involvement in practice and local connections may mean that apprentices are more likely to stay in the profession over time (Stone and Worsley, 2022: p. 687).

So, recruitment to fast track social work-qualifying programmes may have partially achieved its objectives. Step Up and Frontline attracted a wider range of candidates overall, including a higher number from 'prestigious' universities, and with higher academic credentials. However, it was difficult to tell to what extent they had recruited participants who would have pursued other routes into social work if they were not available. At the same time, there was also evidence of a narrowing of the recruitment profile, certainly in terms of ethnic diversity and age distribution. With the caveat that the cited evaluations concentrated on the early iterations of these programmes, providing an opportunity to correct these shortcomings subsequently, this does nonetheless provide some grounds for concern.

Recruitment to Think Ahead was not measured in the same way, so it is difficult to say whether it reflected the same pattern, although there was some evidence that, along from the financial incentives, it did attract applicants with prior experience of mental health services, either direct or indirect (Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 36).

Retention

The issue of retention in social work has been raised consistently over time (see Curtis *et al.*, 2010), and this provided a focal point of inquiry. Over 70 per cent of the first two cohorts of Step Up to Social Work students said on completion of the programme that they anticipated remaining in statutory social work in the long term (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2014: p. 117). A similar proportion of Frontline participants expected to be working as practitioners for the 'foreseeable future' (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016: p. 50), in a survey conducted early in the programme. This offered provisional reassurance that those pursuing these routes remained committed to a career in social work, despite concerns (Galpin, 2015). Most participants from early Think Ahead cohorts also expected to be in mental health social work three years after qualification (Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 79).

Expectations are not necessarily borne out by experience, although there is now evidence on the early career trajectories of those completing fast track programmes. Thus, Step Up to Social Work graduates are 'reasonably' likely to remain in child and family social work (Smith *et al.*, 2018: 8) beyond the 'average length' of a social work career (Curtis *et al.*, 2010), with at least 80 per cent of those from the first two cohorts in practice three years after qualification and 73 per cent of the first cohort similarly placed at the five-year point.

Scourfield *et al.* (2021: p. 13) found similar rates of attrition amongst Step Up to Social Work graduates and a rather more variable picture for Frontline graduates. As the authors observe, comparisons between pathways, or with mainstream programmes, are problematic for several reasons, including different methodologies, differing qualifying points, displacement effects (students who could have followed alternative pathways) and varying initial career intentions.

Whilst remaining in social work, a number of Frontline graduates were found to have left their host authority soon after qualification. Employers were more positive about the regionally based Step Up to Social Work recruitment model as more likely to attract and retain practitioners from the local area (Scourfield *et al.*, 2021: p. 14). Being placed outside their home area also seemed to cause problems for Think Ahead participants (Smith *et al.*, 2019), compounded in some cases by students' experience of difficult or unwelcoming working environments (Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 125).

An extended survey of the experiences of social work practitioners after qualifying has found that Frontline graduates are more likely to report workload pressures in the initial stages of their careers (Johnson *et al.*, 2022: p. 145), although this may be to do with their greater likelihood of working in the areas of child protection or 'child in need'.

For some who had already left the profession, these pressures may have been decisive (Scourfield *et al.*, 2021: p. 96).

Quality

The fast track pathways to social work qualification were introduced amidst a plethora of concerns about the 'quality' of both recruits to the profession and the existing courses available, so it is understandable that fast track evaluations should have taken a particular interest in these aspects of their implementation. Each of the fast track programmes established a rigorous selection process, designed to ensure that recruits had suitable skills and values (see Smith *et al.*, 2013). Aligned with the programmes' prior academic requirements, these processes generate a distinctive profile of recruits (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). But would the specific attributes designated as desirable inputs translate into the production of social work practitioners with strong and suitable skill sets and value bases (outputs)?

Programme evaluations have addressed this question in a number of ways. Fast track students have held a mainly positive view of their qualifying experiences (Baginsky and Teague, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2019), although some clearly found the experience challenging in terms of personal demands and problematic learning experiences. Participants have seemingly benefited from the close links between academic and practice elements of programmes (Smith *et al.*, 2013); tailored placement opportunities (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016) and the dedicated support of lead practice educators (Smith *et al.*, 2013); and in some cases, the close involvement of service user organisations to support learning (Smith *et al.*, 2019).

Whilst evaluations have questioned the ability of fast track programmes to provide a generic social work education (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016), they have found that student outcomes are broadly positive. Maxwell *et al.* (2016) conducted a simulation exercise in which Frontline students were highly rated in terms of a range of core social work attributes by an independent panel, scoring higher than students following other (mainstream) qualifying routes. In their initial evaluation of Step Up to Social Work, Smith *et al.* (2013) found almost unanimous praise amongst employers for programme participants, and this was largely echoed for Think Ahead students subsequently (Smith *et al.*, 2019), where the additional emphasis on mental health in teaching was felt to enhance preparation for practice.

It is difficult to distinguish between prior selection effects and the impact and effectiveness of programmes themselves (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016: p. 123), and evaluations have largely relied on proxy indicators, or subjective judgements of quality. Nor have they been able to gain much

insight into the quality of comparator programmes, apart from a limited sample of mainstream postgraduate students (Smith *et al.*, 2019), and a similarly small-scale simulation exercise (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). Despite these caveats, fast track evaluations have tended to draw positive conclusions about both the programmes and the capabilities and attributes of programme graduates.

Evaluating the evaluations

In broad terms, evaluations of fast track qualifying programmes in social work have concluded that they have begun to achieve key objectives identified for them. These conclusions have, however, been qualified in certain respects, to do with the representativeness of participants, the lack of genericism in their learning content, their potential adverse impact on mainstream programmes (loss of students, competition for placements, financial differentials) and retention difficulties (at least in host authorities).

The evaluations have themselves been subject to commentary, some of it critical. Edwards and colleagues' (2022) 'rapid review' of 'innovations for attraction, recruitment and retention of social care workers' concludes that fast track graduate training schemes 'show promise' (Edwards *et al.*, 2022: p. 217), drawing on several of the evaluations discussed in the present article.

This review endorses the methodological approaches taken, suggesting that the findings should be treated as broadly reliable, partly because they come to similar conclusions (triangulation?). The review identifies certain limitations to these studies, such as a failure to take into account systemic factors affecting retention, including stress and lack of organisational support, whilst highlighting both the 'limited evaluation of single interventions and a lack of research on system-wide approaches that incorporate multiple interventions' (Edwards *et al.*, 2022: p. 217). By implication, the 'self-contained' nature of programme evaluations is problematic in excluding questions of their impact on related activities (mainstream programmes) or the wider field.

Hanley is rather more critical, suggesting that fast track evaluations have been too positive, especially where they have been commissioned by programme providers or their funders (Hanley, 2022: p. 500). This, he contends, leads to a democratic deficit, as evaluators do not set out to 'look beyond restrictive metrics or outcome targets [in order to] consider the broader public impact… as well as their own role in the evaluative process' (Hanley, 2022: p. 499). Programme providers and their allies can then draw on the more positive aspects of the evaluators' findings to further promote their achievements and seek continuing support from funders and policy-makers (Hanley, 2022: p. 500). We are thus invited to

reflect on investigations into fast track qualifying programmes in social work through a wider lens than if we restricted ourselves simply to the questions specified by those with an immediate and direct interest in their findings.

Levels of evaluation?

Edwards *et al.* (2022) suggest that there is merit in extending the scope of evaluations to incorporate 'system' effects, whilst Hanley (2022: p. 499) recommends a 'democratic' model, suggesting that: 'The need for democratic evaluation in programmes that are new or innovative is particularly significant, as they create conflicts of value, elicit strong and contradictory reactions, tend to be highly politicised and there is usually limited agreement around the relevant information required for decision making'. Here, Hanley is drawing on Norris' (2015) observation: 'The default preconceptions about what a good evaluation study should be rarely match the complexities of programmes and policies or the wider information needs of interest groups' (Norris, 2015: p. 138). Evaluators should seek to recognise diverse interests and reflect 'a range of values and interests in their work' (Norris 2015: p. 136). They should not simply reflect the agenda or expectations of commissioners, but should be judged on whether they address a 'range of audiences'. For us, then, the question is whether the evaluations discussed above are capable of re-examination to meet these wider criteria of appropriateness and relevance; or should they be viewed only as 'bureaucratic' exercises reflecting 'the values of those who hold office… offering information to help them accomplish their policy objectives' (Norris, 2015: p. 136).

It may be helpful to set out a possible framework for understanding evaluation findings at a number of different 'levels', summarised as: intrinsic, systemic and structural. This is a crude and imprecise categorisation, but it enables us to distinguish between evidence which relates to the core purposes and participants of the various programmes; the wider impacts on organisations, processes and systems with which the programmes interact; and the structural implications and effects which we may be able to discern. Of course, the ways in which the evaluations are framed (Norris, 2015: p. 136) impact on the extent to which these questions can be answered, but this can reveal where there are knowledge gaps, or speculative assumptions, which in turn require further investigation.

Intrinsic findings

Although we have already reviewed some of the findings of fast track evaluations above, there are a number of additional observations which

can be made about their immediate outcomes which were not derived from the core questions identified. Some of these are positive, such as the benefits of closely linking taught and practice elements of the programme, in the initial iteration of Step Up to Social Work (Smith *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, there seemed to be a wide acceptance of the benefits of collective learning models, with students working in small units with a common lead educator: 'The CSWs' (Consultant Social Workers) role in supporting the participants throughout the learning journey was…perceived as a strength' (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016: p. 86). For a relatively small number of participants, this arrangement proved to be somewhat fragile, and they risked becoming isolated and losing access to learning support (Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 125). It also seemed to be the case that this relatively protected model of support for practice learning led to something of a 'cliff edge' experience when students moved into qualified practitioner roles (Scourfield *et al.*, 2021: p. 43).

Close observation and analysis suggested that the fast-paced teaching and learning experiences were uneven, with certain elements seen as a waste of time, or of limited value for some: 'the somewhat didactic and introductory nature of the teaching felt as if they were going over old ground' (Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 7), whilst others new to the discipline actually valued the opportunity of an intensive introduction to unfamiliar subject matter. In addition, the compressed nature of the fast track programmes also gave rise to concerns as to whether participants were forgoing a wider introduction to the range and depth of learning experiences associated with a 'profession' in order to concentrate on the practical tasks associated with a specific work setting (Smith *et al.*, 2013, 2019). Were they being 'educated' or 'trained', in Thoburn's (2017) terms?

'Pressure' was a constant theme (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2014; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016), noted too by host organisations: 'I think it's been quite difficult at times for them…. Yes, they're doing lots of kind of work on top of the work here [practice setting]. And that's been observed' (Employer representative quoted in Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 59).

Hanley (2022) stresses that the spirit of 'democratic evaluation' means we should recognise and take account of varying perspectives, including those of service users and mainstream social work students. Hanley (2022: p. 500) is critical of 'official' fast track evaluations for paying insufficient attention to these stakeholders, although we are able to glean some insights. Scourfield *et al.* (2021), for instance, report concerns about the effects of elitist assumptions on relationships between Frontline students and their peers (see also Hanley, 2022). This kind of tension was not observed in the case of Step Up to Social Work students (Smith *et al.*, 2018), although mainstream respondents did feel that SUSW graduates would have gained an advantage from specialised teaching and practice learning opportunities, in terms of their subsequent recruitment

chances (Smith *et al.*, 2018: p. 42). Once qualified, there were similar types of experience between SUSW graduates and a comparison group: 'differences between SUSW participants in [this] study and their comparators were not substantial' (Smith *et al.*, 2018: p. 64). Both groups were similarly affected by high levels of stress and workload demands, notably.

Service user perspectives are obviously of great significance and arguably should be given proper recognition in relation to the delivery of qualifying programmes (Casey *et al.*, 2021), since it is here that social workers' perceptions and practice orientations are shaped, if not originated. Several of the evaluations considered could be criticised for overlooking the service user perspective, but in at least two cases, fast track evaluations have paid specific and direct attention to service users and their experiences, albeit in rather different ways (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2019). In the former case, feedback was predominantly positive about Frontline students, although the sample was very small (four in all). The service users had been offered a range of support by the students, including 'direct support such as helping the service user to establish routines. . .and "still being there when I've not done as well"' (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016: p. 92). Unfortunately, a further study designed to test the efficacy of interventions by Frontline students was unable to do so (Bullock and Baker, 2017).

The Think Ahead evaluation took a different approach, considering the question of service user involvement in programme delivery. Students clearly welcomed service user input and rated this as a particularly beneficial learning experience. The evaluation noted a range of approaches to service user involvement, including a programme advisory group, two user-led delivery organisations, user-led teaching sessions and participation in assessment exercises. Despite this, the evaluation revealed a mixed picture. Service users did feel devalued when it emerged that they were not being paid at the same rate as other contributors (Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 119), and there were a number of occasions when service users felt that their contributions were not properly acknowledged: '"a letter of thanks would be nice"; "It was nice to be involved, it would have been better to be asked **how** we would like to be involved"' (Smith *et al.*, 2019: pp. 119, 120). These are all too familiar reflections of service user experiences in social work education, but this does offer al contribution to wider 'democratic' learning (Hanley, 2022).

System effects

Similarly, we may be able to use the evidence generated to identify 'system' effects. This is immediately apparent in that fast track programmes were effectively placed in competition with 'mainstream' qualifying routes,

especially at postgraduate level. Most (86 per cent) of those joining the first Step Up to Social Work cohort had previously considered social work as a career, and financial factors had been a significant factor in making their decision (Baginsky and Manthorpe (2014: p. 25). In the case of Frontline, most applicants (83 per cent) had not applied elsewhere, suggesting a more limited impact on other programmes' intake, although the reported percentages of Frontline students and those on other social work courses at 'high tariff' universities who had previously considered social work as a career were very similar (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016: p. 48).

For Think Ahead (Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 36), focus group discussions seemed to indicate that financial security ("I just don't have £20,000") played a significant part in the decision to apply, although not necessarily as an alternative to another social work course, as participants seemed specifically attracted to the idea of training and working in mental health.

Fast track programmes may not, therefore, have offered a major competitive threat in terms of potential programme participants in their early days (although this may have changed subsequently with programme expansion, a tighter job market and a smaller pool of potential applicants), but there is clear evidence that the financial incentives are seen as beneficial and in some cases are decisive in making social work education an affordable option. Similar observations apply to the resourcing of programmes, with self-contained student 'units' and dedicated practice educators ('consultant social workers'; see Maxwell *et al.*, 2016: p. 64), substantial central and regional programme support, and robust infrastructure arrangements all contributing to the coherence and sustainability of fast track models. The additional money invested in this kind of support for elements of the Step Up to Social Work programme was 'highlighted across all [Regional Partnerships] as crucial to its success: 'without funding [we] couldn't give the time to this programme' (regional manager, quoted in Smith *et al.*, 2013: p. 126). Elsewhere, the capacity to move resources and make rapid changes to deal with emerging problems was a feature of the fast track set up (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016).

The additional capacity and the scope for innovation also offered insights which could be applied within social work education more widely, given appropriate support. These included student units, usually comprising four students and a 'consultant social worker', which were widely (not always) viewed as a very successful basis for shared learning, supportive supervision and collaborative development (Smith *et al.*, 2019); and regional partnerships (Smith *et al.*, 2013), which at least partly inspired the Department for Education's Teaching Partnership initiative (Berry-Lound *et al.*, 2016). Innovations associated with fast track programmes could therefore be of wider benefit potentially. Against this backdrop, though, some agencies could clearly identify conflicting interests, especially in a context of diminishing resources overall. One agency: 'for instance, noted some concern that in a difficult economic climate,

any commitment to Step Up to Social Work may be at the expense of supporting other internal sponsorship schemes that enable existing staff,... to become qualified' (Smith *et al.*, 2013: p. 127). Concerns emerged about the capacity to meet additional demand for placements: Step Up to Social Work was 'seen to be taking placements' by other qualifying programmes (East Midlands, interview). It was also acknowledged that child protection placements were being reserved for final Step Up to Social Work placements (Smith *et al.*, 2013: p. 114).

Systemic implications can likewise be drawn on the subject of genericism in social work education. Fast track programmes are by definition geared towards specialist areas of practice, and their programme content is weighted accordingly. Maxwell *et al.* (2016: p. 120) noted that Frontline participants valued less those placements they undertook outside 'child and family casework', and Smith *et al.* (2013: p. 151) commented on a 'narrowing' of the social work curriculum. As Maxwell *et al.* (2016: p. 122) concluded: 'the move away from generic social work is inherent in the Frontline model...'. It is noteworthy that the Scottish Social Services Council has imposed additional requirements on those who qualify from 'specialist' programmes (including Step Up to Social Work, Frontline and Think Ahead), on the basis that their initial social work education is insufficient to prepare them for generic practice roles.

Here, again, this highly pertinent question of the extent to which social work education is or should be truly generic is illuminated almost by default. This series of evaluations has tended to the position that fast track programmes cannot claim to meet all the requirements of a supposedly generic qualification, posing and effectively answering the question of whether or not specialist pre-qualifying pathways are acceptable. If so, one might ask, what is to stop 'mainstream' programmes developing specialist routes to qualification, perhaps with a reduced academic element?

Structural insights

The 'system effects' suggested by fast track evaluations have appeared as incidental findings. We may also seek to extend our scope of inquiry wider still and consider their structural implications. As Hanley (2022) suggests, we need to take account of broader societal dynamics and stakeholder interests if we wish to render the evaluation exercise properly 'democratic'.

As noted, for example, the evaluations report an imbalance in the profile of programme participants, who tend to be more affluent, younger and whiter than those recruited to other social work qualifying programmes (Smith *et al.*, 2013; Maxwell *et al.*, 2016). As previously noted (Fairtlough *et al.*, 2014), in the case of Black social work students, there are a number of factors in their qualifying experience which tend to have

a compound discriminatory effect, to be found in the construction and cultural conventions associated with learning contexts. This kind of embedded and insidious discrimination is quite likely to be a consequence of specifically targeting academic 'high flyers', who are similarly unrepresentative of the general population (Hanley, 2022) in terms of either ethnic origin or class. And yet, fast track students get more favourable learning opportunities and receive better financial support than those following other qualifying routes. Can what is described as a 'disruptive innovation' (Bullock and Baker, 2017: p. 55) really be thought of in those terms when it is grounded in assumptions and practices which simply reinforce existing social inequalities?

Such assumptions may similarly be judged to inform the forms of practice on which the evaluations report (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2019), which draw on conventional 'reformist' and top-down models of intervention (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016; Bullock and Baker, 2017), alongside limited and problematic engagement with service users (Maxwell *et al.*, 2016; Bullock and Baker, 2017).

Some caveats apply in the case of Think Ahead, which seemed quite successful in attracting participants with personal or close experience of mental health issues, which paid attention (albeit imperfectly) to service user involvement and which attempted to incorporate a collaborative model of practice into its teaching and learning (Smith *et al.*, 2019). If this did represent a genuine attempt to challenge structural imbalances and oppression in the context of mental health, its impact was mitigated by the encounters between students, consultant social workers and the 'medical model', which tended to marginalise the social work students, and, indeed, their (social work) agencies: "I don't understand what they're [Think Ahead students] here for" (Mental health professional quoted in Smith *et al.*, 2019: p. 46).

In a similar vein, the evaluations consistently revealed the demanding working conditions of social work practitioners, with high levels of stress, and at best uneven support provided by parent agencies (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2018, 2019; Scourfield *et al.*, 2021). Once again, these evaluations, initially focusing on quite narrow questions, have generated evidence which adds weight to the suggestion that many of the challenges facing social workers are structural in origin. This, in turn, leads us to question whether limited and piecemeal measures to solve the challenges of recruitment and retention are properly targeted, since they have little to offer in the face of structural factors, and may in fact reinforce existing inequalities (Ravalier *et al.*, 2021).

Concluding thoughts: 'democratising' evaluation?

The preceding analysis offers grounds for rethinking evaluations of fast track social work-qualifying programmes, in response to the criticism

that they are essentially one-dimensional vehicles for legitimising and sustaining dominant interests and hegemonic assumptions (see Hanley, 2022).

The body of work represented by these evaluations is substantial, albeit often conducted by the same, or similar, teams of investigators, and it offers a wide range of insights into recruitment, qualifying education, and early career experiences within social work, notwithstanding the primary emphasis on fast track schemes. This material also provides a resource with which we can begin to 'build back' a more 'democratic' form of analysis and interpretation of the findings presented previously, enabling us to set relatively positive initial conclusions within a broader context.

What we find does seem to depend on what questions we ask, and that, in turn, depends on who is in the position to be able to define those questions. Evaluation, then, is a politically determined exercise, and we should not really be surprised at that. What happens, then, when we take a hint from Bourdieu (1990: p. 53), and 'twist the screw the other way'?

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