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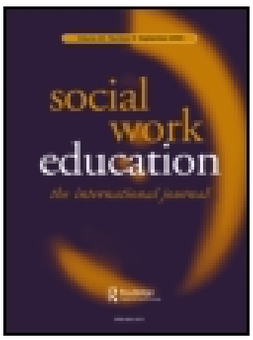

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# Applications to Social Work Programmes in England: Students as Consumers?

Jill Manthorpe, Jo Moriarty, Shereen Hussein, Martin Stevens, Endellion Sharpe, Joan Orme, Gillian MacIntyre, Pam Green Lister & Beth Crisp

*One of the most resounding impacts of the introduction of the new social work degree in England in 2003 has been an increase in the number of applications to social work courses. However, the processes used by applicants to reach decisions about where to study social work are little understood. This article reports data from six preparatory focus groups and four interviews (n = 38), 17 focus group interviews with first year students (n = 112) from nine social work programmes run in six universities, and 2,606 responses to three online surveys administered to first year students, which were collected as part of the national Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree in England funded by the Department of Health. They show that students use a range of sources to find out about social work education, with rising reliance on electronic media as an information resource. Although the majority cites convenience of location as the chief reason for selecting a particular university, academic reputation appears to be growing in importance. Observations from these data are discussed in the context of consumer behaviour in higher education and in social work education at a time when universities are developing marketing strategies to compete for students.*

*Keywords: Admissions; Evaluation; Higher Education; Staff Training and Development; Students*

## Introduction and Background

This article presents evidence on applications to social work programmes, reporting the factors used by students in deciding where to apply and their experiences of the

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process by which they were selected. It draws on data collected as part of the evaluation of the social work degree in England (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008) but is able to include more detailed information than was made available in the final report. By focusing upon students' perspectives, it forms a companion piece to our earlier article discussing the admissions process from the viewpoint of social work academics (Manthorpe *et al.*, in press). In the United Kingdom (UK), most applications for full time undergraduate courses are processed through UCAS, the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK. In England, Scotland and Wales, it is also possible to qualify as a social worker through programmes designed for graduates with a first degree in a subject other than social work. Applications for these programmes are made through UCAS too. Applicants are able to make five choices about where and what they would like to study. Universities make the decision whether to make applicants an offer based on their application form and, depending on the subject to be studied, performance at interview. In England, there are currently some 80 universities and higher education colleges (hereafter collectively referred to as universities) offering social work qualifying programmes, with many localities possessing more than one university in which social work can be studied. In this climate of choice, social work educators and higher educationalists need to have a clear understanding about how students select one institution over another. The data presented in this article reveal the multiplicity of factors that currently influence social work applicants in making decisions about where to study and may provide a baseline for future research.

Across higher education as a whole, universities have become increasingly interested in the factors underlying students' choices, mainly as a result of government policies aimed at greater marketisation within higher education. Such policies are based on the assumption that this will increase student choice and improve the quality and variety of services offered by providers of higher education (Jongbloed, 2003). As a result, universities have made considerable efforts to attract new students through developing their websites and online prospectuses, holding open days, and liaising with schools and other educational establishments. In addition to these 'official' sources of information for potential applicants, the advent of social networking sites and blogs has opened up new unofficial sources. For example, a thread on one website [TinaD(50), 2008] offers some frank advice and observations from applicant, student, and social worker perspectives.

However, students cannot be viewed simply as customers. Moogan and colleagues (1999) argue that, given the time and complexity of selecting a particular university or course and the complexity and variety of choices involved, their decision making might instead be classified as 'extensive problem solving' (Kotler, 1997). Furthermore, evidence from studies undertaken within the UK and internationally (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Breen and Jonsson, 2005) shows that, despite an expansion in university places and in the number of institutions with degree-awarding powers, access to higher education remains unequal. This is indicated by the continuing under-representation of students from lower socio-economic groups and from certain

ethnic backgrounds (Connor *et al.*, 2001; Gorard *et al.*, 2006). These findings have been used to question whether there can be such a thing as 'choice' in higher education. Rejecting presentations such as those portrayed in press reports (for example, Hodges, 2008) urging potential students to apply tactically to universities rated more highly by employers as a way of increasing their earning power, researchers such as Ball and colleagues (2002, p. 70) cite Bourdieu (2000, p. 76) to argue that these assume 'a kind of formal equality that in fact, as we have tried to indicate, legitimates and obscures the effects of real inequality'.

Alternative approaches to the 'student as consumer' debate have used consumer or rational action theories (for example, Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997) in which choices are seen as depending on balancing a variety of costs and benefits, in which social, economic, and educational motives interweave. Rather than supporting simple theories of social reproduction, whereby those with more resources or capital are able to perpetuate their class position by reproducing advantages through selecting prestigious universities or qualifications, this research demonstrates how the distribution of different social and ethnic groups within and across higher education institutions has to be understood as the outcome of several stages of decision-making in which choices and constraints or barriers are interleaved (Ball *et al.*, 2002).

One of the clearest ways in which differing circumstances can lead to different decisions can be illustrated is the extent to which moving into higher education also involves a move away from home. In the UK, there is a trend for higher proportions of students to remain at home while undertaking higher education, leading some observers to express concerns about the development of a two-tier system in which students who live at home have differing experiences to those who move away (Holdsworth, 2006). A survey of students from the Greater Manchester area of England, living in their parents' homes and attending local universities, reveals that they are more likely to be from low income households and to be the first generation attending university. They tend to see staying at home as a way of remaining close to, and being supported by, family and friends. In this way, they would minimise both the financial and identity risks of participating in higher education (Holdsworth and Patiniotis, 2005). Similar findings emerge in Smith's (2007) study of ethnic minority students on Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes in two universities. These students also prefer to 'stay close to home'. The other factor influencing their choice of university is previous experience (for example, because they already know other students or have met and like the staff they meet at open days).

In the UK, most research on social work applications tends to focus more on students' motivations for studying social work in general (Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; Christie and Kruk, 1998) rather than their reasons for selecting one university in particular. This means that we currently have limited knowledge on how applications for social work mirror those within the sector as a whole. A small-scale UK study of social work students (Moriarty *et al.*, 2009) suggests that there is variation in the processes by which students make decisions. Some applicants go to considerable efforts to identify a social work programme where they think they will fit in, while others rely more on the recommendations of others or even to chance. In the United

States, a study of social work students at the University of Northern Iowa (McCullagh, 1989) reveals that the majority of students chose this university on the basis of being located close to home and as being neither as small as some of the local private colleges nor as large as two other local universities. This paucity of existing research on social work students contrasts with the expanding literature on access to higher education among applicants for other subjects or higher education in general, and highlights the need for more information on social work applicants that can be used to contextualise their experiences with those of other higher education students and to identify whether there are any issues that are unique to them.

## Methods

We have described the methods of the evaluation in the accompanying article to this paper (Manthorpe *et al.*, in press) which explores the work of admissions from the viewpoint of social work academic staff in universities. This article looks at the under-researched topic of how students reach the decision to study social work. In summary, information was obtained from multiple sources, including data on applications and acceptances for all full time undergraduate social work programmes from all courses in England supplied by UCAS; an online survey of students ($n = 2{,}606$ responses); group discussions and interviews with students in preparation for the online survey ($n = 38$); and focus groups with students in six case study sites providing undergraduate and postgraduate programmes ($n = 112$). Questions about applications in both the focus groups and online survey were only asked of first year students in order to avoid recall bias. Ethical permissions were received for the study. As Bryman (2001, p. 196) notes, the distinction between primary and secondary analysis is not always clear cut; in particular, mining existing data to its fullest extent helps fulfil the wider obligation of social researchers to those who have participated in research and to wider society that has funded the studies (p. 200). All names have been changed and identifying details of individuals or universities are not included.

## Findings

### *The Rising Number of Applicants and Applications*

An important aim behind the introduction of the new degree in England was to increase the number of applications to social work programmes (Orme *et al.*, 2009), which had been declining since the mid-1990s (Perry and Cree, 2003). Since the onset of the new degree, like most other potential university students, applicants for full time social work programmes apply through UCAS. This has made it easier to identify trends, in contrast to the complexities of the former qualification in which some applicants applied through the Social Work Admissions Service or directly to a university (Moriarty and Murray, 2007).

Figure 1 shows that applications (not simply applicants) for social work programmes between 2004 and 2007 were more than double those made in 2003,

remembering that in 2003 the smaller number of UCAS acceptances is explained by the availability of the final DipSW programmes. In making applications for university places, applicants may receive more than one offer. This is shown in the second data series in Figure 1, which records the number of acceptances. As can be seen, these too have risen since the degree. Figure 1 shows that the ratio of applicants to acceptances through UCAS increased from around four applicants for every three acceptances, to five applicants for every three acceptances (2003–2007). The higher education sector generally views this as a positive indicator in that there is a larger 'pool' from which applicants can be selected making it more likely that successful applicants are able to meet the academic demands of the programme.

Applicants who are unsuccessful in their choice of programme, or choice of university, have not applied in the first place, or who wish to change their choice, may enter a central clearing system, in which unfilled places are offered after the initial selection processes. This is shown in the third data series in Figure 1 which indicates that around one-fifth of acceptances for social work programmes in England are made through clearing. Entry through clearing has been associated with poorer progression in higher education as a whole (Yorke and Longden, 2008) but, so far as we know, has not been investigated on social work programmes.

### *Student Perspectives*

In this context of increasing applications but also increasing competition for social work places, we discuss below the perspectives of students who were successful in their applications and chose to take up a place.

### *Finding out about studying social work*

For some years (Department of Health, 2001) the government has funded a national recruitment campaign to attract people to work in social work and social care.

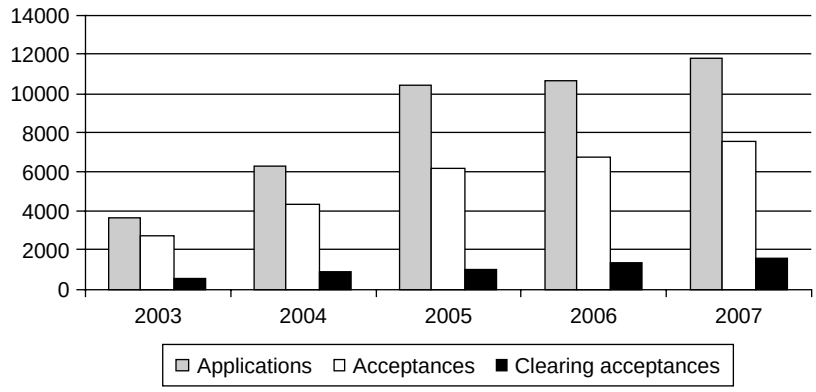


**Figure 1** UCAS Applications and Acceptances for Full-time College-based Social Work Degree Programmes Starting between 2003 and 2007 in England.

**Table 1** Sources of Information Used by Students to Decide Whether or Where to Study

| | 2004–2005 | | 2005–2006* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Source of information | *N* | % | *N* | % |
| Website for university/college currently attending | 256 | 59 | 1,151 | 85 |
| Friends or relatives working in social work or social care | 231 | 53 | 939 | 69 |
| *Socialworkcareers* website | 225 | 51 | 858 | 63 |
| *Community Care* magazine | 200 | 46 | 644 | 47 |
| 'Careers in social work' booklet | 189 | 43 | 905 | 66 |
| Other university/college website/s | 146 | 33 | 1,251 | 92 |
| *The Guardian* weekly 'Society' supplement | 136 | 31 | 577 | 42 |
| Careers staff at school/college previously attended | 129 | 30 | 624 | 46 |
| University/college open day/s | 124 | 28 | 753 | 55 |
| Recruitment/other literature from social work employer/s | 101 | 23 | 1,073 | 79 |
| Valid *n* | 437 | | 1,362 | |

*Note*: *This question was omitted from the 2006–2007 first year student survey. It is based on multiple responses so the total percentage exceeds 100.

Table 1 shows that students' recall of the information they accessed lists university websites as the most commonly consulted source of information. Friends or relatives working in social work or social care, and the *socialworkcareers* website and associated 'Careers in social work' booklet, were other frequently consulted sources in 2004–2005 but in 2005–2006 much more use was made of 'recruitment/other literature from social work employers'.

### *Selecting where to study*

As mentioned earlier, although the UCAS system offers applicants the opportunity to apply for up to five universities, data from the online survey found that only 50% of respondents enrolling in programmes in 2003–2004 had applied to more than one university. However, among those enrolling in 2006–2007, the proportion was 63%. Younger students were especially likely to have applied to one or more university. This meant that they potentially could receive offers from several universities. Ellie explained how she had decided which offer to accept:

> I went to a total of, I think, five [universities] in two years. [This university] also tried to sell themselves whereas a couple of the other [universities I applied to], they did the interview and they tested me, but then that was it. I didn't get [shown] round the campus, I didn't meet any of the lecturers … and … I got offers from all five [places where I applied], but then, of course, I am going to choose the one that is interested in me.

Both the online survey and focus groups asked students about the factors that had influenced their decision in choosing a particular programme. Both sets of data reveal that students tended to offer a combination of reasons for selecting a particular programme. Table 2 summarises responses received to a question on the online survey asking students, 'Which of the following factors influenced your choice of university?'

**Table 2** Reasons for Choosing a Particular University

| | 2004–2005 | | 2005–2006 | | 2006–2007 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reasons for choice | *N* | % | *N* | % | *N* | % |
| Convenient location nearby (close to home, work, etc.) | 284 | 65 | 847 | 62 | 471 | 58 |
| Good reputation for social work teaching | 199 | 46 | 716 | 53 | 489 | 61 |
| Good academic reputation generally | 185 | 42 | 613 | 45 | 386 | 48 |
| Liked the people who interviewed me | 145 | 33 | 524 | 38 | 335 | 42 |
| Attractive location | 113 | 26 | 359 | 26 | 210 | 26 |
| Dealt efficiently with my application | 108 | 25 | 397 | 29 | 260 | 32 |
| Expected to 'fit in' with other students like me | 80 | 18 | 239 | 18 | 177 | 22 |
| Recommended by qualified social workers I know | 68 | 16 | 247 | 18 | 195 | 24 |
| Recommended by friends/family | 72 | 16 | 241 | 18 | 202 | 25 |
| Large social work student group | 29 | 7 | 126 | 9 | 114 | 14 |
| Small social work student group | 35 | 8 | 114 | 8 | 107 | 13 |
| No choice—selected by employer | 62 | 14 | 161 | 12 | 94 | 12 |
| Valid *n* | 437 | | 1,362 | | 807 | |

*Note*: This question is based upon multiple responses so total percentages exceed 100%.

and allowing them to choose as many options as they wished. Excluding those who had not had a choice (generally those who were seconded or sponsored by an employer), respondents chose, on average, between three and four options. As Table 2 shows, the most popular reasons for selecting a particular programme were location, reputation for social work teaching, and reputation of the university more generally.

Although the majority of social work students are aged 25 or over and so more likely to have commitments that would discourage them from moving to a new location, there are signs of an increase over time in the importance of reputation as a way of distinguishing between different universities in the same locality. Adele was in many ways a typical student whose family commitments meant that she wanted to study locally. Faced with a choice of two universities nearby, she chose the one that she thought had the higher reputation:

> Going purely between [other university] and [this one], I've got a family so ... so I needed somewhere near. It just so happened that this [one had the better] reputation.

It is also important to recognise that 'convenient' or 'attractive' locations had differing meanings for different participants. The majority of participants, such as Rachel and Kelly, were more inclined to think of convenience in terms of proximity:

> This is my local university. I only live 10 minutes down the road.

> [This university] is so accessible ... it's just basically on the door step. It's just a bus run away.

Others viewed it in terms of the opportunities it would bring. Maggie explained that she had not chosen a London university in order to concentrate on her studies:

> I used to live in London and London is very, very crowded for me … If I stay in London I would probably not make it [to the end of the programme] at all, because I would go out all the time. Here [university in town], it is very quiet.

In contrast, Jane actively wanted to move to London:

> I thought why not give the big city a chance? I really enjoy London, having grown up on a farm, and I think the range of [social] issues that you kind of see within one pocket of an area, is, you know, quite unlike another part of the country.

Exploring the meaning of 'reputation' revealed similarly multi-layered perspectives. Saira explained that the reputation of the university as a whole was important for her:

> It's a well known fact [this is] a really good university … It is one of the best universities and everyone knows it has got such good status and everything, so I mean I got places in all the other universities [I applied to] but I chose to come [here].

By contrast, this interchange between students on another programme contrasted their university's reputation as being well resourced with their own experiences:

> Isn't [this] university one of the richest universities in the country … [but] they have told us that [other local university has a] far better … library … And the books that there are [here] … a lot of them are really out of date.

For other students, 'reputation' was about the 'currency' of acquiring a postgraduate qualification. Chloë explained:

> One thing I found as well was … this university's the only [one in the region that] actually does the MA as far as I'm aware … So … even though it's quite close to where I live … if I [hadn't got] in here, I'd be forced to go outside of the [region].

Emma, studying on a different programme, expressed similar views:

> I think it is quite good that … [social work degree gives you] the possibility of getting a Master's … It kind of feeds both sides, it is academic as well as kind of training based. So you are kind of getting the best of both worlds, if you know what I mean … If you didn't actually necessarily want to be a social worker in the field, having a Master's carries a lot of weight, if you want to go and do other stuff.

For students who had previous experience of employment in social care or who were seconded or sponsored, 'insider knowledge' was used to gauge 'reputation' in terms of a programme's standing within the profession or among employers. Amy recalled:

> I enquired with a lot of different social workers and a person I used to work with, she's an external examiner, she said definitely if you're going to go anywhere in London you should go to [X]. So it was highly recommended.

Aileen explained that she had also sought recommendations from former work colleagues but that the chance to be with friends was also important:

> Going back to what I [was] saying about working with social workers, the way that they talk about [this] degree [and the university's] … reputation [for] social work [was important] … And I've got friends on [earlier intakes] and it's nice to keep, you know, tabs on how they are doing.

Table 2 also shows that, in terms of preferred intake, similar proportions of respondents preferred small and large intakes. Unfortunately, we do not have any data indicating whether this preference relates more to the perceived teaching quality on small or large programmes or the opportunity to meet like-minded peers.

As well as asking about the factors influencing their choice of university, the online survey also asked respondents to identify which had been the single 'most important factor' in their choice. Table 3 shows that, among the respondents to the online survey with a choice of where to study, reputation for social work teaching appears to be becoming more important than convenience of location.

The online survey also asked respondents if, 'Taking everything into consideration, are you now happy that you have made the right choice of university?'. A sizeable minority (10% in the first two cohorts) felt they had made the wrong choice of university at which they were studying but the corresponding proportion fell to 4% in 2006–2007. It is possible that one explanation for this finding is students' greater use of differing sources of information about where to study. However, as the final set of findings will show, experiences at interviews and open days could also be influential.

## Interviews and Open Days

The *Requirements for Social Work Training* (Department of Health, 2002) stipulate that applicants must undergo an individual or group interview. In addition, universities are increasingly holding open days in which students can find out more about the university and its resources. As Table 1 showed, 28% of respondents to the 2004–2005 online survey and 55% of respondents to the 2005–2006 online survey had attended an open day.

These data were illuminated by the accounts of students who took part in the focus groups. Julie explained that her experiences at an open day had helped her decide:

> I didn't have a clue … but … after you applied then there was sort of an open day and they were really professional and [social work academic] was very captivating, I think.

By contrast, Holly admitted that it was the setting of the university itself that had attracted her:

**Table 3** 'Most Important' Factor Influencing Choice of HEI

| | 2004–2005 | | 2005–2006 | | 2006–2007 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | % | *N* | % | *N* | % |
| Convenient location nearby (close to home, work, etc.) | 154 | 41 | 405 | 34 | 211 | 30 |
| Good reputation for social work teaching | 85 | 23 | 358 | 30 | 270 | 38 |
| Good academic reputation generally | 48 | 13 | 197 | 16 | 73 | 10 |
| Valid *n* | 375 | | 1,201 | | 713 | |

*Note*: The totals in this table differ from those in Table 2 because they exclude those who reported they had no choice in selecting where to study.

> I mean it was, it was just a lovely building and the whole setting, I thought, "I really wanted to come here".

Leanne emphasised the need to feel that she 'fitted in' and contrasted her experiences at a neighbouring university with those at the university in which she was studying social work:

> And I actually went for an interview down at [X], not for social work, it was for a different course, I just decided ... just to sort of test whether they'd just let me in ... But I tell you what, they were so, I walked into this place, it was such a different atmosphere, it was very snotty, and, you know, it was like, I felt straightaway that I wasn't good enough. But here I didn't feel like that.

In addition to experiences on open days, both the online survey and focus group data confirmed that what seemed to be particularly important was the way in which the open days and the selection processes were organised. These were seen as indicative of what the programme might be like, as Sharon and Hannah recalled:

> Well, I had a choice of [X] or [Y] and [X] just seemed to be offering the best programme and it seemed to be a bit more, well it seemed to be a lot more, organised than [Y], just on the open day.

> It was a bit of a pain, but they asked you to [prepare a piece of written work] before your interview ... and I was really impressed with that, I thought, "Wow, you know, they are very rigorous to start with". I went to [another university] ... and I wasn't impressed at all, I thought they were shoddy ... and there was no sort of presentation or anything, we weren't shown round anything and [this place] was just so impressive in comparison. And so that for me that is what swung it really.

## Discussion

This study was limited in that while we were able to obtain information from those who embarked upon social work qualifying programmes, we know little of those who applied unsuccessfully or those who applied to study social work and then chose not to take up the offer of a place. It was also undertaken before the implementation of proposed reforms to allow students with higher than predicted grades at 'A' level to seek places at universities to which they may have thought they would not meet the required entry standards (Halpin, 2006). If significant changes occur because of this opportunity, our understanding of how students' perceptions of their likely educational success influence their choices of university, or course of study, will improve considerably.

In many ways, the results presented in this article are consistent with the existing literature on higher education presented in the introduction, highlighting how differing students may make differing choices, depending on their circumstances. The preference for studying locally chimes in with other studies of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Holdsworth, 2006; Smith, 2007). However, other findings from the evaluation (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008) and elsewhere (Holmström and Taylor, 2008a, 2008b), suggest that the socio-demographic characteristics and qualifications of social work students appear to

be moving to resemble those of other students. The decline in sponsorship of social care staff for professional training (Harris *et al.*, 2008) and the move to greater numbers of sponsorships available to graduates from other disciplines with good degrees to enter postgraduate social work programmes seems likely to confirm a convergence between social work and other students' characteristics, such as those studying to become teachers.

There are three main areas in which this article presents new knowledge. First, successful social work students appear to be consulting a growing range of sources before applying to programmes, particularly electronic. What images these present of the university and of the social work department are therefore likely to be influential, and how comparisons are made with other universities is likely to be important if courses are beginning to compete for students with high levels of academic achievement.

Second, while proximity of location appears to remain the most important reason for choosing a particular university, as it was with DipSW students, this may decline in importance, as younger students may be more mobile than older students, even allowing for the influence of income on their lack of opportunities or desires to remain at home. In this context, Holmström (2008) draws attention to the need for social work educators to respond to younger students as social work's new 'non-traditional' student.

Third, reputation of the social work programme, and to a lesser extent, reputation of the university as a whole, appears to be growing in importance in terms of determining applicants' choice of university. As authors or contributors to their own programme information materials, social work academics may have some scope to reflect or obscure this reputation in social work publicity and to situate their department within or apart from this institutional image, for example, by emphasising the academic resources available from this profile if they are applicable to social work students. Both social reproduction theory and rational action theory suggest that some parents may be encouraging of their children's applications to universities with high academic profiles and reputation. However, they may be equally susceptible to information suggesting that a particular programme achieves high levels of employment among its former students.

Clearly, more work is needed to unpick how applicants construct 'reputation' and 'location'. Social work programmes generate valuable and reliable income for universities, while generally adding to an institution's success in meeting government targets for widening participation in higher education and achieving high levels of completion rates compared to other degree programmes (Harris *et al.*, 2008). If they are to use information on their 'reputation' to achieve greater influence within the universities and departments in which they are located, then social work educators will need to know if this is a collective reputation, or if it depends on high profile individuals, or research or media profiles, or combinations of these.

In the context that admissions work may sometimes seem both onerous and undervalued (Taylor and Balen, 1995; Holmström and Taylor, 2008a; Manthorpe *et al.*, in press), social work admissions staff may appreciate the finding that students set high

value on the welcome they receive at open days and when being interviewed. Not only do these offer the opportunity to confirm the reality of images in publicity materials where 'the sun always shines in the brochures' (Harris, 1997, p. 38), but they also help students to differentiate between other programmes to which they have applied. In particular, the efficiency of social work admissions was raised by students as important in offering a sense of what they might expect and how they would be valued. At the same time, there is an important caution from Land's (1994) discussions with nursing applicants that an open day can be experienced as rather disorganised and time-wasting by some students if not tightly structured. Taken together, these findings suggest the need to value the role of admissions staff but also to communicate to the increasing number of people involved in applications and interviews that the process is not simply one of professional gate-keeping but may involve elements of marketing in a competitive environment.

More research is necessary to see what gives students the impression that 'people like me fit' the social work programme. The situation of younger students has been one of the most recently identified areas where proactive measures are considered necessary for social work programmes (Holmström, 2008) while US research points to the importance of welcoming minority ethnic students (Elam and Brown, 2005).

The findings that the personal recommendations of social workers seem to be playing a decreasing role in student decisions are interesting and we hypothesise that this reflects declining levels of contact with current social workers as colleagues, given the reduction in secondment of social care staff (Harris *et al.*, 2008) who might have been particularly influenced by the opinions of colleagues, human resource personnel or managers. The increase in influence of families/friends may be surprising. Again, we can only hypothesise that the centrality of parents as funders and the value placed on the opinions of friends or social networks are affecting social work students, much as they do other students.

Only a minority of participants reported that they had no choice of where to study. This applies to some but not all of those students who are seconded on to a programme by their employers, for example to the Open University's distance learning programme. As Harris *et al.* (2008) show, students' levels of satisfaction with such programmes are high and a lack of individual choice may not seem to matter substantially in their case. There is clearly an opportunity for more work to examine the relationships between student choice and student satisfaction.

Another important group comprises the fifth of acceptances made through the UCAS clearing process. Some may be making their acceptance on the basis of limited knowledge and only brief acquaintance with the subject or the university, or have not considered or made arrangements about student life. This group's experiences may be different from other students in terms of their knowledge of the university in which they are enrolling; their friends may be elsewhere; and for many it will be second best at a number of levels. Work is needed to establish good practice in supporting students who enter after clearing, especially as they are generally thought to be more likely to leave before achieving their intended qualification (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Universities that depend on 'clearing' for their social work recruits may face

substantially different student profiles and may be vulnerable in competitive environments to expansion by other providers.

Overall, these data emerge at a time when there is greater agreement that admissions and applications are important elements in the higher education process. The implications of this are numerous. For example, Holmström and Taylor (2008b) suggest the value of looking at selection and application data to identify and support those at risk of non-completion. However, the overall context of social work education in England has witnessed criticism of social work applicants' academic abilities (Gillen, 2009) which may result in greater pressure to value academic standards. Will this growing emphasis on academic potential and performance be sustainable with social work academics' interests in and efforts to widen student diversity (Dillon, 2007)? Will programmes be explicit about their academic criteria and how will they counsel applicants who are rejected? More fundamentally, will more exacting applications processes make a difference to the quality of those entering the profession and their work?

## Conclusion

Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the findings presented in this article lend support to the idea that many social work students are consumers, much like other students. They are entering mass higher education and there may be increasing convergence between applicants for social work and for university programmes more generally. Elements of rational action theory are evident in that decisions appear to be weighed between a number of factors, outlining the complexity of determining costs and benefits for individuals in specific circumstances. For some, convenience of location remains central but there is a rising interest in the reputation of the programme and university. Social work educators may find this national data relevant to their local circumstances in forming strategies to respond to the continuing changes within social work education and changes in requirements and demand from potential applicants.

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